

## The Influence of Kant on Christian Theology: A Debate About Human Dignity and Christian Personalism

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### Introduction

In recent writings, Robert Kraynak indicts modern liberalism, arguing that it is incompatible with the Christian faith. The modern language of human rights, he believes, undermines Christian virtues, producing a dangerous individualism. Kraynak suggests that constitutional monarchy comports best with Christianity but recognizes that it is unlikely to reappear on the historical scene anytime soon. He advises us, therefore, to embrace democracy on prudential grounds, tempering it by firmly distinguishing between spiritual and temporal realms.

Many scholars today raise challenges to democracy and question whether we ought to use human-rights language. I disagree with some of Kraynak's prudential judgments about these two issues, but they do not surprise me.<sup>1</sup> What disturbs me is how he uses Kantianism to caricature and undermine personalism. In this article, I argue that what he says about personalism is historically and philosophically simplistic. First, I outline Kraynak's account of Kantianism, noting how he ascribes it to personalists. Second, I show how important twentieth-century personalists explicitly reject Kant's metaphysics and epistemology. Third, I discuss how personalists use Kant's ethic carefully, fully aware of its dangers. Fourth, I argue that personalism originates not in Kantianism but in a metaphysic of being, which Kraynak never philosophically engages. By presenting it crudely, he is able to evade its powerful metaphysical and ethical challenge. Dismissing personalism, he develops a

troubling argument about hierarchies of value within the human race that is metaphysically and ethically untenable.

## Kraynak and Kantianism

For Kraynak, Kantianism is modernity's great villain, responsible for undermining traditional Christianity. Many historical factors produced modern liberalism and human rights, but Kraynak observes that "in the last analysis, I would argue that the decisive factor has been the intellectual movements growing out of the Enlightenment, especially the philosophy of freedom developed by Immanuel Kant."<sup>2</sup> Kantianism views people as moral agents claiming rights and determining their own destinies. It accepts the "distinction between Nature and Freedom, and locates the dignity of the person in the ability to create a human world outside of biological and physical nature through assertions of will."<sup>3</sup> For Kantians, persons possess inalienable rights protecting them from harm. Kraynak believes that modern Christians accept Kantianism uncritically, equate it with Christianity, and ignore Christianity's antidemocratic history. He urges us to reject Kantianism and to return to premodern understandings of the *imago dei* and community.

Kraynak believes that personalists are particularly guilty of endorsing Kantianism. Personalism, he maintains, is "a complex idea, but at its core one can find a synthesis of Thomas and Kant."<sup>4</sup> It embraces the Thomistic natural-law teaching that humans are rational and social animals longing for God but also accepts Kant's idea that they are acting and willing creatures with human rights. Kraynak finds this synthesis in Second Vatican Council documents, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the writings of Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, John Paul II, and others. For example, writing about Maritain, he notes that his "synthesis of traditional Thomistic natural law and modern human rights culminated in his theory of personalist democracy as the alternative to secularism and Marxism."<sup>5</sup> Discussing John Paul II, he remarks that his goal "is to develop a synthesis of Thomism and a Kantian version of phenomenology that tips the scales in favor of traditional natural-law duties over modern natural rights."<sup>6</sup> The pope and Maritain are only two of many personalists Kraynak claims endorse Kantianism.

## Personalists Are Not Kantians

Undoubtedly, Kant has influenced modern thought. His epistemology shaped Protestants such as the Niebuhr brothers and their American students and had

a deep impact on Karl Rahner, John Finnis, and other Roman Catholics. Too often, Kantianism restricted discourse, undermining traditional understandings of God, the person, and ethics. Any serious student of modern thought would be foolish to deny Kant's profound effect on it.

