SOAPBOX

WHY PERSONHOOD RUNS DEEPER THAN NEUROLOGY

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"It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."
—Oscar Wilde[1]

Is there a ground-zero in human relations, a place where everyone, no matter their personal, cultural, scientific, or religious allegiances, ought to start—and really do start—in their interpersonal interactions?

In 1962, Peter Strawson gave an address entitled "Freedom and Resentment" at his induction into the British Academy.[2] His aim was to undercut philosophical worries about determinism by showing that a commitment to interpersonal accountability is an unrevisable feature of ordinary human life. This commitment manifests itself in what Strawson dubbed our "reactive attitudes." These attitudes involve our reactions to the postures we take to each other—whether we are manifesting goodwill and respect for others and their dignity, or indifference, or malevolence.

Because it attempts to plumb the depths of our thinking, philosophy develops slowly. And so Strawson's gambit to vanquish deterministic worries about human accountability is still eminently current in philosophical circles. In fact, it is even more relevant now, given our culture's growing inclination to believe that ultimately everything about us will be explained in terms of our brains' neural networks.[3] When we consider the centrality of interpersonal interaction to human life, we realize that any understanding of ourselves based primarily on neuroscience will be inadequate.

Roger Scruton invokes Strawson's piece in his *On Human Nature*.[4] He observes that the human world is one of rights, duties, and deserts; of self-conscious agents who sometimes act freely for specific reasons. "Thinking of the world in this way," he writes, we react to it

> with emotions that lie beyond the repertoire of other animals: indignation, resentment, and envy; admiration, commitment, and praise—all of which involve the thought of others as accountable subjects, with rights and duties and a self-conscious vision of their future and their past. Only responsible beings can feel these emotions, and in feeling them, they situate themselves in some way outside the natural [deterministic] order, standing back from it in judgment.[5]

Combining this Strawsonian insight with Stephen Darwall's *The Second-Person Standpoint*,[6] Scruton argues that human personhood is essentially a social phenomenon: "I am I to myself because, and to the extent that, I am you to another. Self-consciousness depends upon the recognition accorded to the self by the other. ... 'I' requires 'you.'"[7] The argument is subtle but worth comprehending, since its upshot is that attempts to account for our humanity in third-person natural science terms must fail. Natural science views us as objects rather than

as addressable subjects. But our distinctiveness resides in our capacity to view each other in first- and second-person ways, where *you* as a self-conscious subject address *me,* and thus *I* am called into self-conscious and accountable personhood by *your* treating *me* as someone who can act freely and for particular reasons rather than as an object trapped in a causal nexus that compels me to behave in specific ways.[8]

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It can seem deeper to attempt to capture what we are in the merely third-person terms of the physical and biological sciences, but it is actually shallower because it eclipses the aspect of our lives that ultimately governs—and should govern—our most fundamental thinking about human being. When we look at no more than the neurological underpinnings of our personhood, we are looking at *necessary* rather than *sufficient* conditions of human personhood—at *causes* rather than *reasons* for why we act and react as we do—and personhood disappears. Yet even neuroscientists react resentfully when they think they are not being shown the respect they as persons deserve.

I tell my students that acknowledging interpersonal interaction as ground-zero in human relations implies that there is an objective standard of right and wrong for human behavior that underlies all of its culturally relative manifestations. For instance, in Korean culture it is disrespectful for children to make direct eye contact with their elders, while in American culture it is disrespectful for them *not* to—yet these differences are in fact just culturally relative ways of rendering to a class of people their due respect.

Regularly reminding ourselves of this fundamental feature of human life helps us maintain our

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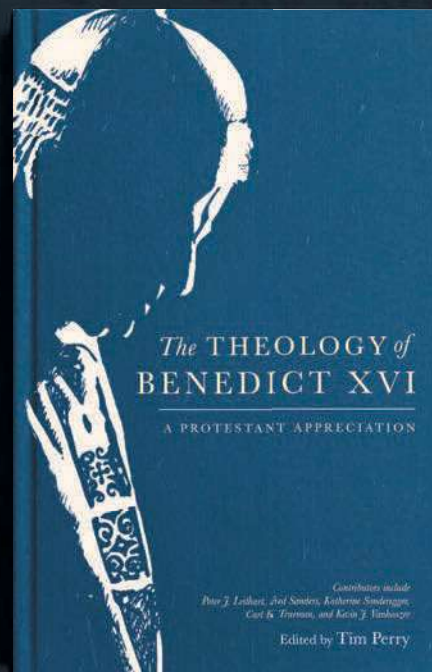

