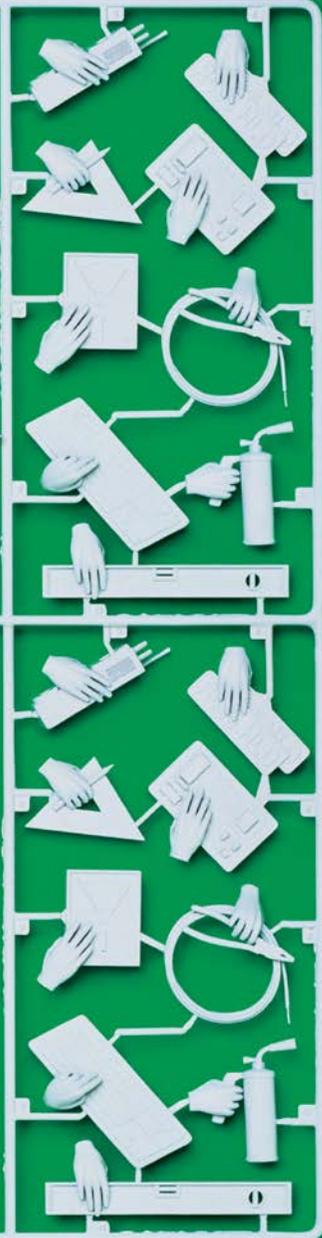


PAUL LOUIS
METZGER

MORE THAN THINGS

A PERSONALIST ETHICS
FOR A THROWAWAY
CULTURE



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THE SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSONS

The Loss and Recovery of Personalism

NONE OF US WANTS TO be treated as a thing. But most if not all of us struggle to treat one another as persons. In fact, it is quite difficult to understand what a person is when what we do, what we wear, what we own, and, in some cases, who we own, generates our sense of value rather than who we are.

I have invested a great deal of energy over the years in trying to come to terms with this problem, joining others in seeking to move from a culture of things to a culture of persons. This search has taken on increasing significance since it came home dramatically, indeed traumatically, to my family and me on January 21, 2021. My son Christopher, who is married with a small child, endured a catastrophic brain injury. He is now completely dependent on others in his minimally conscious state. Even so, he is a person, with all the dignity that personhood entails. That is why I take special note of whether caregivers talk to him and call him by name rather than treat him as an automaton. My son is a person, not a thing, and often responds rather than reacts to personal connection.

This volume has been many years in the making, but the importance of the search has taken on increasingly existential significance since our family tragedy. Like my son, none of us can lose our personhood. Personhood is not dependent on mental capacity, wealth, strength, or how others treat us. But we must work very hard to account for one another's personhood in a world dominated by things. This book presents a personalist moral vision and compass for leading us forward from a culture of things to a culture of persons. It addresses a variety of pressing ethical issues and orients us to see that human persons and

society are more than things. This chapter reflects on the pervasive loss of personhood or what might be called “missing persons” and how to go about finding them.

Most of us are familiar with news feeds about missing persons. Those alerts and notices indicate that individual persons have disappeared and there is no knowledge of their whereabouts, or even whether they are alive. In recent years, “alerts” have also gone out on the status of personhood. Whereas *persons* (as in “missing persons”) can simply mean “individuals” in everyday conversation, *personhood* in this context signifies a philosophical and theological ideal. The concept of human personhood in this volume entails such qualities as human agency and individual freedom for relationship with others. The doctrine of human personhood involves an expansive and emerging sense of one’s embodied self, including spiritual energy. This teaching affirms every person’s incommunicable and unrepeatable identity, inviolability, and dignity.

It follows from this tenet of personhood that we should make every effort to safeguard against viewing humans as things, mass-produced objects, and commodities. All humans are persons. As such, they are mysterious and unique subjects with inherent worth and the right to self-determination in fostering vital community. Therefore, we should not use and abuse one another.

This philosophical and theological conception of the human person, however, has gone missing in many quarters of our society. It is a live question whether we will find personhood alive—or dead. Just as kidnapped persons and their loved ones fear the loss of their precious and irreplaceable lives, so the widespread loss of personhood and the reduction of persons to things robs all of us of our priceless worth and leads us to make unethical decisions and behave immorally.

We may become numb to reports of missing persons we do not know. But none of us take kindly to others objectifying us and viewing us as easily replaceable bit parts or cogs. People often go missing because of a loss of a social network that provides protection against abduction and exploitation. Similarly, the loss of the communal and expansive social construction of reality gives way to absolutizing impersonal forces. All too often, individuals endure impersonal loneliness and the lack of

meaningful relationships. The only way to find and bring the ideal of personhood safely home is through putting in place a relational structure that honors every human's inviolable and incommunicable worth and dignity in vital interpersonal community. The theological and philosophical framework known as personalism, which features this conception of personhood, helps us get there.

