

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

A Response to  
Robert P. Kraynak

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I thank Professor Kraynak for responding to my essay in such a spirited manner. I want to begin by assuring him that I have no Kantian skeletons in my closet. Like other personalists, I openly acknowledge the value of some of Kant's ideas. What I deny is that I am a "Kantian," and reject the notion that using Kant's ethical ideas is necessarily a bad thing. In this response, I first note that Professor Kraynak creates considerable confusion about the extension of the term *Kantianism* because he uses it both metaphysically and ethically. Second, I maintain that he misunderstands Thomistic personalism because he ignores its metaphysic. Responding directly to his questions, I argue that with a proper metaphysical foundation, Thomistic personalism can selectively use Kant's ethical ideas without worrying about Kantianism's alleged dangers.

In replying to my essay, Professor Kraynak defines Kantianism as a political and ethical ideal, suggesting that I misunderstand him by discussing metaphysics and epistemology. However, in several writings, he defines Kantianism metaphysically. For example, he thinks 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>1</sup> Notice what Professor Kraynak says here about the will and biological nature. Rather than limiting himself to ethics and politics, he makes metaphysical claims about how Kantians understand the person. In fact, Professor Kraynak indicts Kantian Christianity because it allegedly leads moderns to overestimate human value. He often mentions its "philosophy of freedom,"

which is clearly a metaphysical concept of the person.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps (as his response suggests) he thinks we can sever ethical ideas from metaphysics, but this is a very modern idea, deeply influenced (if I dare say so) by Kant. Medieval thinkers locate ethics within a metaphysical context, correctly recognizing that any understanding of freedom implies ideas about the most general features of reality. Because Professor Kraynak defines Kantianism metaphysically, it is perfectly legitimate to point out that many personalists reject Kant's metaphysic. If he now wants to restrict the extension of the term *Kantianism* to ethics and politics, he clearly departs from his earlier work.

Even with this new definition of Kantianism, however, Professor Kraynak creates considerable confusion about what it means to be a Kantian personalist. At one point, he lists thinkers who are personalists, and then maintains that Christian personalists preserve Thomistic metaphysics while adopting Kantian ethics and politics. However, only some of the personalists on his list embrace Thomistic thought. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer strongly criticize Thomistic understandings of reason. Elsewhere in his response, Professor Kraynak says that Kantian personalists take a favorable stance toward the League of Nations or the United Nations. Yet, W. Norris Clarke has written almost nothing about international institutions, and Michael Novak is often critical of the United Nations. By shifting his definitions of Kantianism, Professor Kraynak confirms my suspicion that he creates a Kantian straw man that bears little resemblance to actual thinkers.

At one point in his response, Professor Kraynak accurately describes the general features of Christian personalism but misunderstands *Thomistic personalism*. He is right to say that Christian personalism emphasizes dimensions of Christian anthropology such as an awareness of subjective consciousness and self-determination in action. It also values personal identity, the uniqueness of all persons, the interiority of spiritual life, and human rights. Unfortunately, Professor Kraynak disparages Thomistic personalists for grounding personalism in Thomas, saying that they engage in "wishful thinking." This is an audacious charge to make against formidable Thomistic thinkers such as W. Norris Clarke, John Paul II, and Jacques Maritain. How exactly do they misinterpret Thomas? Naturally, Thomas never presents a modern understanding of human rights, but personalists do not claim that he does. Instead, focusing on what he writes about freedom, the Trinity, and human action, they develop a concept of the person's value.<sup>3</sup> They know that Thomas pays insufficient attention to human subjectivity, so they supplement his work with insights from Scheler, Buber, Marcel, and others. They also maintain that the modern concept of human rights expresses modernity's pro-

found appreciation of the person's value.<sup>4</sup> Human rights language poses some dangers, but Thomistic personalists believe we can avoid them by carefully developing Thomistic metaphysics.

Professor Kraynak misunderstands Thomistic personalism because he spends little time analyzing Thomas' metaphysics. I have read what he writes about Thomas, and he focuses primarily on his ethical and political work, making only vague references to his metaphysics of being. This is not how Maritain, John Paul II, and other Thomistic personalists approach Thomas. For example, Maritain analyzes human rights in terms of natural law, and in turn, founds natural law on the spiritual nature of the person, who is intimately related to God and other creatures.<sup>5</sup> He rightfully refuses to sever ethics and Thomistic metaphysics, demanding that we think about the person's spiritual nature. Before concluding that Maritain is deluded and dishonest about his debt to Kant, I would hope Professor Kraynak would more carefully consider his metaphysical analysis.

