



NEWMAN STUDIES JOURNAL

VOL. 18 • ISSUE 2 • WINTER 2021

Newman Studies Journal (ISSN 1547-9080) is a biannual peer-reviewed journal founded and owned by the National Institute for Newman Studies and distributed by the Catholic University of America Press, 620 Michigan Ave NE, 240 Leahy Hall, Washington, DC 20064.

Annual individual subscriptions are priced as follows: Print—\$35, Electronic—\$37.50, Print + Electronic—\$50. Annual institutional subscriptions: Print—\$90; Electronic—\$95; Print + Electronic—\$125. Single print issues are \$25 for individuals and \$45 for institutions.

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Manuscripts should be submitted electronically as a Word document to Elizabeth Huddleston, Associate Editor at ehuddleston@ninsdu.org. Authors should consult NINS's website (www.newmanstudies.org) for submission details.

Notifications of change of address or inquiries concerning subscriptions or back issues should be sent to: Newman Studies Journal, PO Box 19966, Baltimore, MD 21211-0966; e-mail: jrnlcirc@press.jhu.edu; phone: 800-548-1784 or 410-516-6987.

The journal is indexed in the Catholic Periodical Literature Index (CPLI), a product of the American Theological Library Association. It is also abstracted and indexed in the Emerging Sources Citation Index, a product of Clarivate Analytics.

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ARTICLES

- 5 Sainthood as Selfhood: The Dramatic Art of Becoming Holy JENNIFER NEWSOME MARTIN
- 23 St. John Henry Newman's Romance of Dogma: A Reappraisal of His Poems ROBERT L. KIRKENDALL
- 47 Newman, Chesterton, and the Rhetoric of American Populism DAVID PICKERING
- 70 Is John Henry Newman's Nineteenth-Century *The Idea of a University* Relevant in the Twenty-First Century? ALLAN PATIENCE

BOOK REVIEWS

- 90 *Our Dear Bought Liberty: Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America*, by Michael D. Breidenbach SHAUN BLANCHARD
- 94 *The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics*, by W. J. Mander DWIGHT LINDLEY
- 96 *John Henry Newman. L'argument de la sainteté. Quatre variations phénoménologiques*, by Gregory Solari CHARLES J. T. TALAR
- 98 *A Liberalism Safe for Catholicism? Perspectives from the Review of Politics*, edited by Daniel Philpott and Ryan T. Anderson AUSTIN WALKER
- 101 *La Vision eschatologique dans les Sermons paroissiaux de John Henry Newman*, by Jean-Louis Guérin-Bouthaud JÉRÔME GROSCLAUDE
- 102 "Heart Speaks to Heart": *Saint John Henry Newman and the Call to Holiness*, edited by Kevin J. O'Reilly BRIAN W. HUGHES
- 105 *La Sacramentalité de l'histoire et le salut de tous selon John Henry Newman. Relecture de l'histoire à partir des principes dogmatique et sacramental*, by John Alwyn Dias CHARLES J. T. TALAR
- 108 *The Apocalypse of Wisdom: Louis Bouyer's Theological Recovery of the Cosmos*, by Keith Lemna ELIZABETH A. HUDDLESTON
- 110 *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, edited by Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe DANIEL WALDOW
- 114 *Introducción a la ética de Robert Spaemann*, by Maria Luisa Pro Velasco LUIGI RUSSI
- 117 *The University and the Church: Don J. Briel's Essays on Education*, edited by R. Jared Staudt MATTHEW T. GERLACH
- 120 Newman Vignette
- 121 Announcement of New Senior Research Fellow
- 122 2022 Spring Newman Symposium
- 123 *Newman Review: E-Publication*
- 124 NINS Visiting Scholar Program
- 125 Correction to NSJ 18.1

Introducción a la ética de Robert Spaemann

BY MARIA LUISA PRO VELASCO

Filosofía Hoy, Granada: Editorial Comares, 2021. xiv + 158 pages. Softcover: \$32. ISBN: 9788413691428.

I consider myself a neophyte of Christian personalism—nothing more than an educator who regularly revisits the question: “what is it to be human?” I want to claim that people like me are one of the intended audiences of Pro Velasco’s stimulating Spanish-language monograph on the ethical thought of Robert Spaemann. A Professor of Philosophy at the Catholic University of Avila in Spain, Pro Velasco holds there the post of Academic Secretary to the John Henry Newman Chair. The resonances between Spaemann and Newman can easily be overlooked because they did not belong to the same epoch. And yet, it often happens in the philosophical enterprise that seemingly unrelated authors open unexpected doorways into one another’s thought by having arrived independently at topics of shared interest. In this reviewer’s opinion, Newman’s original re-reading of the notion of “idea” offers a fertile entry point into Spaemann’s understanding of personhood. If this is the case, Spaemann’s ethical thought could *also* be read as a way of furthering Newman’s insights in a different intellectual climate.