However, Kraynak overstates this influence, attributing Kantianism to thinkers who explicitly reject it. For example, commenting on personalism, he says, "by making separate existence something that is willed and claimed as a right that must be recognized by others, personhood moves outside the sphere of Thomism and even of Christian charity into the realm of Kantian liberalism."<sup>7</sup> He cites W. Norris Clarke's work, and in a later essay, accuses Clarke of being oblivious to Kantianism in Catholic theology.<sup>8</sup> Clarke is one of America's great Thomists, and I cannot understand why Kraynak links him to Kant. In his recent book, Clarke criticizes Kant for suggesting that the subject makes her world through freedom.<sup>9</sup> Some may find his exegesis of Thomas unconvincing (I think it is utterly persuasive), but there is no merit to Kraynak's charge that Clarke is a Kantian.

Kraynak's short mention of Clarke reveals just how arbitrarily he hurls the charge of Kantianism at personalists. It also shows how little he understands personalism. Clarke is deeply influenced by European personalists who reject Kantianism. For example, Joseph de Finance, S.J., develops an extraordinary account of the human person grounded in a Thomistic metaphysic that bears little resemblance to Kant's philosophy. Cornelio Fabro, the great Italian Thomist who developed Thomas's doctrine of participation, argues that Kantianism helped produce modern atheism. Louvain Thomists Louis de Raeymaker and Frederick Van Steenberghen incorporate insights about the person from modern phenomenology, but deny that agents exercise freedom through mere assertions of will. Finally, Lublin Thomists such as Mieczyslaw Krapiec use intentionality to undermine Kantian epistemological assumptions.<sup>10</sup> All of these personalists reject Kant's epistemology and metaphysics.

When Kraynak does discuss European personalists, he mischaracterizes their positions. For example, he accuses Maritain of embracing Kantianism, but Maritain spent much of his life battling it. In *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, he skillfully undermines Kantian notions of the autonomous self.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Kraynak mistakenly states that John Paul II develops a Kantian phenomenology, disregarding how Max Scheler deeply influences him. The pope's criticisms of Scheler are well known, dating back to his habilitation thesis.<sup>12</sup> However, Scheler helps him develop his concept of the person and a hierarchy of values.<sup>13</sup> By using the phrase "a Kantian version of phenomenology," Kraynak misunderstands the phenomenological context

of John Paul II's work. He claims that phenomenology descends from Kantianism, but this is far too crude.<sup>14</sup> Edmund Husserl draws heavily from Kant, but Roman Catholic personalists following him such as Dietrich von Hildebrand, Adolf Reinach, Max Scheler, and Edith Stein developed a realist phenomenology, connecting the mind with objects after Kant's so-called Copernican Revolution.<sup>15</sup> On these epistemological matters, John Paul II agrees completely with Scheler and his fellow phenomenologists.<sup>16</sup>

### **Does Using Kant Lead to Kantianism? A Bad Slippery-Slope Argument**

Personalists do, however, appeal to Kant's ethics, and Kraynak makes much of these appeals when charging them with Kantianism. However, using human-rights language or even referring to Kant does not automatically make a thinker a Kantian. For example, Maritain defends human rights but repudiates Kant's account of them in no uncertain terms. Kant's philosophy

built no solid foundation for the rights of the human person, because nothing can be founded on an illusion; it compromised and squandered these rights, because it led men to conceive them as rights in themselves divine, hence infinite, escaping every objective measure, denying every limitation imposed upon the claims of the ego, and ultimately expressing the absolute independence of the human subject and a so-called absolute right.<sup>17</sup>

In the face of such explicit language, it is absurd to label Maritain a Kantian merely because he uses human rights language.

Similarly, John Paul II uses Kant's ethic without degenerating into a Kantian. In *Love and Responsibility*, he adopts a version of Kant's categorical imperative, insisting that we never treat people merely as a means.<sup>18</sup> He calls it the "personalistic norm," and Kraynak cites it to demonstrate Kant's influence on the pope.<sup>19</sup> Yet, though John Paul II appreciates Kant's emphasis on ethical obligation, he arrives at the personalistic norm through a phenomenological analysis differing substantially from Kant's rationalist ethics. Kraynak mentions a passage in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* where John Paul II discusses Kant, but he completely ignores how in this same passage, the pope qualifies Kant's ethic by emphasizing love.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in other works, John Paul II rejects Kant's concept of freedom and nature. For example, in *Veritatis Splendor* he denies that freedom means rising above our biological natures.<sup>21</sup> Far from being an anomaly, *Veritatis Splendor* expresses John Paul II's long-standing worries about Kantianism.

