

BOOK REVIEW

John Henry Newman. *Identità, alterità, persona*. By Michele Marchetto. Carocci Editore, 2016. Pages 104, 2016. Softcover: € 12. ISBN:9788843080809.

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During the recent Gailliot Award ceremony, Fr. John T. Ford, recipient and distinguished scholar, pointed out how scholarship in Newman studies tends to be reduced to works published in English. In spite of that – he continued – the amount and quality of dissertations, monographs, and articles, produced in the non-English speaking world, are simply too massive to be ignored.

In this perspective, the *Newman Studies Journal* solicited me to offer a review of this essay, published in Italy by Carocci Editore, and titled *John Henry Newman. Identità, alterità, persona*. The author, Michele Marchetto, is Professor of Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Education at the Istituto Universitario Salesiano di Venezia (IUSVE). Having published two monographs on Newman (the first one is *Un presentimento della verità. Il relativismo e John Henry Newman*, Rubettino, 2010), and edited in Italian two very important collections of his writings (*Scritti filosofici*, Bompiani 2005, and *Scritti sull'Università*, Bompiani 2008), he is considered one of the greatest Newman scholars in Italy.

With this latest work, Marchetto intends to achieve a well-defined, two-fold goal: presenting Newman's philosophy as personalist stance, and, by means of it, consider a major issue of the contemporary age, "the dissolution of the self and its claims to unity" (p. 13). Although connected, these research objectives pertain to areas of study marked by very different, vast, and complex challenges. However, the author chooses to not deal with these distinct issues in separate sections of the book. On the contrary, the essay explores them in an intertwined and integrated fashion, thus offering not only a brief though comprehensive look at two critical questions of our time, but also some significant interpretive insights. As the objectives announced in the introduction clearly demonstrate, the intrinsic pragmatic rationale for this work is the potential of Newman studies to enlighten and criticize the ongoing crisis of the subject.

Mainly drawing on *The Philosophical Notebook*, but also, considerably, the *Grammar* and many other writings, Marchetto is able to think of the distinctive characteristics of Newman's reflection in comparison with virtually all the major streams of Western intellectual history, engaging them in an ideal conversation.

The juxtaposition of quite different lines of thought and types of reference is sometimes unquestionable, e.g. Joseph Butler (pp. 33-4), and Edith Stein (p. 41), and sometimes bold, e.g. Max Weber (p. 16), and Johann Wolfgang Goethe (p. 82). The

final result is a useful, concise introduction to Newman's personalism intended for both the general academic audience, and – because by examining Newman's concept of person it cuts across several important areas of philosophical inquiry – the more specialized group of Newman scholars, who may find in it valuable suggestions for new avenues of research. The cost of this broad and compendary approach is, inevitably, a lack of depth. The author, however, manages to weave together very skillfully the different themes and viewpoints involved as he progresses through the chapters.

The first two, titled “Myself and my Creator” and “Grammatica del riconoscimento: l'io come persona” (“A grammar of recognition: the self as person”), are devoted to present the theoretical background of Marchetto's discourse on person, which is precisely Newman's own path to a personalist philosophy. They prepare the ground for reading and understanding the subsequent chapters, which are more analytical and interpretive. These five sections explore with great attention the concept of person as employed by Newman in its main dimensions and contents, i.e. the phenomenological understanding of the subject (Ch. 3: “Person and phenomenology”); the essence of the person as relationship (Ch. 4: “Person and relationship”); the dialectic between the absolute and general principles on the one hand, and the singularity and variability of the individual on the other hand (Ch. 5: “The person between egotism and development”); the role of the hermeneutic process in the connotation of the person as narrative identity (Ch. 6: “Person and hermeneutic”); the articulation of immanence and transcendence in the context of personhood (Ch. 7: “Person and Transcendence”).¹

Particularly compelling is chapter four, focused on the relational nature of the person. This analysis, in fact, may serve as the pivot of the monograph, in so far as it summarizes and makes explicit the authentic meaning of the wide array of comparisons that the author engages Newman in. At first sight, from some passages, it may seem that Marchetto describes Newman's thought almost as a *'via media'*, partially conceding to ideologies both objectivist and subjectivist, absolutist and relativist, conservative and progressive, reactionary and revolutionary, etc. At page 46, we read for example: “Objectivity and subjectivity are thus constantly balanced: without falling into empiricism nor in the abstractions of metaphysics, Newman appeals to the nature of mind and the movements of conscience as well as to their foundation.”² However, a complete and thorough reading of the book brings to light the real ground underlying Newman's balanced and dialectic perspective, that is the inherent relational character of his way of thinking. As Marchetto points out at page

¹ 3. Persona e fenomenologia, 4. Persona e relazione, 5. La persona fra egotismo e sviluppo, 6. Persona ed ermeneutica, 7. Persona e Trascendenza.

² “Oggettività e soggettività trovano dunque un costante equilibrio: senza cadere nell'empirismo né nelle astrazioni della metafisica, Newman si rivolge tanto alla natura della mente e ai movimenti della coscienza quanto al loro fondamento.”

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54, for Newman it is the relationship that defines the essence of personhood: “the relationship is constitutive of being ‘person.’”³

In the light of these considerations, we could define Newman’s thought/philosophy as doubly personalist. Not only did he conceive a philosophy *of* the person, focused on the themes of conscience and graduality of Revelation; he also developed and expressed such a reflection in a fully personalist fashion, by rooting it in the dialogical relation to his own self, to others (past or contemporary thinkers, friends, mentors, family members, etc.), and, even more markedly, to the (ontological) Other.

In all, *John Henry Newman. Identità, alterità, persona* is a remarkable piece of scholarship which will stand as an invaluable tool to challenge many of the prevalent clichéd understandings of Newman as a philosopher.

³ “Che la relazione sia costitutiva dell’essere persona è confermato dall’insistenza di Newman sulla «distinzione» fra le Persone della Trinità, distinzione intesa come l’essenza stessa della Persona, e sulla difficoltà della loro combinazione: (...)”