PREFACE

Toward the end of the previous millennium, Oriel College, Oxford, could not display its usual verdant quadrangles. Instead, it could offer its inhabitants and visitors only a burning heat accompanying the “worst drought in five-hundred years” and pale tan lawns. Yet Oxford remained its ancient, inspiring self and graciously became host to the third international Conference on Persons.

Scholars gathered from across the world to share their work concerning the nature, lives, and deaths of persons. This concept of persons is at once both plain and technical, difficult to define but easy to use, complex in relationship to other concepts and allegedly simple in scope, broad in its application and precise in meaning, powerful in moral, legal, and emotional ramifications and humble in appearance only. Those participating scholars spent a week discussing crucial human issues both perennial and brand new. They brought their hard-won thoughts to the dry land of England that year to have them scrutinized, criticized, and praised. They were, themselves, persons who maintained wonder at the nobility and frailty of human beings of every kind and at the very idea of personhood. The discussions which took place seared a noble impression upon my memory for two important reasons.

Some of the participants were old hands at the century-old school of thought called “personalism.” Some of us had just been introduced to the work of the distinguished American philosopher, Borden Parker Bowne, and the like-minded spirits from around the world that his thinking spawned. Without digressing here into a history of the personalist movement, I will say that those spirits and those of us who attended the conference had one thing in common: the will and the reason to assert and reassert the value of humanity in the face of an ongoing and growing onslaught of modern and contemporary impersonalism. The influence of early personalists and the work of the current proponents of personalism are yours to behold in the pages that follow and, thus, need no further chatter from me. The high quality and significance of their work is manifest and made a lasting impression upon me as it doubtless will upon you.

What is not so available to the readers of this volume is the delightful surprise that the people of the conference not only “talked a good personalist game” but also lived their intellectual commitments as well. They were keen, kind, constructive, helpful, critical, insightful, and a joy to engage. They were a rare philosophical breed who practiced well their preaching, and by their living precedent gave both the movement of personalism and humanity per se a hopeful example. Even from their writings we may glean some idea of what I have claimed about their noble, living commitments. Here I will end to let them begin their “celebration of persons.”

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