

Book Reviews

Gassendi raises significant “science and religion” questions for us today that this volume of tightly historical accounts has no interest in. But it is not even that simple, for underneath the contributors’ theological indifference is the influence of Gassendi’s non-essentialist view of knowledge—in which one can know only observable facts, never essential meanings. Guiding their every evaluation is the assumption that where our modern scientific life-world follows trajectories that trace back to Gassendi, in those trajectories, Gassendi was right. There is no critique of “us” in such a “history”; this idea makes the volume more of a self-congratulatory hagiography of present post-Christian naturalistic prejudices than anything else.

All the really interesting theological questions about our knowledge of nature that Gassendi throws up, are simply not present. The contributors never consider what a world-shaping metaphysical innovation this new philosophy of matter is. The idea that Aristotelian hylomorphism (where all physical beings are matter-and-form composites) might have gotten something right never comes up. Hylomorphism—today totally displaced by Gassendi’s atomism—holds that intelligible qualities, such as purpose and essence, are integral with physical being’s material and efficient causalities. But contemporary sciences—and particularly the life sciences—are trying (ironically?) to understand a world without purpose or intrinsic meaning (what then is a mind and a cosmos for? asks Thomas Nagel). What if there really are purposes and essential meanings embedded in nature that we can to some degree know? We cannot follow up those possibilities if we are determined to stick with Gassendi’s purely atomist philosophy of matter. And the idea never comes up in this book, that Descartes—though, indeed, totally whipped by Gassendi’s skeptical and non-essentialist critiques—may yet have grasped something true about the nature of intelligibility (rational and essential truths) that cannot be explained by an entirely external and phenomenological epistemology. The supposedly objective and merely positivist historical scholars in this volume are all firmly on Gassendi’s side.

The glaring problem with the book—at least to a Christian interested in “science and religion”—is that it has absolutely no interest in what theological lessons we might learn from better understanding the

life and thought of Pierre Gassendi. The book never asks what Gassendi’s atomist, hedonist, and epistemic legacy means for theology and science today. But readers who ask those questions will be better equipped to so do by reading this very fine work of (alas, theologically and metaphysically eviscerated) modern historiography about the life and thought of Pierre Gassendi.

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WHO ARE YOU REALLY? A Philosopher’s Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Persons by Joshua Rasmussen. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023. 304 pages. Paperback; \$30.00. ISBN 9781514003947.

In this text, philosopher Joshua Rasmussen attempts to understand the nature of human persons (Part One) and their origin (Part Two) through a study of human consciousness. While his book is an exercise in philosophical analysis, he offers reflections on the plausibility of his arguments in light of recent findings in psychology and theoretical physics.

In the first two chapters, Rasmussen establishes the framework for his analysis. Of particular significance is his use of introspection to argue against reductionist accounts of consciousness. By introspection, he means attention to first-person experience of the data of consciousness, such as thoughts and feelings (pp. 8–10). Such attention shows that the best explanation of consciousness will be one that accounts for the reality of mental states. Since we can have what Rasmussen calls a direct, introspective awareness of mental states, we can know these states are real (pp. 30, 40).

The next four chapters build upon this realist account of the contents of consciousness by attending to thoughts, perceptions, intentions, and values. In each case, Rasmussen concludes that the best way to account for the existence of these mental states is by changing our orientation from a “mindlessness frame” to a “mind-first frame” (p. 123). So, for example, introspection reveals that thoughts are real, but are not the same as, nor are they simply reducible to, brain states (pp. 57–59). Likewise, introspection reveals that the elements necessary for a free choice—i.e., agency, intention, and options—are present in

acts of willing, and that the reality of these mental acts is confirmed insofar as they affect material states (p. 116). In summary, the existence of these various mental states requires a mental context, which is the mind. But since mental states also change, there must be a constant that anchors the mental context, and that anchor is what Rasmussen means by a person. "Qualities in consciousness depend on the existence of *someone* with a mind" (p. 142, emphasis mine).

There is much that is relevant in these chapters to those interested in how science might inform philosophy of mind. In his analysis of thoughts, Rasmussen notes physicist Alex Rosenberg's objection to the existence of a mind (p. 74). Rosenberg's critique provides Rasmussen with an example of how science can help philosophy clarify the question. In this case, the question is what kind of material must exist for thoughts to exist. Introspection reveals the need to posit some "material" that cannot be accounted for only by reference to the data of physics. In his analysis of the will, Rasmussen notes that recent studies in neuroscience have found evidence that conscious acts precede the quantifiable brain activity associated with those acts, thus supporting the notion of a free will. Another study found that conscious acts have a significant effect on the brain without contradicting physical laws (pp. 118–19). These and other studies confirm that mental acts, such as conscious intending, affect material states, such as brain activity.

In the final two chapters of Part One, Rasmussen explains the integration of these conscious acts in terms of what he calls the "conscious substance theory." In short, a person is a substance that unifies both mental and material aspects, such that the causal operator is neither a mental nor a material bit, but rather is itself a *capacity* of the conscious substance. Furthermore, this conscious substance explains the *unity* of the person (p. 172). On the one hand, a person can be understood only insofar as the conscious states of that person are affirmed as real. As real as these states are, however, they are all just various parts of what makes a person. The nature of a person is not these parts, but rather is the substance that unifies all these parts. Rasmussen here presents what is perhaps his most interesting example of scientific research relevant to understanding his theory of the person. Physicist Carlo Rovelli explains that matter is best understood as informational, not spatial. This

allows for the possibility that both minds and bodies are just different aspects of an underlying quantum field (p. 165), a possibility to which he returns later in the book.

