

*The Human Person: What Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas Offer Modern Psychology* by Thomas L. Spalding, James M. Stedman, Christina L. Gagné, and Matthew Kostecky. Basel, Switzerland, Springer Nature, 2019, 172 pages. \$90.00 hardcover.

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It is difficult to overlook the disunity that afflicts the discipline of psychology. Across the diverse specialties and sub-areas of the discipline, there appears to be a lack of integration. A cursory examination of undergraduate textbooks in the field indicates that theories influencing scholarly, experimental, and clinical work often relate to each other incoherently. Psychology needs a principle that can give its diverse theories and practices an underlying unity. This outstanding book aims to provide that unity. It recommends nothing less than retrieving a set of teachings from classical philosophy to remedy what ails psychology. Specifically, it aims to recover the philosophy of the human person that is first developed in the writings of Aristotle and to apply that recovery to problematic issues in psychology.

A philosophy of the human person is fitting since the central interest in psychology is human behavior. In Aristotle one finds the source of a philosophical anthropology sufficiently flexible and comprehensive that it can adapt and apply to psychology. However, this application requires qualification because Aristotle's thought in some areas "is open to myriad interpretations or perhaps even underdeveloped" (p. 10). What is needed is not so much Aristotle himself but Aristotle's influence. There is in Aristotle's legacy a philosopher who refined, developed, and improved the Athenian's philosophy so that it can justifiably address issues in psychology, especially those that bear on problems of coherence. Thomas Aquinas could be an effective interpreter because, having lived 1500 years after Aristotle, he benefited from a long, richly developed history of commentary on Aristotle's works. Equipped with this wisdom, he was able to perfect and amplify Aristotle's philosophy. Aquinas's own achievement spawned a school of thought called "Thomism," obviously with a nod to his name. Historically, Thomism is sometimes called the "Thomistic synthesis," a homage to Aquinas's accommodation of

his predecessors, like Aristotle. Taking this to heart, the authors (three psychologists and a philosopher) combine the resources of Aristotle and Aquinas to supply a philosophy of the human person in order to unify the discipline of psychology. They employ Aristotle and Aquinas in combination, preferring a shorthand to express the tandem: the “A–T tradition” (p. 11).

In the course of eight clear, well-argued, and instructive chapters, the authors make their case that the A–T tradition has a philosophy of the human person that can serve psychology in salutary ways. Every chapter is engaging, accessible, and written in an appropriately lively style. The narration also employs a grammatical technique to avoid prolixity: an efficient use of parenthetical remarks to advance content. The authors’ use of parentheses is nothing less than artful. The Introduction previews the central principles of the A–T view of the human person and the psychological issues that those principles will benefit, which will be shown specifically as the book develops. The chapter also announces that just as the A–T tradition can assist psychology, so psychology can edify the A–T tradition, especially upon recognizing the significance of empirical research (p. 12). The Introduction blesses the reader with a summary section. This benefit appears in every subsequent chapter as well. The book closes with a chapter titled “Summary and Conclusions” that recalls the strengths and limitations of the A–T tradition and reminds the reader that the interface of philosophy and psychology benefits both disciplines. In between, the authors navigate through six chapters revealing the depth and adaptability of the A–T tradition, sufficient to recommend ways to develop, reinforce, or even challenge many accepted views in psychology.

The Introduction is effective at disabusing skeptics who doubt whether philosophy can be relevant to psychology, and who have tried from psychology’s inception to separate it from philosophy (p. 4). Philosophy is not a social science, so what bearing does it have on psychology? Isn’t it the case that psychology, after all, is a science, while philosophy is not? If philosophy is not a science, what claim, outside of logic, does it have on knowledge at all? Isn’t philosophy relegated to mere opinion? The authors effectively dismiss this criticism, pointing out, first, that to deny philosophy’s relevance is self-refuting. If one argues that social science is knowledge, whereas philosophy is not, one has made a philosophical claim. Since this is a claim about the nature of knowledge, having to do with epistemology, it is a claim coming under the philosopher’s purview. It is philosophy’s business to decide what counts as knowledge. The recourse to empirical methods does not insulate a social scientist from self-refutation. Nowhere in the details of an experiment or an empirical description is there evidence for the removal of philosophy. It is just an opinion to say so, and a philosophical opinion at that. Hence, one should admit that psychologists often presuppose philosophical assumptions in their work. Accordingly, philosophy is relevant to psychology (1) by bringing philosophical commitments to the psychologist’s attention, (2) by clarifying those commitments, and (3) by explaining

their influence on psychological theory, research, and practice, in ways the psychologist herself might not have realized.

