After nearly a century of being relegated to the hinterlands of psychological inquiry, virtue is back in vogue. Martin Seligman’s launching of the positive psychology movement provided the catalyst for the long overdue renaissance. Conceptually grounded in the Aristotelian notion of eudemonia as the telos of human life, positive psychology employs a “strengths based approach” to understanding human behavior. By emphasizing human agency and the possibilities of self-determination, the approach challenges psychology’s traditional emphasis on environmental determinism as well as serving as a much-needed corrective to the long-standing myopic focus on human dysfunction, disorder, and pathology. Clinical practitioners who employ a positive psychology perspective assist clients in “building what is strong, rather than merely fixing what is wrong.” Students in positive psychology classrooms quickly learn the mnemonic PERMA as a way of recalling the components of human flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Since Seligman’s initial article was published, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in both the academic and popular psychological literature on character strengths and virtues.

For philosophers and theologians grounded in classical virtue theory, the positive psychology movement affords a propitious opportunity to engage interdisciplinary dialogue on issues surrounding psychotherapy and psychological well-being. Philosophical Virtues and Psychological Strengths broaches that dialogue with clarity and substance. The product of three years of interdisciplinary discussions at the Institute for Psychological Sciences, the volume contains thirteen essays by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists and represents a timely and commendable attempt to, in the words of Romanus Cessario, “establish the foundations for a fruitful, bridge-building dialogue between speculative thinkers and clinical psychologists” (7). The editors also hope to “retrieve selectively, with an eye toward psychological mediations, the best of what is contained in the Christian philosophical and theological traditions and to put this wisdom at the service of the psychological sciences” (17).

After two introductory essays, the heart of the volume consists of eight essays, each providing a systemic analysis of specific constitutive elements of the structure and capacities of the human person. The editors’ selection and ordering of these topics is effective and judiciously accomplished. Taken as a whole, the essays represent an accessible, thought-provoking, and eminently readable primer in Thomistic psychology.

The first three essays of the main section lay the conceptual groundwork for the others. Christopher Thompson begins by noting that establishing interdisciplinary dialogue between the classical philosophical tradition and contemporary psychology affords both opportunities and difficulties. His starting premise is that “the best point of entry is not to begin with the speculative facets of the Thomistic philosophy of man. Rather, the best place to begin a fruitful dialogue is in the counselor setting, on the home turf of the clinical psychologist” (37). From there, Thompson posits that both philosopher and practitioner can agree that the pursuit of goals befitting one’s human dignity is essential to a healthy, flourishing life. Therefore, the discussion of proximate goals and their relationship to ultimate ends must be at the center of their dialogue.

In “Personal Unity,” Matthew Cuddeback asserts that the ontological presuppositions which ground a particular therapy play a
determinative role in the nature and efficacy of therapeutic interventions. It is therefore imperative that the practitioner’s therapeutic perspective acknowledge the essential ontological unity or, in Cuddeback’s felicitous phrasing, the “ontological selfhood” of the client.

The volume’s conceptual framework is further expanded by John Cuddeback’s natural law account of human happiness. At the heart of his essay are the fundamental human questions: What was I made for? Where is true happiness to be found? What should I do and who should I be? The author tackles these questions with clarity and verve and reminds us that the answers are instantiated in relationships: “The moral life, indeed human life itself, is perhaps best understood, then, as the drama of man’s free response to a call of love, and a call to love—in friendship” (77).

Two subsequent essays focus on essential components of Aquinas’s virtue theory: the proper ordering of one’s intellectual and appetitive powers, and the agent’s choices that cultivate or degrade those powers. In “Balanced Emotions,” theologian Paul Gondreau employs schematic clinical examples in forging the book’s longest, and arguably most effective, essay. Drawing from a significant range of classical literary, philosophical, and psychological sources, Gondreau provides an excellent overview of Aquinas’s integralist view of reason and emotion and emphasizes that properly ordered emotions are not simply expressions of a moral agent’s sense of well-being and self-satisfaction, but also “a goad to virtue” (185). In philosopher Tobias Hoffmann’s “Free Choices,” the author argues that, contrary to a secular perspective that conflates freedom and license, truly free choices are not simply those that are unfettered by environmental constraint but rather are reasonable acts fully congruent with the proper ends of human existence.

The coherent and ontologically grounded picture of the human person that emerges from these eight essays stands in stark contrast to the fragmented depiction offered by a postmodernist worldview that reduces the human person to something of a cosmic epiphenomenon—an arbitrary constellation of contingencies and performances lacking nature, substance, and essence. To those stricken by the cultural virus of reductionist views of the human person, these essays serve as a much-needed antidote.
The book’s ambitious objectives are most fully realized in those essays that transcend disciplinary boundaries and fully integrate philosophical and psychological perspectives. However, most of the essays display a decided bias toward the speculative and metaphysical rather than the practical and empirical. A fuller and more sustained engagement with the positive psychology and psychotherapeutic literature on virtues and character strengths would have done much to correct that imbalance.

The book’s concluding “Connections” section comprises three essays, each well worth reading, but they are not as well integrated as those in the preceding sections. Philosopher Roger Scruton’s essay provides a historical overview of philosophical anthropology, from its Platonic and Aristotelian origins to its undermining in Cartesian skepticism and its restoration in Kant’s deontological approach. Despite being a valuable and informative essay on Kantian philosophical anthropology, it is nevertheless a rather perplexing and ill-fitting addition to this particular collection.

Psychologist Paul Vitz’s postscript provides the work with its own fair-minded and accurate critique. Vitz frankly acknowledges that although progress has been made toward achieving the book’s central objective of closing the gap between speculative philosophy and psychology, “the bridge has not been completely constructed … the distance between the two disciplines has not been fully spanned” (294). Notwithstanding the veracity of Vitz’s assessment, it is important to acknowledge that readers who closely engage with this volume will come away with a sense of the enticing possibilities, if not the full actualization, of a sustained encounter between Thomistic philosophy and contemporary psychology. The volume represents an important, albeit somewhat cautious, first step toward achieving that goal.

The term “neo-scholastic psychology” is mentioned only once in this book, but the concept haunts the entirety of the work. In the early twentieth century, neo-scholastics attempted to “restore the soul” to a materialistically minded psychology. According to Robert Kugelmann’s definitive work, *Psychology and Catholicism*, that project was exhausted by midcentury. It was undermined by the rigid insularity of the neo-scholastic approach in that “the basic conceptions of its metaphysics could never suffer challenge by anything produced by the psychologists—thus making psychology ultimately pointless from the philosophical perspective, and philosophy a rarefied irrelevancy for psychologists.” Consequently “the soul was quietly dropped from psychological discourse.”

To avoid history repeating itself, researchers who pick up where *Philosophical Virtues and Psychological Strengths* leaves off should take up the challenge presented by Benedict Ashley in the volume’s penultimate essay and investigate to what extent modern psychological research can affirm, inform, refine, and even challenge Thomistic notions of the human person. Researchers should tackle this project secure in the knowledge of the transcendent realities of where the search for truth leads, even though the path is perhaps not quite so narrow or direct as one would have believed in undertaking the journey’s first steps.

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