

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Defending Human Dignity: John Paul II and Political Realism

Derek S. Jeffreys

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2004 (235 pages)

The author of this review is not Catholic, and he is neither philosopher nor ethicist by profession. He is Calvinist Protestant and a student of the history of political thought. His qualifications for composing this review therefore reside in his acquaintance with the tradition of political realism, rather than in any expertise in philosophical utilitarianism, Thomist metaphysics, or Schelerian phenomenology. This caveat in his evaluation of Derek Jeffreys' argument regarding the Thomist phenomenology of John Paul II is perhaps not unwelcome, however, for precisely these reasons: He is well-prepared to evaluate both the accessibility of Jeffreys' argument to the so-called general reader, and he is well-versed in the language of political realism toward which Jeffreys finds Pope John Paul II directing his ethical critique.

In this book, Jeffreys sets out both to validate the coherence of John Paul's "Thomist personalism" and to demonstrate the ethical and political superiority of John Paul's realist vision to the "consequentialism" embedded in the realist tradition. Determined to show the ultimate reductionism, if not incoherence, of realist consequentialism, Jeffreys asks the following question (23): Why, following John Paul's lead, might we not endorse realism's "descriptive account of power and disorder, acknowledging that human beings have powerful tendencies to dominate others for selfish reasons," while at the same time rejecting its "normative project"? Why could

we not ground realism in “an alternative ethic that values the dignity of the person over calculating consequences”? He thus proceeds to unpack John Paul’s personalism, both in its indebtedness to phenomenologist Max Scheler and in its loyalty to Thomist metaphysics. According to Jeffreys, John Paul both embraced the implied personalism of the phenomenological project and resisted its purported subjectivity. The result, for Jeffreys, is a fuller account of human value and interaction and thus a more complete challenge to philosophical utilitarianism and to the proportionalist consequentialism that is utilitarianism’s first cousin. While Jeffreys is critical of John Paul’s project in one or two places, his criticism is less an attack on the project’s legitimacy and more an impatience with its incompleteness and occasional inconsistency in application to world politics.

He begins by showing John Paul’s determination both to accept Scheler’s emphasis on human “intentionality” in the apprehension of value and to reject his “emotionalism” (45–48). Human apprehension of value thus grows from “a complex interplay between emotion and cognition in our intentional relations to values” (45). Moreover, precisely because of the key part played by human love as both an emotional and cognitive force in the apprehension of value, human intentionality—in the lived experience of others—cannot help but confront an objective “hierarchy of values” (54–55). It is the human “capacity to love,” in both its emotional and cognitive components, that “constitutes the deepest ground of human dignity” (48). This is so because full humanity appears primarily in just this “reciprocity” of self-giving love (53). Such reciprocity therefore both acknowledges and forms human personhood (54). The cognitive apprehension of value hierarchy follows inexorably, then, from the experience of reciprocal love. Not only do “spiritual values” reveal their superiority to “material values” in the experience of reciprocity, but also the dignity of personhood manifestly caps the hierarchy of spiritual values (59–65). Of course, the key relevance to politics of John Paul’s personalism here is his insistence that the hierarchy of value appears only in the experience of reciprocity, or, properly, genuine community (62).

Next, Jeffreys works deliberately through John Paul’s intricate and profound analysis of human sin and the disorder that results from its “inversion of the order of values.” It turns out that John Paul’s account of sin rests solidly on the same analysis of human intentionality whose proper direction reveals human dignity and personhood, but whose more pervasive and perverse direction leads instead to disorder and inhumanity (67–76). It turns out, as well, that John Paul’s account of sin both illustrates the way sin ossifies in social structures and undermines the many contemporary efforts to shift human responsibility from persons to structures (76–81). Drawing on his understanding of sin, then, John Paul pointedly eyes both the “perils of globalization” and the “dangers of nationalism” (84–95).

In his third chapter, Jeffreys lays out John Paul’s “compelling but incomplete” critique of consequentialism in realist thinking. Pointing to the consequentialist’s

inevitable fallback position that weighs material values in preference to spiritual values (e.g., 132–39), due to the apparent incommensurability of material with spiritual values, Jeffreys asserts John Paul’s convincing argument for the superiority of spiritual values: Not only are such values indivisible, but “their capacity to satisfy is unlimited and undiminished by increasing the number of persons enjoying them” (109–12). (John Paul thus challenges not only the consequentialists but also the “basic goods” theorists [112–15].) Indeed, it is precisely the historical reality of martyrdom that “demonstrates the preeminence of spiritual values” (115). Spiritual values connected to personhood are thus “architectonic, ordering other values. There is not and cannot be an equality among values” (115).