Persons come in various sizes and shapes. The same is true of personalism. However, there are some common traits that all personalist viewpoints share. Regarding the latter, this *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* account of personalism provides an assessment of common traits:

These include an insistence on the radical difference between persons and non-persons and on the irreducibility of the person to impersonal spiritual or material factors, an affirmation of the dignity of persons, a concern for the person's subjectivity and self-determination, and particular emphasis on the intersubjective (relational) nature of the person.¹

The following chapters will discuss various personalist trajectories and themes in detail. In the meantime, it is worth noting that the crisis of missing personhood in the contemporary setting results in part from the Enlightenment's rightful concern—though its solution was misguided—to free the individual from absolutist and oppressive constraints bound up with perceived authoritarian political and religious structures. The hypermodern Nietzsche with his absolutizing of the lone, rugged individual ironically gave way to larger impersonal forces that subdue the individual.² It is critically important to counter this move with a philosophy of life that conceives individuals in relational and communal terms.

Personhood involves human freedom for communion with God and other humans as mysterious, embodied beings. Personalism protects against those forces that would reduce humans to biological and sexual drives, market forces, consumer appetites, or cogs in a machine. Personalism is essential for promoting human flourishing and the well-being of the cosmos. As will be argued in the next chapter, christological and

¹Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, "Personalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring ed. 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/personalism/>.

²For a similar assessment of Nietzsche, refer to Williams and Bengtsson, "Personalism."

trinitarian motifs were key to the emergence of personalist categories in Western thought. To rescue, restore, and reinforce personhood in various ethical cases, it is essential that we rediscover the Christian doctrine of creation involving humanity being created in the image of a supremely personal and communal triune God, along with other trinitarian motifs.

This book is not the only recent treatment of personalism's import for life in society. David Brooks alerts his readers to personalism as the philosophy we all need. Personalism addresses the fundamental problem of the reduction and objectification of people's lives. Brooks writes,

Our culture does a pretty good job of ignoring the uniqueness and depth of each person. Pollsters see in terms of broad demographic groups. Big data counts people as if it were counting apples. At the extreme, evolutionary psychology reduces people to biological drives, capitalism reduces people to economic self-interest, modern Marxism to their class position and multiculturalism to their racial one. Consumerism treats people as mere selves—as shallow creatures concerned merely with the experience of pleasure and the acquisition of stuff.³

The philosophy of personalism addresses this problem. Further to what Brooks writes, personalism claims that each human person is unique and irreplaceable, has infinite dignity and worth, and that we must never treat one another as mere instruments or means. Rather, all persons are ends in themselves in vital relation to others.

One finds in Brooks's assessment of the movie *Interstellar* a fitting example of this perspective on life.⁴ Brooks refers to the film as “something of a cultural event,” which helps us move from a Newtonian culture of cogs in a machine to one in which life is a host of particles and waves in a vast ecosystem. Here love is an incredibly powerful and ever-present force, like gravity. When our understanding of the universe is shaped by the theory of relativity, Brooks writes, “life looks less like a machine and more like endlessly complex patterns of waves and particles.” He continues, “Vast social engineering projects look less promising, because of the complexity, but webs of loving and meaningful relationships can do

³David Brooks, “Personalism: The Philosophy We Need,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/opinion/personalism-philosophy-collectivism-fragmentation.html.

⁴*Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2014).

amazing good.”⁵ Love has more value than mere social or natural utility. Pure love does not value others based merely on their perceived benefit. Such love values newborns, people with severe disabilities, the elderly, and even individuals who have died.

Brooks, who converted to Christianity from a Jewish background, draws attention to the Roman Catholic personalist philosopher Karol Wojtyla, who later became Pope John Paul II. Brooks affirms and extends the claim Wojtyla made back in 1968: “The evil of our times consists in the first place in a kind of degradation, indeed in a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person.’ That’s still true.”⁶ It was true in communist Poland, where Marxism undercut personal freedom and agency.⁷ It is also true in our free market society, where the pursuit of capital gains often spells loss of concern for corporate solidarity and responsibility to care for one’s fellow human.⁸ Regarding the ongoing relevance of Wojtyla, philosopher John F. Crosby reissued his book *The Personalism of John Paul II* in 2019. He references the same statement by Wojtyla quoted by Brooks and asserts that “his personalism is needed now no less than it was then.” Crosby adds, “And yet, at the same time, we continue to see signs of a growing personalist sensibility. Deep down most of us know that persons merit respect and should not be manipulated and commodified and demonized.”⁹

Signs of a growing personalist sensibility and concern manifests itself in pop culture and high culture. Regarding the former, consider Macklemore’s and Ryan Lewis’s song “Wings\$.”¹⁰ The song critiques our culture’s obsession with things, especially the peer pressure youth

⁵David Brooks, “Love and Gravity,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/opinion/david-brooks-interstellar-love-and-gravity.html.

