

## PERSONALISM SUPPORTS THE DIGNITY OF NATURE

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Professor Ferre has written both a penetrating and perceptive analysis of what personalistic idealism does or may entail about the dignity of nature. His study is an essay in appreciation as much as one of criticism. More importantly, he has opened the door to fruitful discussion, particularly between personalists and panpsychists, of a concept of nature which would ground an adequate environmental ethic. Ferre has thus done a real service to personalists. (It should be clear that we are referring to the position known as personalistic idealism, but I will, for the sake of simplicity, use the term personalism in my remarks.) I for one accept for the most part his critical assessment and I welcome his proposals for "enlarging the concept of personhood"<sup>1</sup> (p.1).

Consequently, I have no desire to cavil over Ferre's treatment of personalism. I prefer to carry on the work of clarification which he has so helpfully begun. In saying this, I am conceding the ambiguities in the personalist position regarding the status of nature which make his essay highly important especially if, as Ferre suggests in closing, the survival of the ecosystem is at stake.

Ferre begins by asking whether personalism "has the conceptual resources to speak to contemporary ethical concerns for the natural order" (p.2). He first provides the terms for answering this question by posing another, namely, what is an "adequate" environmental ethic? and then by formulating "the minimum conditions for such an ethic in principle" (p. 1).

The first of these is the criterion of practical adequacy. The test here is the enhancement of "the likelihood of biotic health generally." This is taken to mean that the health and survival of the human species is a function of its interdependence on and reciprocal concern for the total complex biosphere. I concur heartily with Ferre on this point.

The second condition for an environmental ethic is normative

adequacy. According to Ferre, there are three facets of normative adequacy. (1) There must be clear principles of "distributive justice for environmental goods and ills" (p.4). (2) There must be "an ethic for the *use* of the environment" (p.4). (3) There must be a basis for considering "value claims besides those made *on behalf of human beings*" (p.5). That is, this ethic must "have room for a concept of the *dignity* of nature" (p.5).

Since the first two factors in normative adequacy can be dealt with in terms of the traditional categories of ethical theory, it is only the third that is a distinctive and provocative condition. The reason for this is clear: the concept of the dignity of nature runs head on into a fundamental presupposition of the western (European) ethical tradition. Ferre quotes Kant's classic statement to this effect: "Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on Nature's, have . . . if they are nonrational beings, only a relative value as means, and are therefore called *things*; rational beings, on the contrary, are called *persons*, because their very nature points them out as ends in themselves, that is, as something which must not be used merely as means" (q. 22 on p. 13; cf. q. 9 on p. 6). On this basis, if only *persons* are of intrinsic worth as ends and *things* are only of relative value as means, then the concept of the dignity of nature (the realm of things) is a contradiction in terms. So Ferre throws down the gauntlet to this usage and insists that there is a non-personal or non-human application (see q. 11 from Frankena on p.7) of intrinsic worth or dignity. I think personalists should applaud Ferre's move here for reasons I will mention shortly.

First, let me note that the moral tradition's distinction between persons and things has been undergirded by classical Christian theism's dualism between the supernatural and the natural. The natural order is subordinate to and subject to the use of human creatures. The outcome, even though the theology may not have

intended it, has been the exploitation of the earth and the destruction or endangering of many living species which the earth has nourished. It is not hard to see, therefore, why traditional ethics and traditional theology have not been conducive to grounding an adequate environment ethics, especially if this depends on a viable concept of the dignity of nature.

The question is whether the personalistic philosophy is in a position to do any better. I think personalism is prepared to give consistent and constructive meaning to the dignity of nature. It can, at least in principle, deal with the problem Ferre has raised. That is, I am not maintaining that personalism has delivered on its principles in this regard but that it should. Let me explain.

Personalism is the metaphysical hypothesis that there are no non-personal beings. Or, as Brightman puts it, personalism is "the hypothesis that all being is either a personal experient (a complex unity of consciousness) or some phase or aspect of one or more such experients" (*Person and Reality*, p. 135). This is, to be sure, a minimum definition which calls for a great deal of elucidation. Initially, however, whatever the number, nature, or level of such beings, person as an ontological ultimate is not restricted to human being. Thus, for Brightman, Nature is viewed as the activity and expression of the cosmic person, not as a material substance created *ex nihilo* and existing separately. Though Martin Buber is not usually classed as a personalist, he makes the point well: "The relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God; in it true address receives true response; except that in God's response everything, the universe, is made manifest as language."<sup>2</sup>

We could give personalistic metaphysics a panpsychistic reading by viewing all reality as a complex of psychic entities. As

Leibniz puts it, "Active force [is] . . . something akin to the soul." All substances thus have the same kind of nature or inner constitution. Leibniz does not mean by this that all reality is *just like* human minds. He is saying that there is a common quality shared by all substances, a quality manifested insofar as we know it directly in our own psychic activity. The analogy (centers of psychic activity) in virtue of which we grasp the sameness of all beings also provides a way of understanding the differences among "things."