Perhaps, however, John Paul II and Maritain are unaware that by using Kant, they risk capitulating to modernity's worst excesses. Kraynak suggests that personalists want to keep "Kant-in-a box," accepting his ethic, but rejecting his metaphysic and epistemology.<sup>22</sup> He believes, however, that once they retrieve Kant's ideas, powerful cultural forces will force them to accept modernity's individualism and atheism.

This is a bad slippery-slope argument that does a disservice to personalists who fully understand the dangers of using Kant. Yes, modern liberals often abuse human-rights language, but this is no reason to abandon it. Instead, we ought to defend the person's value on Christian grounds. When John Paul II condemns the "culture of death," he does not recommend that we give up talking about human rights altogether but calls for developing a "culture of life" with a proper understanding of rights.<sup>23</sup> Modern abuses of the language of personality, freedom, and rights are very real, but surrendering to them is defeatist. Christian intellectuals are perfectly capable of retrieving aspects of modern thought while securing them in a sound metaphysic.

## The Truth Concerning the Human Person

By offering a bad slippery-slope argument and caricatures of personalism, Kraynak avoids confronting personalism's metaphysical arguments. Personalists focus on experience and action and consider the metaphysical concept of the person.<sup>24</sup> Metaphysically, the person is not an autonomous being acting against nature, as in Kraynak's Kantianism. Nor is she a creature defining herself solely through will. Instead, she expresses the highest form of being. As Thomistic personalists emphasize, all real beings are active and dynamic, communicating their being with others. People differ from other beings because they have self-presence, characterized by self-consciousness and self-determination.<sup>25</sup> They can never disregard the truth or disconnect from the material world because they form a complex set of relationships with other beings in the universe.

Without seriously engaging this vision, Kraynak fails to clarify his own concept of freedom. Does he reject the idea that people have self-possession? Does he deny that they have the capacity for free choice? Kraynak rarely considers these questions, instead simply rehearsing what he thinks the Christian tradition teaches. For example, apparently, he affirms predestination, defending it by vaguely appealing to divine omnipotence.<sup>26</sup> This will not do philosophically because it reveals little about what omnipotence, divine action, or human freedom mean.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Kraynak rejects the idea that freedom

means transcending nature, echoing John Paul II's idea that freedom and truth are inseparable. This is philosophically thin stuff that reflects none of personalism's careful distinctions between kinds of freedom.

I find this philosophical imprecision particularly disturbing because of personalism's ethical import. It emphasizes that we should never use people merely as means, but Kraynak ignores this idea when he ought to consider it. For example, while recommending a mixed constitutional order, he extols Sparta's political system, never mentioning its infanticide and ritual killings of the weak.<sup>28</sup> Why does he praise a militaristic government that denigrated human dignity in multiple ways? Similarly, Kraynak recommends a patriarchal model of the family, advising women to obey their husbands in order to better obey God. However, he fails to mention domestic violence, a feature of many patriarchies of the past.<sup>29</sup> Finally, Kraynak convincingly calls for renewed attention to prudence, maintaining that statesmen must sometimes use brutality to balance peace, virtue, and piety.<sup>30</sup> Yet, he says little about the limits of political brutality. When does prudence become a war crime? In the contemporary war against terrorism, this question is vitally important because some prominent public figures advocate that we torture suspected terrorists.<sup>31</sup> I am not accusing Kraynak of promoting war crimes, domestic violence, or infanticide, but it is telling that too often he fails to acknowledge that people possess value, regardless of political behavior, gender, or age.