Pro Velasco’s monograph consists of four chapters and is the fruit of her prolonged visitation of Spaemann’s work since her master’s and doctoral dissertations. An initial biographical chapter provides a feel for Spaemann’s personality. One sees him grow up a conscientious youth in war-torn Germany with a felt sense of the inherent dignity of the human person. The second chapter moves to the central presuppositions underpinning Spaemann’s ethical thought. Pro Velasco’s discussion of the notion of personhood struck this reviewer as particularly informative. She quotes with parsimony to highlight revealing passages in Spaemann’s writings: like one, from *Grenzen*,¹ where the German philosopher suggest that “personhood” can easily get thrown around as a label, as though it were applied to some object of taxonomy (54). Spaemann regards this as a nominalist position—one that might even invite questioning the humanity of “non-typical” individuals (this key point returns in the final chapter). For Spaemann, “personhood” is not reducible to a particular quality that needs to be recorded in all members of a class. In this respect, Pro Velasco claims—more resolutely than in previous secondary literature (61)—that Spaemann locates personhood in that latent “capacity” or orientation for reflexive self-observation and moral choice, through which the specifically human form of life *can* manifest in its plenitude. This, regardless of its actual

manifestation in a specific person at a specific moment in time, so that a human being who does not instantiate this capacity does not, for this reason, cease to be a person. This is where one sees Spaemann relying on the Aristotelian notion of *telos* (48) as open-endedness and “being-towards,”² which in turn focuses attention on distinctively human acts, such as promise and forgiveness (62), through which personhood can flourish.

This chapter (chapter two) will be of particular interest to Newman scholars, especially where Pro Velasco argues that personhood for Spaemann cannot be exhausted in an enumeration of particular qualities. It resides instead in a *telos*—an orientation in the human being that makes space for his/her developmental unfolding as a *human* being. This formulation could have been quoted straight out of a letter Newman wrote to his brother on 10 November 1840.³ In that letter, anticipating Sermon no. 15 (*US*), Newman distinguishes between the manifest and the latent as two mutually implicating aspects of reality, such that reality is at the same time apprehended through ostensible forms, while there also remains an unmarked excess beyond such forms.⁴ One might then say, in Newman’s terminology, that Spaemann seems to identify the person with the *idea* of a person—in this dynamic sense suggested by Newman, as disclosure and fulfillment of the latent through the manifest.⁵ The enduring fertility of Newman’s notion of “idea” can hardly be overstated, in light of how it manages to hold together the visible and the invisible, sign and reality⁶—as well as providing a precious new key for visiting Spaemann’s ethical thought.

Chapter three develops these premises to illuminate certain foundational themes in Spaemann’s ethical thought. Spaemann was alert to the tension between the “internal” and “external” perspective for evaluating a “life well-lived.” Would that be a life merely infused with a subjective feeling of contentment (as hedonist philosophers might suggest), or would it be a life that looks accomplished also from outside? (89). Spaemann’s response is that a life well-lived *also* entails the openness to engage with the look “from outside.” This makes possible an integral gaze over life, providing the basis for stepping into moments of understanding, in which one becomes aware of an “orientation towards an end”—a deeper purpose—in one’s own life history (90). Spaemann also orients the ethical life towards

² For an eminently lucid introduction to *telos* (final cause), see Brian Kemple, *Introduction to Philosophical Principles: Logic, Physics, and the Human Person* (CPI, 2019), 46–62.

³ Quoted in, Pierre Gauthier, *Newman et Blondel: Tradition et développement du dogme* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 131–45.

⁴ Pascale Ide, “L’idée chez Newman: Une relecture à la lumière du don” (14 October 2019). <<http://pascalide.fr/lidee-chez-newman-une-relecture-a-la-lumiere-du-don/>>.

⁵ Ide, “L’idée chez Newman.”

⁶ Dean Neubauer, *The Biosemiotic Imagination in the Victorian Frames of Mind: Newman, Eliot and Welby* (PhD thesis, London Met, 2016), 98–135.

¹ Robert Spaemann, *Grenzen. Zur ethischen Dimension des Handelns* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2001).