In any case, since all reality consists of persons or dimensions of the being of persons, there is no being to which in principle moral categories do not apply. If "personalism holds that the class of moral agents and the class of moral patients both coincide with that of persons" (Frankena in the masthead quotation to Ferre's article, p.1), and if the class of persons is exhaustive of reality, then there are no beings which do not fall within the class of moral agents and moral patients. It is clear that for Frankena, persons are identified with human beings and even a restricted class of human beings (see q. 11 in Ferre, p. 7). But for personalists, persons is an ontologically generic concept not confined to human beings. And such person-like beings or beings characterized by personhood in some sense are subject to moral categories not by virtue of being human but in virtue of being centers of being with structure and function of their own.

It follows then that the metaphysical foundation of the moral dichotomy between person and thing and the theological dualism between supernatural and natural is in principle undermined. It is, therefore, intelligible "to conceive the locus of intrinsic value standing outside the human person" (p.8), as well as inside human persons. It should in fact be put more strongly. Personalism supports the dignity of nature because the personal experient or experients who comprise "nature" occupy a peer

status in the economy of the world as a whole. It would depersonalize nature just as surely as would dehumanizing human persons not to accord dignity to the status of non-human beings in whatever form or locus. For these reasons, I disagree with Ferre when he says that "Personalistic Idealism does not seem well suited . . . to ground a genuinely adequate environmental ethic" (p.8).

I am not, however, arguing that personalism has drawn the conclusions from its metaphysical premises so far as the dignity of nature is concerned. Nor have personalists scratched the surface of the practical problems in sustaining reciprocal relations and mutual respect in the total environmental context.

This brings us to Ferre's treatment of Borden Parker Bowne in Section II. For Ferre it is primarily Bowne who reflects the "problems in personalism" in the area under discussion. Ferre marshals convincing evidence to show that Bowne accords nature a kind of second-class status "dependent, instrumental, and phenomenal" (q. 21 on p. 12) and thus clearly not something that deserves to be respected in itself. In this sense, Bowne seems to treat intelligent purposive thought as somehow extrinsic to the physical machine. Nature still seems to behave in materialistic ways in spite of Bowne's insistence on "the failure of impersonalism." Even Brightman, in his classification of values, ranks natural values ("the forces of nature"), along with economic values, as "purely instrumental values" (see *A Philosophy of Religion*, p. 95).

I take it, however, as the genius of personalism to hold that there are no properties which are not properties of persons or person-like beings. And if values are in, of, for such beings, then there are no *purely* instrumental values, for that would be to treat some person or complex of persons (in this case, those whose existence is integrally identified with what we call nature) as an

“it,” as “things,” as mere phenomena, as purely instrumental. The question is not whether nature (as a person or a complex of person-like beings) is instrumental to human existence and well-being. If such beings form an interacting and interdependent system, then all are mutually instrumental. The point is that they are not purely instrumental but they are instrumental in virtue of their intrinsic reality and worth as such. They are instrumental because they, as it were, make themselves available to each other. In religious idiom, nature is the divine (whether in the guise of one or many actual entities) giving itself (forgive the impersonal pronoun) that other being might be nourished and flourish. And in this sense, nature in view of what it really is is intrinsically worthy of respect and gratitude.

For me the fundamental thrust of personalism is that it transcends the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and the theological dualism of supernatural and natural. I can only attribute the kind of problems Ferre rightly finds in Bowne’s thought and to a lesser degree in Brightman’s to a lapse from basic personalistic premises. It might be better to say that they did not fully emancipate themselves from the language and concepts of the dualisms in question. That is, for Bowne to characterize nature as phenomenal and instrumental comes very close to reducing nature to *body* over against the divine *mind* which is thus externally related to nature. For Brightman, on the contrary, the human person is virtually reduced to *mind* externally related to *body*. Elsewhere I have discussed the asymmetry between Brightman’s concepts of human person and divine person, since for Brightman the latter is in no sense externally related to nature. Nature is thus neither a self-contained substance nor is it “idealized.” For this reason, I think the force of Brightman’s quotation in Ferre’s second section (q. 15 on p. 10) is not the

same as that of the quotations from Bowne in the same section. I might add that whether "nature should be *respected in itself*" (p. 12) is not something which can be determined on the basis of any allegedly self-evident notion of nature. The issue depends on a conception of nature which would make the dignity of nature intelligible. I have tried to show that the metaphysical presuppositions of personalism are compatible with and indeed supportive of the dignity of nature. I am grateful to Ferre for crystallizing the issue. And I agree that unless personalists free themselves from the residue of mind-body dualism they will not be able to ground an adequate and relevant environmental ethic.