In different contexts, the authors observe that while philosophy and psychology are certainly different, their differences don't prohibit philosophy from asking informed and critical questions of psychology. One illustration of how philosophy can bring trenchant criticism to psychology is its exposé of psychologists who, in their zeal to champion psychology as a "hard" science (something akin to physics or chemistry), have mistaken science for scientism (p. 4; p. 13). Scientism is a philosophical position about knowledge and reality, masquerading as a scientific position. Scientism dogmatically asserts that the only genuine way of knowing is that which is determined by the methods of empirical science, or, even more extremely, that the only things that exist are those that are accessible to the methods of empirical science. Of course, each of these beliefs is arbitrary. In the first place, the success of science does not entitle one to limit all knowledge to objects of empirical methods. Secondly, empirical science, since limited to the study of physical beings, does not have a *metaphysical* perspective permitting it to rule out the possibility of non-physical existents. Hence, scientism rests on egregious fallacies, showing again that "philosophy survives to bury its undertakers."

The attempt in the twentieth century to have behaviorism dominate psychology was, arguably, a submission to Scientism as a worldview (p. 14). The person was reduced to an object defined by materialism and mechanism. However, psychologists themselves eventually objected on grounds that such reductionism does not explain so much as explain away what it is to be human, which, after all, is the psychologist's professional interest. Reaction to behaviorism was a predictable effort to restore a psychology that is more humanistic, even if at the cost of being less "scientific." Philosophical assumptions were operative in this reaction.

Another objection the authors dispel is that the A-T tradition is irrelevant for the simple reason that centuries ago it was refuted and replaced by modern science (p. 12). This is an enduring myth which has become an idol of the intellectual tribe. The source of this belief is the exposure of errors in Aristotle's experimental conclusions, findings that were accepted by scholastic thinkers like Aquinas. It is true that researchers like Copernicus and Galileo revisited Aristotle's experiments and refuted them, but these alternative empirical results are not as significant as one might think. This is because Aristotle's thought is an ontology that does not stand or fall on the success of his empirical findings. The principal concentration of the A-T tradition is in first principles, the truths of which are compatible with, and do not depend on, changes in empirical science. Aristotle's principles of substance, causality, actuality and potentiality, necessity and contingency are perennial and are unaffected by any experimental science, sound or unsound. Aquinas makes the point by referring to the Ptolemaic astronomy accepted during his lifetime: "the suppositions that these astronomers have invented need not necessarily be true; for perhaps the phenomena of the stars are explicable on

some other plan not yet discovered by men” (1964, II, 17). The idea that Aristotle was refuted and should be replaced took hold because Renaissance philosophers associated the astounding success of technological science with the culture’s dismissal of Aristotle. This was not a refutation but a historical stipulation (Feser, 2008, p. 175).

One of the strengths of this volume is the authors’ ability to show that the A–T view of the human person can address needs in psychology because it embeds the person in a comprehensive philosophy of nature. The human being is an embodied person, endowed with traits that make him an animal, while also endowed with powers, intellect and will, that make him more than an animal, or, more accurately, make an animal, which on account of unique powers, is species-specifically human. In these respects, the A–T tradition recognizes that there is both similarity and dissimilarity in the comparison of humans to animals. However, the similarity is considerable, given that our body is the basis of our sense cognition and sense appetite, which we have in common with the other higher animals. And yet, our capacity to form abstract concepts, which enable us to judge and reason, makes us *different in kind*. These issues are treated at length in chapters 3 through 5.

The A–T view has the advantage of recognizing the difference in human nature while escaping the naïve binary between animal and human that echoes the influence of Descartes. While few psychologists today would profess to be Cartesians, Descartes’s influence still affects many of them (p. 5). One way this is evident is in psychological debate about the mind–body problem. Very often this problem is set up as a dichotomy reminiscent of Descartes’s dualistic view of nature. Hence, the debate is often reduced to a dispute between those who regard the human being as a machine (explained by materialist–mechanistic principles) and those who regard the human person as something of a disembodied self. The A–T tradition overcomes these simplifications, insisting that the human person is a kind of animal, an organic whole, a combination of soul (life principle) and body, naturally integrated in its powers and actions.