When discussing a person's value, Kraynak marshals a hierarchy of being to argue that we should rank the value of various human beings. Jesus' words, he believes, require us to "distinguish between higher and lower human beings and imply that fundamental human rights can be negated in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice."<sup>32</sup> Armed with distinctions among various degrees of human value, we can justify capital punishment and warfare to protect the innocent. For example, Kraynak states that right-thinking Christians should recognize that the lives of an unborn child and Charles Manson differ in value. Because of this axiological difference, we can execute Manson, while opposing abortion.

This argument is epistemologically presumptuous and metaphysically confused. Undoubtedly, we can describe degrees of being, distinguishing between angels and humans, and also recognize the fullness of being in some remarkable persons. However, this cannot warrant creating a hierarchy of being within the human species. First, we are rarely in a position to ascertain the spiritual state of another's soul, whose choices in relation to God must always remain epistemologically opaque to us. It is remarkably audacious of Kraynak to pretend to be able to rank people simply by observing their outward actions.

Second, and more importantly, Charles Manson and the unborn child both share a common human form according them extraordinary value.<sup>33</sup> Because of this form, even terrible people such as Manson retain a baseline value, never degenerating into an animal without personal qualities. It is a central idea in Thomistic thought that existence is good, and human existence is particularly good because of its personal character. We may justify the death penalty for a variety of reasons, but a hierarchy of value within the human species should play no role in our justifications because it is epistemically and metaphysically befuddled.

Personalists such as John Paul II recognize that no matter how brutal a person may become, she retains a fundamental value. The pope witnessed the horrific Nazi and Communist regimes and understands that unless we affirm this value we cannot protect ourselves against totalitarianism and the culture of death. This is why in *Veritatis Splendor*, he reaffirms the idea of intrinsically evil acts that no circumstances can justify performing.<sup>34</sup> Rape can never become a military tactic, as it did in the Balkans in the 1990s. Genocide can never become a means of seeking reparation for past ills, as it did in Rwanda in 1994. Unless we affirm the person's value, we will end up justifying such crimes, judging some persons to be morally inferior to others and worthy of extermination.

## Conclusion

Kraynak has done a valuable service by focusing on modern liberalism's deficiencies. We should not identify Christianity with democracy and should recognize how human-rights claims can undermine community by fostering excessive individualism. However, our disgust with modernity's excesses should not lead us to disregard how it has enriched the Christian understanding of the person. Personalism carefully and judiciously retrieves aspects of modern thought. By calling it Kantian, Kraynak creates a straw man that he dismisses without serious thought. Consequently, he risks losing the moral compass necessary to counter political and social movements that destroy the human person. Rather than simplistically labeling personalism, Kraynak ought to acknowledge its import for contemporary life.

## Notes

1. Leo Strauss made similar arguments about human rights years ago, and in the 1990s, John Paul II warned about distorted human-rights language. Mary Ann Glendon criticizes the American concept of rights. As Kraynak knows, H. Richard Niebuhr counsels us to avoid identifying Christianity with democracy, and Stanley Hauerwas concurs. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); *Evangelium Vitae*, sections 11, 19–21 ([http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john\\_paul\\_ii/](http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john_paul_ii/)); Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991); H. R. Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” in *Theology, History and Culture*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Stanley M. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).
2. Robert P. Kraynak, “‘Made in the Image of God’: The Christian View of Human Dignity and Political Order,” in *In Defense of Human Dignity: Essays for Our Time*, ed. Glenn Tinder and Robert P. Kraynak (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 107.
3. Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in a Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 152.
4. *Ibid.*, 156.
5. Kraynak and Tinder, *In Defense*, 110.
6. *Ibid.*, 110–11.
7. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 155.
8. Kraynak and Tinder, *In Defense*, 118n. 21.
9. W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 11, 36.
10. For references to European personalists, see Joseph de Finance, S.J., *Être et agir dans la philosophie de S. Thomas* (Rome: Università Gregoriana, 1960); Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1968); Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo S. Tomasso d’Aquino* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1950); Louis de Raeymaeker, *Philosophie de l’être* (Louvain: Editions de l’Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1946); Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Ontology*, trans. Reverend Martin J. Flynn (New York: J.F. Wagner, 1952); Mieczylaw Krapiec, *I-Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology* (New Britain, Conn.: Mariel Publications, 1983).
11. Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), chap. 3.