In his final chapter, Jeffreys looks specifically and carefully at the trajectory of John Paul’s participation in the politics of nations. By doing so, he intends not only to make sense of John Paul’s language of the “rights of nations” (apparently resistant to humanitarian intervention and so endearing to realists) but also of his call for a “civilization of love,” one celebrating the “family of nations” (apparently bolstering claims for humanitarian intervention so endearing to liberals). With John Paul’s philosophical framework behind him, Jeffreys argues persuasively for the coherence of this position and for its realist character. Human responsibility extends beyond state sovereignty, for John Paul; it also requires attention to national dignity and identity (158–66).

After pointing to one or two key inconsistencies in John Paul’s application of such “moderate realism,” particularly his failure to acknowledge the manifestly sinful character of the so-called United Nations organization (176–80), Jeffreys determines to build on the framework John Paul has established. He argues persuasively that John Paul’s approach might yield a more fully insistent case for humanitarian intervention simultaneous with a more properly resistant case for such intervention. With John Paul’s fuller account of both the value of human personhood and the role of nationhood in developing and exhibiting such value, Jeffreys argues that the criteria for humanitarian intervention articulated by John Paul are comprehensible, usable, defensible, and thus realistic (173–76). While such criteria still require exercises in practical wisdom, they put the emphasis more properly on the spiritual values of freedom, dignity, community, and personhood. They point both to a priority of means (e.g., nonviolence over violence), and to a priority of authority (e.g., multilateral over unilateral) that together are consistent in their determination to uphold both human personhood and the human family.

I confess that before reading Jeffreys’ book, I knew little about the philosophical basis for John Paul’s “internationalist” project. My description and evaluation of the book’s argument might therefore be suspect. Nevertheless, I am confident in saying that this book will reward its readers. Indeed, I find Jeffreys’ exercise to be not only a convincing account of John Paul’s project but also a welcome path through the realist-idealist divide. It is easy to see how John Paul might serve as a reliable guide through

the often-depressing mire of realist worldly wisdom, on the one hand, and idealist naïveté, on the other. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it in his cover blurb, “No doubt some will challenge [Jeffreys’] account of realism, but at the very least he has begun a conversation that needs to take place.” I would modify that sentence only by inserting the adverb *desperately* just before *needs*.

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Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today’s Society

Craig M. Gay

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This book promises to begin a discussion among evangelicals and other serious Christians about the compatibility of their basic faith commitment with an uncritical acceptance of the cultural values promoted by capitalism. All too often, evangelicals and others who may already constitute Craig Gay’s intended audience have given the impression of either ignorance or indifference to the corrosive effects of what he describes as the “exaltation of the monetary unit,” while also demonstrating acute distress over the apparent decline in personal morality and family values. Gay’s book is promising precisely in that it may help its readers to see that there is a deep connection between the two and that any serious effort on the part of evangelicals and others to overcome that decline must be premised on a more critical awareness of what we may be doing to ourselves in embracing the “cash values” of a society obsessed with business and financial success.

Gay certainly does not mean to be an enemy of capitalism. His initial chapter is a very positive assessment of “the sources of capitalism’s productivity,” in which he not only recognizes capitalism’s role in providing opportunities for an unprecedented number of success stories in the global struggle against poverty and destitution but also, following Max Weber, Peter Berger, and others, he acknowledges the reality of capitalism’s spiritual and ethical presuppositions, especially their specifically Calvinist origins. He also sees more deeply than some of Weber’s interpreters that capitalism’s success as an economic and cultural system depends upon the nearly universal acceptance of its “money metric” as the ultimate standard of value, not only in strictly economic transactions but also in virtually all forms of human interaction. Gay’s is an admirably accessible survey of the complex line of theoretical development by which social scientists have moved beyond Weber’s original insight into the cultural significance of accounting through the works of Sombart, Schumpeter, and finally Georg Simmel on the broader and deeper meaning of money as such. He recognizes, as earlier