While the human person exercises intellect and senses, these ought not to be understood as discrete powers abstracted from the person as an embodied whole. Whenever the person activates any human power, all the person’s other powers are active in one way or another. Etienne Gilson expresses the matter succinctly when he says that it is the whole person who knows things, “in that he thinks what he perceives.” Strictly speaking, neither the senses nor the intellect knows; “it is the individual man who knows by means of the senses and the intellect” (Gilson, 1986, p. 173). Whenever one goes to a concert, it is not just the auditory powers that listen, it is the whole person. By defending the hyломorphic unity (body and life principle, or soul) of the person, the A–T view can suggest how contemporary psychology might escape the implicit Cartesianism that sometimes lurks in psychological theory. The integral unity of the person as knower and actor in the world is a powerful and persistent theme in this book.

Associated with this more comprehensive conception of nature is a corresponding broader and more diverse account of causation than that found in modern natural and social science (p. 5). Aristotle understood philosophy to be an exercise of our intellects to reduce sense wonder to causal explanation. In this endeavor, the philosopher discerns that nature involves four causes: the *material cause*, the stuff out of which a substance becomes; the *formal cause*, the kind of thing the substance is; the *efficient cause*, that by which something is made; and the *final cause*, that for the sake of which something is made. Modern science tends to reduce causal explanation to matter and efficiency (p. 5). After the influence of Francis Bacon, formal and final causes were removed from natural philosophy or science. The A–T tradition, however, protests, knowing that it is still reasonable to insist that formal and final causes are part of the story of nature. The regularity of nature indicates that activities in things follow their natures. Things behave in ways that indicate purposiveness, according to the A–T principle that “action follows nature.” Such purposiveness describes human life as well. The A–T view insists that it is implausible to deny teleology. It is hard to imagine how science could proceed without invoking it. Try explaining DNA without relying on such causes. Ed Feser cites the Austrian Nobel Laureate, Max Delbruck to make the point. Delbruck declares that Aristotle should be posthumously awarded the Nobel Prize for the discovery of DNA, since the discovery coheres neatly with the teleological vision of science he encouraged (Feser, 2009, p. 47).

When contemplating human purposiveness specifically, one must consider how human beings ought to live. One of the most commendable contributions of this book is its bold determination to address psychology’s difficulties accommodating moral prescription. This the authors address in their chapter on Human Flourishing (chapter 6) and on The Human in Society (chapter 7). Psychology, in its effort to be empirical, faces a challenge when it comes to justifying moral judgments. Moral value is not something discoverable through scientific methods. This limitation is one of the reasons more humanistic psychological theories arose in the twentieth century. These theories partly developed under the influence of phenomenology and existentialism, which do not omit moral motivations in human behavior (p. 61). If psychology is to address all human behavior, it cannot ignore questions of human well-being, human happiness. Such neglect would be especially inconsistent with the aims of clinical, therapeutic psychology. On this matter, the A–T tradition is well-equipped to inform psychology. The A–T tradition is committed to virtue ethics, according to which a human being attains her well-being through habit formation (p. 110). Habit formation makes a natural interface with psychology, since conditioning has been a dominant theme of psychological research. Virtue ethics can exploit this and, reinforced by the idea of teleology in human nature, can indicate how psychology can prescribe behaviors that befit human subjects. Virtue ethics also bears on social happiness. Aristotle is famous for his dictum that the human person is a political animal

(*zōon politikon*), meaning that individual happiness depends on recognizing the need for social interaction (p. 134). (To be happy alone is limited only to gods and beasts, Aristotle famously quipped.) Relying on this background, the authors assert virtue ethics as a mainstay of the A–T tradition to illuminate issues of human value in psychology.

In closing, it must be said that this book is a resounding success. It accomplishes what it sets out to do: to prescribe and defend a philosophy of the human person that can support psychology and that can diagnose some of its incoherencies. It cautions us about the delusion that one can throw philosophy away. The prosecution of clarification, order, justification, analysis, and challenging assumptions are important for every discipline, but they are the essence of philosophy. So, every discipline will benefit from philosophy, provided it is a defensible philosophy. Modern culture has been afflicted with weak, problematic, even sophistical, “philosophies,” even though their representatives are often lionized. This book finds a refreshing alternative by restoring the classical wisdom of the human person distilled in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas, a wisdom that transcends and can expose the errors of such modernist ideologies, many of which have negatively affected psychology. This tradition enables one to think about the individual from a common-sense point of view, a point of view that is deepened and reinforced by a defensible metaphysics and philosophy of nature. It is a tradition that can help remedy the ills of both philosophy and psychology.

### References

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