12. John Paul II criticizes Scheler for neglecting norms in ethics, misunderstanding conscience, and failing to comprehend essential elements of Christian ethics. For a German translation of the habilitation thesis, see *Primat des Geistes*, ed. Manfred S. Frings (Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1980).
13. John Paul II succinctly describes his debt to Scheler in a 1976 essay where he says that he led him to his ideas about the acting person, which he then developed by working on Thomas. See Karol Wojtyła, “Special Contribution to the Debate: The Intentional Act and the Human Act, that is, Act and Experience,” in *Analecta Husserliana V* (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing, 1976), 269–80.
14. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 152.
15. For example, Scheler dismantles Kant’s epistemological assumptions, rejecting the idea that the mind constructs objects out of sense-data, see Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), chap. 2. See also Dietrich von Hildebrand, *What Is Philosophy?* (London: Routledge, 1991); Adolf Reinach, “The Apriori Foundations of the Civil Law,” *Aletheia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3: *Philosophy of Law* (1983): 2–142; Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989).
16. In *The Acting Person*, John Paul II acknowledges his debt to Dietrich von Hildebrand and Nicholas Hartmann, see Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potcoki (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 311n. 50. For one essay where he sides with Scheler over Kant, see Karol Wojtyła, “The Separation of Experience from the Act in Ethics,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 23–44. Here, John Paul II criticizes both Kant and Scheler but makes it clear that when it comes to the experience of values, he agrees with Scheler.
17. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 84.
18. Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1960), 40–44.
19. Kraynak and Tinder, *In Defense*, 110–11.
20. *Ibid.*, 110. For the original text, see John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 200–201.
21. *Veritatis Splendor*, secs. 46–47 ([http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john paul ii/](http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john%20paul%20ii/)).
22. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 159.
23. *Evangelium Vitae*, secs. 78–101 ([http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john paul ii/](http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john%20paul%20ii/)).

## Controversy

24. John Paul II calls these two approaches the “personalistic” and the “cosmological” approaches, see “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), chap. 15. John F. Crosby carefully develops this contrast; see John F. Crosby *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1996).
25. For a succinct account of these features of the person, see W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993). See also John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, chap. 1; and John Paul II, “Thomistic Personalism,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 165–75. See also de Finance, *Être et agir dans la philosophie de S. Thomas*, chap. 7.
26. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 101–4, 104–5, 179.
27. In her recent tome on Aquinas, Eleonore Stump offers an excellent discussion of divine action and human freedom, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), chaps. 9 and 13. Maritain discusses these issues brilliantly. See Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publication Company, 1966). Alfred J. Freddoso and Thomas P. Flint present one of the most systematic accounts of omnipotence in the contemporary philosophy of religion. See Alfred J. Freddoso and Thomas P. Flint, “Maximal Power,” in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113.
28. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 235.
29. *Ibid.*, 59–62, 215–17.
30. *Ibid.*, 231.
31. Alan Dershowitz recently advocated that we issue “torture warrants” to monitor how the United States government tortures terrorism suspects, see Alan M. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).
32. Kraynak, *Christian Faith*, 174.
33. Edith Stein focuses heavily on the metaphysical debates about the human form, wrestling with the question of whether each person has an individual form. Sarah Borden argues that the idea of an individual form will produce just the kind of ethically problematic distinctions between persons that Kraynak proposes. See Sarah R. Borden, “An Issue in Edith Stein’s Philosophy of the Person: The Relation of Individual and Universal Form in Endliches und ewiges Sein” (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2001).
34. *Veritatis Splendor*, secs. 78–80 ([http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john\\_paul\\_ii/](http://www.vatican.va/holyfather/john_paul_ii/)).