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proper place in the creation order—that though we are a kind of animal, we are not primarily to be considered in terms of where we stand on the proverbial phylogenetic tree. Our personhood transcends mere animalhood. We are more—and are responsible to act as more—than mere beasts (see Ps 49:10; Jude 10). Our personhood takes the lead in our ordinary interactions: I appear as an addressable person to you, and you appear as an addressable person to me. So sometimes we quarrel as one of the ways that all of us—neuroscientists included—call each other to account.[9]

Keeping this unrevisable feature of distinctively human life in mind helps buttress our sense of accountability to each other and to God. Hearing people quarrel reminds us that each of us is to treat others as we want to be treated, as our Lord reminded those listening to him (see Luke 6:31). Indeed, from creation onward God has always addressed humankind as *you* and thus called us to account (see, e.g., Gen 1:28–29; 2:16–17; Rom 2:1–5). Moral and spiritual accountability is thus shot through our entire lives and is an essential part of the background of the good news (see Isa 30:18–20; Heb 4:13; 9:23–28).

These philosophical insights help us hold what is most distinctive—and, ultimately, most hopeful—about human life in place.[10] D

[1] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.

[2] See *Proceedings of the British Academy 48* (1963), 187–211.

[3] Erik Parens, "The Benefits of 'Binocularity,'" *New York Times* (September 28, 2014), corroborates its relevance like this: "Will advances in neuroscience move reasonable people to abandon the idea that criminals deserve to be punished? Some researchers working at the intersection of psychology, neuroscience and philosophy think [so]. Their reasoning is straightforward: if the idea of deserving punishment depends upon the idea that criminals freely choose their actions, and if neuroscience reveals that free choice is an illusion, then we can see that the idea of deserving punishment is nonsense." Later in the article, Parens cites empirical evidence that neuroscience in fact tends to undermine our commonsense commitment to accountability: "When university students learn about 'the neural basis of behavior'—quite simply, the brain activity underlying human actions—they become less supportive of the idea that criminals deserve to be punished."

[4] Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). The second chapter is titled "Human Relations" and develops Strawson's position.

[5] Scruton, *On Human Nature*, 25–26.

[6] Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[7] Scruton, *On Human Nature*, 56–57.

[8] Scruton states: "Personhood emerges when it is possible to relate to an organism in a new way—the way of personal relations. … With this new order of relation comes a new order of explanation, *in which reasons and meanings, rather than causes, are sought in answer to the question, 'Why?'* With persons we are in dialogue: we call upon them to justify their conduct in our eyes, as we must justify our conduct in theirs. Central to this dialogue are concepts of freedom, choice, and accountability, *and these concepts have no place in the description of animal behavior"* (*On Human Nature*, 31–32; my emphases). Because we are also biological creatures, a fair amount of who we are involves causal explanation in terms of, e.g., genetics and development, but only as necessary (but not sufficient) biological underpinnings of our personhood.

[9] In *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), C.S. Lewis argued that human quarreling differs from animal fighting because the former, unlike the latter, consists in "trying to show that the other [person] is in the wrong" (3). Quarreling presupposes a standard of right and wrong—"some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you like to call it" (4)—that virtually all human beings agree about. This standard obliges us to recognize and respect each other's dignity. When we don't, reactive attitudes like resentment or indignation surface and get voiced in our quarrels. As Lewis claimed, educated as well as uneducated people, children as well as adults, are all inclined to quarrel when they feel their dignity is being violated, including, I would stress, those who maintain that there are no objective standards of right and wrong. Scruton unpacks the significance of quarreling in *On Human Nature*, 111.

[10] Scruton (*On Human Nature*, 47) writes: "Religious people, by holding onto their faith, hold onto [the] kind of deep, but metaphysically unsettling, truth about the human condition" that is captured by the reactive attitudes. He notes that they "have no difficulty understanding that human beings are distinguished from other animals by their freedom, self-consciousness, and responsibility. And they have a ready supply of stories and doctrines that make sense of those truths. But those truths would be truths even without religion, and it is one task of philosophy in our time to show this."

MARK TALBOT'S current research focuses mainly on philosophical anthropology and philosophical psychology.