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### Symposium introduction: Minding the modern: Human agency, intellectual traditions, and responsible knowledge by Thomas Pfau

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## **Symposium introduction: Minding the modern: Human agency, intellectual traditions, and responsible knowledge by Thomas Pfau**

Justin K. H. Tse

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<https://syndicate.network/symposia/literature/minding-the-modern/>

When Syndicate sent Thomas Pfau's *Minding the Modern* to one of this forum's six contributors—I won't say which one—I immediately received a request for an extension. It was not because the length of the book intimidated him, though its size is indeed impressive. It was rather because it was, in his words, "too interesting to skim."

I do not tell this story because I want to embarrass this contributor, whom I later found out had also been in the middle of a move while reading and commenting on the book. Instead, the point is that if *Minding the Modern* is "too interesting to skim," then perhaps there is something personal about reading it. Indeed, Pfau opens with the point that the concepts in the book aren't tools to be used; that would, after all, be a reason to skim a book, to pick up what is necessary and to leave the rest. As Pfau argues,

Our relationship to concepts thus should mirror that to other persons . . . For that to happen, and for us to inhabit concepts as living frameworks with a deep history, rather than occasionally wielding them as tools (such as resonates in the sadly common phrase of "applying a theory") also means to conceive rationality not as a correlate of self-possession but of what, echoing Hegel, Gadamer calls "recognition" (*Anerkennung*). (31)

For Pfau, a concept is like a person. You can't use concepts; you have to engage them. You have to know their histories, the way they passed on their traditions and their stories, because concepts are a remembrance of the past. They also grow—or, as John Henry Newman put it—they develop. You have to let a concept breathe, talk, walk. To use a concept—indeed, to be complicit in the modern academic culture's practices of applying theories and skimming books—is what (for Pfau) is paralyzing the humanities. You don't skim *Minding the Modern*. You engage Pfau as Pfau engages you head-on with a dialogue about the concepts he explores.

*Minding the Modern* suggests that the "death of the humanities," so glibly discussed in our academic culture, is nothing short of the death of humanity in modernity, period. The gaze of modernity, Pfau shows, has sundered the concepts of "will" and "person" from the traditions that gave them meaning, dismantling the very intellectual frameworks that make human agency possible. Even when history is studied, the modern purpose of historicism is to cut us off from the past, to say that then was then and now is now so that even our act of remembering is to forget. As John Henry Newman and Samuel Taylor Coleridge insist, this is no way to do history; the past is, after all, not even past because the concepts that are still necessary for human agency today are more desperately needed than ever.

*Minding the Modern* is an episodic account of two concepts, "will" and "person," that Pfau claims to be central to human agency. Marshaling texts from Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, Pfau follows their thought on the "will" in contest with their interlocutors. Pfau engages these persons as they develop a conceptual tradition of ethical action while engaging with other persons, resulting in a series of dialectical exchanges showing that the will operates as a kind of personal psychology engaging in both interior and exterior conceptual dialogue. Persons developed this conceptual tradition, Pfau claims, and persons then forgot it. Beginning with Franciscan turns toward a nominalist philosophy detaching divine action from this conceptual apparatus (especially in Ockham), Pfau leads

us down another conversation—a dialogue of forgetting—consisting of Hobbes, Locke, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. In the modern mind, agency (Pfau contends) has become detached from concepts, resulting in a progressive amnesia about the frame of action, generating our modern paralysis. A rereading of Coleridge, Pfau suggests, can help us remember this personal frame of action again, to have our wills relate again to persons as we dialogue about concepts, an action that will invigorate our agency, our ability to act again.

In this way, Pfau provides a phenomenology of what we do when we read, when we use our wills and intellects, when we engage with concepts. Paralleling that effort, our Syndicate panel attempts to show what it means to engage with the concepts that Pfau explores, seeking precisely to develop the concepts of “will” and “person” that Pfau claims to be central to human agency. Vivasvan Soni calls attention to Pfau’s utopian tendencies in his direction to reengage with tradition, asking him to reflect on the deep-seated antagonisms between rational deliberation and the creation of future fictions in his conceptual apparatus. Silvianna Bürki challenges Pfau’s romanticism, urging him to take his methodological reading of human agency to the next step of bridging faith and reason. Andrew Grosso pushes Pfau to go even further back in his excavation of the concepts of will and person, to pinpoint the loss of conceptual frames of action in the absolutization of divine sovereignty in Israel’s post-exilic faith. Cyril O’Regan wants Pfau to think critically about his genealogical framework, asking him to clarify why exactly the particular thinkers he has chosen (especially Coleridge) suffice for his conceptual archaeology. William Robert highlights how Pfau’s engagement with Aquinas is a juxtaposition of one genealogy (Pfau’s) with another (Aquinas’s) and gently nudges Pfau to do the same with the nominalist Franciscans that he vilifies. Eugene Webb wants Pfau to consider the possibility that Eastern Christian thought may have also been subject to the same amnesias, suggesting that Pfau take into account genealogies that are not yet part of his story due to schisms in the Christian church. In each of these engagements, a person has read Pfau as a person engaging concepts that still have yet to be developed; the dialectical urging—even goading—of these reviews underscores precisely the central point on which Pfau insists in the book: concepts are to be developed in dialectical dialogue, not forgotten in ways that produce paralysis. To engage is to act; to forget is to die.

Let me finish, then, on a final personal note. Artur Rosman, a writer of no small notoriety in the Catholic blogosphere, is running a lengthy Patheos interview with Pfau on *Minding the Modern* concurrently with our forum. Although he is my friend, I am not trying to plug his blog here; that would, after all, be a form of utilitarianism that Pfau would condemn. Rosman’s loyal readership will already know of his openness, even of his vulgarity, in discussing his financial woes in the modern capitalist system. He has given me personal permission to say that during one of those more stressful periods, he stayed up late at night reading *Minding the Modern*. Like the contributor with whose story I began, Rosman also found it impossible to skim the book; it was like the account of eighteenth-century nominalism, the forgetting of the person and the disembedding of the will from the conceptual tradition of human agency, was guiding him to understand the intellectual origins of the arbitrariness that he continues to face as a person publicly on the margins of the market economy. Rosman found consolation in the personal engagement with the living concepts of “will” and “person” so that he could continue to exercise his human agency in a world that militates against it. It is that recovery of the sources of action to which Pfau aims. As St. Augustine might have said, take up and read—for to read is to act, and to act is to live.