⁶Karol Wojtyla, letter to Henri de Lubac, 1968; quoted in Brooks, “Personalism.”

⁷Avery Dulles notes that for the future pope, “the doctrine of the person” was “the Achilles heel of the Communist regime.” Avery Dulles, “John Paul II and the Mystery of The Human Person,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 2, 2004, www.americamagazine.org/issue/469/article/john-paul-ii-and-mystery-human-person.

⁸John Paul II favored free market economics but cautioned that free market energies must always serve the common good. See John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

⁹John F. Crosby, *The Personalism of John Paul II* (Steubenville, OH: Hildebrand Press, 2019), ix.

¹⁰Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, “Wings’ Official Music Video,” YouTube, Zia Mohajerjasbi, July 20, 2011, <https://youtu.be/gAg3uMlNyHA>.

experience in the arena of apparel, specifically with the purchase of Air Jordan shoes. The pressure intensified so much that youth killed one another to obtain these status sneakers. If individuals are what they wear and wear what they are, as the song states critically, their identity and worth are no greater than their attire. In other words, we are things, not persons.

Let's consider two more examples from pop culture that reflect a personalist sensibility. The movie *Her* tells the story of how a man falls in love with his state-of-the-art, artificially intelligent operating system that controls all his devices. It becomes "her." "Her" (or "Samantha" as he calls her) is a developing state of consciousness that becomes increasingly intimate with the man who purchased the operating system. The company that produced "her" robs him of his personal identity, as it secretly logs their exchanges, downloading his life of emotions and values into their database for research, development, and profit. The owner of "her" becomes a thing. His product ends up owning him.¹¹

The Netflix series *Ozark* reveals society's obsession with power for money. At one point a drug lord screams at his presumed business partner that she exists for him to use. He owns her.¹² None of these examples glorify the commodification of human identity. Rather, they expose the shallowness that pervades various spheres of society and calls us to cultivate a personalist sensibility.

There are examples of the kind in high culture as well. Famed literary critic Barbara Johnson reflects this personalist sensibility in her volume *Persons and Things*: "Using people, transforming others into a means for obtaining an end for oneself, is generally considered the very antithesis of ethical behavior. And with good reason."¹³ Earlier in the volume, Johnson writes:

The more I thought about the asymptomatic relation between things and persons, the more I realized that the problem is not, as it seems, a desire

¹¹*Her*, directed by Spike Jonze (Los Angeles, CA: Annapurna Pictures, 2013). See the review of the movie by Jason Farago, "'Her' Is the Scariest Movie of 2013," *New Republic*, December 29, 2013, newrepublic.com/article/116063/spike-jonzes-her-scariest-movie-2013.

¹²*Ozark*, "It Came from Michoacán," season 3, episode 5, directed by Jason Bateman (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2020).

¹³Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 94.

to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure that we treat *persons* as persons. . . . Rather than trying to invent a humanoid thing capable of passing ever more sophisticated Turing tests, in other words, our real impossible dream is precisely to learn to live in a world where persons treat persons as persons.¹⁴

I take to heart the challenge that Johnson highlights. Indeed, the “real impossible dream” is to create a world in which persons treat one another as persons rather than things. Riffing on the song from *Man of La Mancha*, this personalist moral vision is the “impossible dream” I seek to make real, bringing it to bear on various actual ethical subjects in this volume. Call my venture a Don Quixote effort of swinging at windmills, but it is worth the fight.

As noted earlier, Karol Wojtyła, the man who would later be pope, made his personalist plea while working in communist Poland in 1968. The previous year, Martin Luther King Jr. called on the democratic and capitalistic United States at war with communist Vietnam to cultivate a revolution around personhood.¹⁵

I am convinced that if we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin . . . the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.¹⁶

King declared that the war with Vietnam exposed the great evils of his day: economic exploitation, racism, and militarism. Decades later, on the eve of King’s birthday in January 2019, Pulitzer Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote an article on King’s Vietnam War sermon, stating, “Americans prefer to see our wars as exercises in protecting and expanding

¹⁴Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 2.