We come now to the third and last section of Ferre's essay, in which he explores the possibilities of personalism. In this section, Ferre focuses on "promising openings" particularly in Brightman's thought. He does this by finding room in Brightman for "extending the ontological horizon" and by finding sufficient flexibility in Brightman for "enlarging the concept of personhood." I have nothing but praise for Ferre's appreciative and constructive probing. Ferre's analysis of some of the uncertainties in Brightman's conceptual apparatus regarding substances (see pp. 17-19) goes a long way toward clarifying the refining Brightman's basic position. I think Brightman would have seen the cogency of much of Ferre's argument. Ferre produces what I can only call innovative and suggestive proposals for a rapprochement between personalism and panpsychism.

Ferre begins by showing that Brightman admits degrees of personhood, even though the analog is human persons. "Above" human persons, there is at least the divine person. "Below" human persons, there is a spectrum of personal substances

ranging down to such existences as a grasshopper, a mosquito, and even an amoeba. But Brightman does not consider the hydrogen atom (nor perhaps the uranium atom) as a case of personhood and thus a substance. If, however, Brightman rejects the substantial reality of "mere matter," in what sense does a hydrogen atom exist in a personalist metaphysics? Ferre argues that to be consistent Brightman should allow the substantial reality of "complexity in unity" (and thus conscious existence) even in atoms, crystals, and plant cells, especially since "Brightman rejects the concept of totally unconscious being" (p. 19). Ferre concludes, therefore, that "it would be in keeping with the more essential thrust of [Brightman's] thinking that ontological status be accorded to whatever has unity, complexity, and interactivity, and that these traits be the sufficient conditions for what it is, in his technical sense, to be a conscious self" (pp. 19-20).

Ferre then concludes from the extension of the ontological horizon to all units of experiencing, however minimal, that properties like dignity can be applied intrinsically across the board to such entities. And thus one can speak credibly of the dignity of nature. This conclusion can, I think, also be drawn, as I have said above, from the personalistic premise that nature can be understood as the complex unity of the divine in action.

Ferre proceeds to give an ingenious and yet fair interpretation of Brightman's definition of person to legitimize the ascription of dignity to all actual entities or person-like units. Brightman understands person as "a complex unity of self-consciousness that is able to develop ideal values and to act in itself and to interact with others" (q. 33 in Ferre, pp. 21-22). Thus the degree of dignity of any entity is measured by the extent to which it can develop and seek, that is, in terms of "the capacity to take account of the absent" (p. 22). This generic prehension covers the entire ontological horizon and is not restricted normatively to human pursuit of ideal values. Although I have some difficulty



with the concept of *degrees* of dignity, I am willing to accept it as a heuristic principle for dealing with the indefinitely complex problems of interaction within the gradation of being.

In conclusion Ferre raises the question of where his examination brings personalism out vis-a-vis panpsychism. He cites Brightman's view that panpsychism is "an overdeveloped personalism" (p. 23). Ferre has in effect attempted to show that personalism is an underdeveloped panpsychism. It would be too ambitious to undertake an adjudication or resolution here. Nevertheless, Ferre's essay invites a thorough look at where the rubs come and what can be done to deal with them. What is clear is that the affinities between and the common motifs of personalism and panpsychism are such that both positions have more at stake in reenforcing each other than in repudiating each other. I think Ferre's essay has already given us a positive illustration of this. Jointly panpsychism and personalism may be the last best hope of metaphysics.

Brightman is quoted as saying of an issue between the two positions that it "is not definitely decidable" (p. 25). And Ferre concedes that "these matters of metaphysical dispute may never allow of settlement" (p. 25). No one is, in my opinion, ever completely satisfied with his/her view of reality. Neither can one avoid some metaphysical stance. And as Ferre has shown, there is grave practical urgency about confronting theoretical issues responsibly. In this sense, metaphysics may be the last best hope of earth.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>References are to Ferre's article in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>*I and Thou*, Martin Buber, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>See my "Reflections on a Philosophical Heritage," in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986) esp. pp. 265-269.