In Part Two, Rasmussen attempts to explain the origin of persons by delineating the conditions for its source (chaps. 9–11) and then explaining what might fulfill those conditions (chaps. 12–13). First, he argues that anything capable of generating a conscious substance must itself be conscious (p. 207), it must be a unity that integrates conscious acts (p. 216), and it must be identical over time (pp. 231, 233). Then, Rasmussen employs a notion of emergence to explain the origin of persons in light of these three conditions. He considers and rejects both "weak" and "incongruent" notions of emergence that would simply reduce consciousness to third-person, mindless bits of matter (pp. 240, 243). Consciousness must be the result of "strong" emergence of a sort that he calls "substance emergence," meaning that the material from which a conscious substance emerges must itself have the capacity for consciousness. Substance emergence is not incongruent, since the substance in question is congruent with conscious acts; nor is it weak, since the emergent content of consciousness (e.g., a mental image) is not logically predictable based solely on the conscious substance from which the content emerges (p. 246).

The book's argument culminates in chapter thirteen, in which Rasmussen posits what he calls the "source substance" as the origin of persons. The source substance is *fundamental*, such that it does not emerge from any prior substance; it is *conscious*, giving it the capacity to generate consciousness; it generates things according to principles and patterns that are *intelligible*; and it is the substance out of which *persons* emerge. Rasmussen attempts to show the plausibility of the theory in several ways. First, the "informational theory of matter" based on the work of Rovelli (see above) makes sense if the source of all matter is itself a conscious substance and the informational states that constitute matter are themselves the contents of consciousness belonging to the source (pp. 256–58). Rasmussen then explains how a mind-first (as opposed to a mindless) ontology has the advantage of not requiring multiple kinds of substances to explain matter, since a source substance that is conscious can generate both mental and material aspects

Book Reviews

of reality. Rasmussen sees further support for this possibility in recent psychological studies of perception, which understand “particles” to be properties of conscious beings (pp. 260–61). He notes also that a mind-first notion of reality makes sense given that the world is not fundamentally chaotic, but rather is intelligible. Finally, the existence of persons is more plausible if the foundation from which persons emerge is itself personal. Rasmussen concludes the book with a consideration of what he calls the “destruction problem.” If mindless matter (which includes the body) cannot construct a conscious substance, then by symmetry the absence of mindless matter cannot destroy a conscious substance. Therefore, persons can exist even after the body associated with that person ceases to exist (p. 277).

Rasmussen intends the book to be accessible to the lay person while maintaining the interest of the specialist, and he partially succeeds in both respects. Some readers might be encouraged by Rasmussen’s repeated assertion that it’s hard work to ask and answer these deep questions, as well as by his assurances that it will be worth the effort to go where few have dared to tread, though others are just as likely to find these refrains grating and condescending. Those skeptical of Rasmussen’s conclusions will appreciate his willingness to take nothing for granted, including his own existence. The result, however, is that the book wades into debates that are unlikely to help the casual reader follow the argument. Those less interested in the baroque concerns of contemporary analytic philosophy can follow the trajectory of the book’s argument by reading only the introductory and summary portions of each chapter.

All readers will be served well by the book’s most significant contribution to the study of consciousness, which is Rasmussen’s insistence upon the indispensable role of attention to the data of consciousness. Much discussion in modern philosophy of mind not only ignores these data but also actively dismisses them, resulting in what philosopher Bernard Lonergan called the “truncated subject.” Rasmussen is to be commended for his effort to understand human consciousness through his relentless attention to its contents.

Unfortunately, the effort is severely hampered by a conflation between knowing and looking that

permeates the book. Rasmussen’s theory of the nature and origin of persons would be immensely strengthened if understanding (i.e., intellect in action) were to be distinguished from adequate seeing, and if the real (i.e., verified intelligibility) were to be distinguished from that which is adequately seen. Then his theory of the person *qua* conscious substance could be affirmed as real even though it cannot be seen. Furthermore, the emergence of such a substance could be understood by analogy with the paradigmatic instance of emergence, that is, the emergence of the act of understanding out of acts of perception. If readers are unable to complement Rasmussen’s argument with their own grasp of these distinctions, they are likely to either reject the book’s foundational assertions about the reality of their own conscious acts or simply trust Rasmussen that his conclusions are correct. Thus, in the opinion of this reviewer, the book will best serve the reader, casual or specialist, who is able to evaluate the cogency of Rasmussen’s argument without relying on the ocular version of knowing that permeates it.

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SOCIAL SCIENCES

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GENERATIONS: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future by Jean M. Twenge. New York: Atria Books, 2023. 560 pages. Hardcover; \$32.50. ISBN: 9781982181611. E-book; \$16.99. ASIN: B0B3Y9RSFP.

Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research.

– Sociologist Guy Swanson, 1971

Certainly, the ideas behind Swanson’s observations guide the work of San Diego State University psychologist Jean M. Twenge, who has published scores of peer-reviewed empirical studies comparing the responses of different birth cohorts (generations) on the same social survey questions over time. Although limited to the United States here, her empirical research mostly compares present attitudes to past ones and compares different generations to each other in the same time frame. She has long been thinking with comparisons.