“benevolence,” understood as a commitment towards the flourishing of life’s *telos* (96)—as it unfolds in the interplay of the latent with the manifest. It is out of a particular respect for the latent aspect of *telos* that Spaemann cautions against all form of objectification (which reduces life to its manifestation at a particular moment), inclusive of other-than-human beings. These considerations allow Pro Velasco perceptively to draw out the import of Spaemann’s “ethics of benevolence” for the contemporary conversation on integral ecology.⁷

The last chapter presents the author’s original attempt to elucidate Spaemann’s ethical thought by contrasting it with the positions of Peter Singer and Daniel Dennett. This also causes the tone of the chapter to become somewhat more technical than the previous three. The difference between Spaemann, Singer, and Dennett reminded this reviewer of the dispute between Linnaeus and Goethe around how to discern what a plant is. Linnaeus preferred to define plants through a taxonomy of “typical” features, used for determining the “plantness” of a plant.⁸ Instead, Goethe suggested that plants should always be approached as developmental continuities, whereby their “plantness” would be unthinkable outside of the succession of different stages in their unfolding. In a similar way, Spaemann’s teleological view of the person resists all manner of attempt to separate out personhood from the enduring biological life of the beings in which personhood manifests (137). On the contrary, Singer and Dennett enact different forms of separation. Singer treats personhood, from a utilitarian standpoint, as a quality that hovers “above” the biological plane. This allows him both to ascribe it to other-than human beings and to deny it to human beings at the initial or terminal stages of life. Dennett, on the other hand, comes up with a “list” of typical attributes of personhood that—much like Linnaeus’s taxonomy—fail to account for how a person is, in fact, a becoming-person, an unfolding *telos* through different stages of life (139).

In sum, this is a provocative little volume that manages to invite a curiosity for Spaemann’s ethical thought, stressing throughout the teleological dimension of life—a choice that makes the text particularly fertile as a basis for dialogue with Newman’s notion of “idea.” Pitched for the most part at the level of the college student, the text is marketed by the publisher as one of the first introductory monographs on Spaemann for a Spanish-speaking audience. This reviewer would like to add that—unlike many a supposed “introduction”—the text really walks the talk and so it could, if translated, serve an English-speaking audience equally well.

LUIGI RUSSI

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⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for the Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

⁸ James L. Larson, “Goethe and Linnaeus,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28, no. 4 (1967): 590–596.

The University and the Church: Don J. Briel’s Essays on Education

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY R. JARED STAUDT

Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2019. xxxvi + 250. Paperback: \$22.95. ISBN: 9781950970254.

Powerful forces of disintegration plague universities and colleges, which reflect and reinforce the wider forces of social disintegration in the church and in the world: the fragmentation of disciplines, compartmentalization of daily experiences, divorce between objective truth and subjective perspective, separation of faith and reason, rupture between the natural and supernatural, and the list could go on. Thus, any attempt to renew the Catholic “multiversity” today must reckon with such forces. This is precisely what the reader will find in this collection of essays by the late Don J. Briel, which is quite ably edited and introduced by R. Jared Staudt. Perhaps the significance of these essays might best be summed up by Newman himself when commenting on the purpose of the Catholic Church in setting up universities: “to reunite things which were in the beginning joined together by God, and have been put asunder by man.”¹

The eleven essays of the book are grouped into three parts. The essays in part one purport to lay down “Foundational Principles,” fundamental themes of Briel’s vision of education: imagination open to mystery (chapter one), faith and reason (chapter two), and nature and essential ends of the university (chapter three). The first essay—perhaps one of Briel’s more demanding essays stylistically, and therefore perhaps not ideal as an entree into the book—illustrates the import of the “sacramental” imagination and what James Taylor has called “poetic knowledge” as the font of a true education. Though Newman is not cited in this first essay, the Newman scholar will see the implicit connection to the *Grammar*’s “illative sense.” Perhaps the strongest of the three essays in terms of a direct connection to the main title of the book, *The University and the Church*, is the third chapter: “The Idea of the University and the College,” in which Briel summarizes fundamental claims in Newman’s *Idea of a University* and points to their application and significance for the Catholic university today. Combined with the second essay (“Newman’s Personal Approach to Faith and Reason”), the third essay does indeed lay a solid foundation for the rest of the book, which returns many times to nearly all fundamental aspects of Briel’s (and of Newman’s) educational philosophy.

Part two is indeed the heart of the book and is worthy of serious reflection

¹ Newman, sermon 1, “Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training,” *US* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), 12–13; cf., Mark 10:9 and Briel, 172.