Unfortunately, Professor Kraynak is often inattentive to fine metaphysical distinctions, preferring instead to label, rather than carefully engage thinkers. For example, he mocks W. Norris Clarke's "creative completion" of Thomas but misrepresents his analysis of being. Clarke does not argue (as Professor Kraynak says in his response) that being is a dynamic kind of "relation." This is a sloppy summary of Clarke's work. Clarke shows how a substance is relational but insists that it is not entirely constituted by its relations. This may seem like an arcane metaphysical point, but it is absolutely crucial for understanding Thomistic personalism. The first act of *esse* or being distinguishes something from nothing, but its second act is naturally expansive and diffusive, relating it to others. These two aspects of *esse* give value and dignity to individual substances, while also relating them to other beings. In this vision, the universe is a vast community of beings acting on each other.<sup>6</sup> Fully developed, it supports a concept of society in which people relate to one another in self-giving love.<sup>7</sup> It bears no resemblance to some modern, atomistic ideas about human rights and community.

Because he misrepresents Thomistic thought, Professor Kraynak mistakenly believes that Thomistic personalists succumb to the dangers of Kantianism. For example, he charges that Kantian Christianity overstates humanity's dignity as a species.<sup>8</sup> However, Thomistic personalists locate the human person within a vast network of beings in the universe, all of which originate in God, the Pure Act of Being. Human beings have a unique value because they occupy both material and spiritual realms but are always subordinate to their Creator.<sup>9</sup> Professor Kraynak also alleges that Kantian personalists "equate the

dignity of man with the rights of an autonomous being rather than with a soul that is both divine and sinful and that needs to be elevated by subordinating the personality to a higher order of being and even to human hierarchies.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, Thomistic personalists frequently discuss how our souls accord us dignity. John Paul II writes eloquently about the soul, insisting that it enables people to have an interior life and a capacity to act responsibly, both of which distinguish them from things.<sup>11</sup> Maritain explicitly locates human dignity in the person’s spiritual nature.<sup>12</sup> W. Norris Clarke ardently defends the soul’s existence.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Professor Kraynak thinks that by using Kant, we necessarily glorify human autonomy, undermining the true hierarchy of ends. However, if being is intrinsically diffusive, we cannot see people as self-sufficient, autonomous beings choosing whether they want to relate to others. People always exercise a freedom limited by their relationship to God and others. There is no danger here of excessively valorizing human autonomy.

Armed with a proper metaphysics, personalists need not fear Professor Kraynak’s Kantian boogeyman. They can freely adopt elements of Kant’s ethic or any other useful development in modern thought. More than any other person alive, John Paul II has shown the power of this approach to modernity. Condemning many of its negative aspects, he nevertheless always acknowledges the gifts modernity has bequeathed to us. For him, a “heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness, and of the respect due to the journey of conscience, certainly represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture.”<sup>14</sup> Properly understood, modernity reveals that human beings have a “rightful autonomy” over their actions and environment.<sup>15</sup> Professor Kraynak would be wise to heed John Paul II’s words and example and move away from his absurd allegations about repressed Kantian presuppositions. He might then realize that Thomistic personalism offers an extraordinary vision of humanity and God that should command the attention of contemporary thinkers.

## Notes

1. Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in a Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 152.
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, 2002), 107–8.

3. For an excellent example of how Thomistic personalists use Thomas, see Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).
4. For Maritain’s careful exegesis of Thomas’ texts on the person, see *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).
5. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 95–107.
6. For Clarke’s insightful analysis of substance, see “To Be Is To Be Substance-in-Relation,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
7. John Paul II shows how to use this metaphysic to promote a “civilization of love.” See “Letter to Families from John Paul II,” secs. 11–15, February 2, 1994, available at <http://www.vatican.va/index.htm>.
8. Kraynak, “Made in the Image of God,” 114.
9. For a good discussion of this special status, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), chap. 6.
10. Kraynak, “Made in the Image of God,” 113.
11. See John Paul II, “Truth Cannot Contradict Truth,” October 22, 1996, available at <http://www.vatican.va/index.htm>.
12. Here is what Maritain says about the connection between the soul and human rights: “In other words, there is no right unless a certain order—which can be violated in fact—is inviolably required by *what things are* in their intelligible type or their essence, or by what the nature of man is, and is cut out for: an order by virtue of which certain things such as life, work, and freedom are due to the human person, an existent who is endowed with a spiritual soul and free will” (emphases are in the original). Maritain, *Man and the State*, 96–97.
13. W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), chap. 15.
14. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, sec. 31, available at <http://www.vatican.va/index.htm>.
15. *Ibid.*, sec. 38. Kenneth L. Schmitz shows how John Paul II endorses elements of modern thought, while anchoring them in a metaphysic of being. See Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1993).