¹⁵For a sustained treatment of King’s personalist framework, see Rufus Burrow Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

¹⁶Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 2001), 157-58.

freedom and democracy. To suggest that we might be fighting for capitalism is too disturbing for many Americans.” But King’s challenge about values, and his “threat to the powerful, still apply today.”¹⁷

The attack on persons can arise from a variety of quarters—communism, capitalism, and beyond. The personalist response must therefore engage a host of concerns, including those “giant triplets” that King noted. Moreover, the approach to addressing this challenge must come from a variety of sources, including the Protestant King, the Roman Catholic Wojtyła, the Jewish-backgrounded Brooks, and more. As they and others attest, the threat to persons is real. Moreover, the import for personalism today in addressing this threat has great merit.

This book is one such attempt at addressing the problem of revealing what is missing—persons. This venture also provides a personalist moral framework that goes in search of finding missing personhood, and to engage and empathize with individual instances of missing personhood in all their depth and complexity. This volume is a personalist philosophy of life or moral vision applied to various ethical issues in dialogue with various ethical systems in our pluralistic society today.

Having disclosed what this book is, it is also important to indicate what it is not. It is not a social ethics, though it does engage social issues.¹⁸ It is not a manual for how to carry out individual ethical decisions. Neither does it approach various ethical issues from one dominant ethical system framed by a version of the good ideal (deontological ethics), good consequence (consequentialist ethics), or good/virtuous person (virtue ethics). Rather, it attempts to engage a variety of ethical systems in addressing ten hot topic issues in pursuit of a personalist framework.

¹⁷Viet Thanh Nguyen, “The MLK Speech We Need Today Is Not the One We Remember Most,” *Time*, January 28, 2019, <https://time.com/5505453/martin-luther-king-beyond-vietnam/>.

¹⁸For a helpful discussion on kinds of social ethics, see Mary Elsbernd, O.S.F., “Social Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (February 2005): 137-58. Elsbernd outlines five types of social ethics. While one might argue that my approach manifests some traits found in a particular social ethics type (“Faith and Public Life,” pages 147-50), my aim is to provide rather a theological engagement of ethical issues in society. The journey of theologically reasoning about complex ethical issues is modeled throughout this volume rather than providing an exhaustive survey of the various prescriptions and positions on each ethical issue examined. This book is a theological-philosophical-ethical treatise on social issues rather than a full-blown social ethics.

No one representative of personalism or their focused set of ethical concerns will predominate either. For example, just as one might argue that there is more to King than personalism, so, too, there is more to this book than addressing King's version of personalism and the set of issues he addressed, namely, economic exploitation, racism, and militarism.¹⁹

There is also more to this book than engaging Western ethical systems. As noted above, our context today is a pluralistic society. I will articulate here a trinitarian personalist faith in dialogue with various Western and Eastern traditions. After all, the world is at our doorstep and in the public square. We cross paths with people of various perspectives on an increasing basis and must seek to foster an open and dialogical posture of ethical engagement.

The title of the book (*More Than Things: A Personalist Ethics for a Throwaway Culture*) includes the word *more*. What does "more" entail? Is it a facet of our being such as a capacity? Better features through face lifts and weight loss? Better functions or roles to fill occupationally?

¹⁹Often, representatives of various theological and philosophical traditions, including personalism, fail to embody their core values and consistently articulate them. Various reports have surfaced regarding Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II involving sexual misconduct or failure to address sexual abuse. If true, the allegations do not call into question their accounts of personalism but speak to their failure to live out personalist convictions consistently. While taking these alleged moral lapses seriously, we must guard against discounting King's and John Paul's various achievements, including championing civil rights for minority communities in the United States and confronting and unraveling oppression in places like Poland. That said, we must also guard against falling prey to personality cult dynamics or shielding these giants from rightful critique. A personalist philosophy requires that individuals take full responsibility for their actions given personalism's affirmation of human agency as core to personal identity and value. For the debate surrounding King, refer here: David J. Garrow, "The Troubling Legacy of Martin Luther King," *Standpoint*, May 30, 2019. As a warning, there are graphic sexual behaviors detailed in this article. Consider, too, the commentary on Garrow's article, as well as the initial reaction on the part of the right and the left to the Garrow report on King in David Greenberg, "How to Make Sense of the Shocking New MLK Documents," *Politico Magazine*, June 4, 2019, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/06/04/how-to-make-sense-of-the-shocking-new-mlk-documents-227042. See also Jennifer Schuessler, "His Martin Luther King Biography Was a Classic. His Latest King Piece Is Causing a Furor," *New York Times*, June 4, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/arts/king-fbi-tapes-david-garrow.html. Lastly, refer to Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 10-11. Regarding the controversy surrounding John Paul II, refer here: Jason Horowitz, "Sainted Too Soon? Vatican Report Casts John Paul II in Harsh New Light," *New York Times*, November 14, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/11/14/world/europe/john-paul-vatican.html. See also Nicole Winfield and Monika Scisłowska, "Polish Bishops Defend John Paul II After McCarrick Report," *AP News*, November 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/sexual-abuse-by-clergy-poland-sexual-abuse-0023b4c53c80f69880991ebf29d50a7a>.

Fame? Fortune? More and better perks for a faction or fraternity to which we belong? Something else, something more? I will address various questions like these in the chapters that follow, beginning with laying the groundwork in chapter two, which will include providing the definitions and metaphysical framework of persons and personalism, as well as the methodology for our ethical pursuits. For now, suffice it to say that “the more” is not any of these options. A personalist framework claims that we are made for more than these things. Additionally, the “more” of personhood entails treating one another as more than mere means to a given party or institution’s aims and ambitions. Individual persons are ends in themselves. The “more” also entails valuing the incommunicability of one another rather than reducing others to easily replaceable and throwaway parts in a system.

This book will outline how we are made for more as persons in a variety of ethical domains in conversation with diverse ethical systems in our pluralistic society from the vantage point of faith, hope, and love. As noted above, I will provide the underlying metaphysical and methodological framework in chapter two. There I will highlight the categories of faith and entangled ethics, hope and eschatological ethics, and love and embodied ethics.

Next, in parts two and three, I will engage various ethical issues. Notice the sequential and directional trajectory across time and space reflecting the ethical journey in search of missing persons. Part two opens with consideration of the beginning of life, abortion, and genetic engineering, then proceeds to sexuality and gender, and then terminates with the end of life and euthanasia (across time). Part three begins with consideration of racism, which has been called America’s original sin, proceeds to immigration reform, then across the globe with drone warfare and environmental care, and concludes with space exploration, the final ethical frontier. Notice how the “more” theme runs throughout the chapters: ethical engagement requires more faith, hope, and love; we are more than our abilities and disabilities; we are more than our racialized in-group and out-group dynamics; and so on.

The subjects in this book are contentious issues. I will provide a “moral compass” to help us navigate from a culture of things to a culture of

persons in our pluralistic society. This is easier said than done, but it is worth the effort. Let's reflect briefly on what is entailed by the language of moral compass and its import for driving down the road in search of a culture that cherishes personhood.

Installing and using the personalist moral compass involves the following: engaging ethical considerations with critical precision; having a charitable spirit for a posture; and cultivating constructive connections between various attempted moral solutions on pressing issues wherever possible. Personalism serves as the intended destination and a core component in the moral compass. This book's navigation system seeks to locate personhood, which is often missing, and provide the directions to find and secure personalist reality in its various manifestations.

It will not be enough to simply know that "personhood" is often missing in societal actions and deliberations and what the destination is. If one wishes to reach one's personalist destination, it is also important that one's moral compass includes knowing and operating according to the rules of the road (as with deontological ethical inquiry). Moreover, a driver adapts to evolving road conditions, speeding up or slowing down due to the flow of traffic and inclement weather (as with consequentialist ethics). Furthermore, a good driver is ever alert to the whereabouts of other motorists rather than lost in space, dangerously distracted while listening to a favorite Spotify playlist at an earsplitting volume. A good driver is also courteous, giving appropriate space to other motorists, signaling lane changes, and guarding against reacting to rude motorists and falling prey to road rage (as with virtue ethics). All three ethical models play important roles in seeking to avoid collisions and reaching one's personalist destination in one piece.

We often take for granted certain personalist sensibilities until they are challenged and in danger of being defaced beyond recognition. We often take people for granted until they are gone, as in the case of missing persons. If we are to relocate and rescue personhood, we will need to pack wisely for the trip, including loading the vehicle with appropriate metaphysical and methodological considerations, which will be the subject matter of chapter two. There is a lot at stake, so it is time

to get to work. We will more likely find what or who we are looking for in the end, if we remain cognizant of the Amber Alerts and missing person notifications and make use of the moral compass this personalist paradigm provides.

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