Personalism is the first systematic American philosophy associated with a single institution, viz., Boston University. In addition, its chief early progenitors were primarily affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church. Most of these were white males, with Georgia Harkness (1891-1974) as the most outstanding female representative. Martin Luther King, Jr., is the African American generally associated with this tradition, although John Wesley Edward Bowen (1855-1933), a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was actually the first African American to study personalism under Borden P. Bowne and Henry C. Sheldon at Boston University.

We have heard little about Personalism since the late 1960s. This is due partly to the retirement and deaths of its chief representatives and the fact that their students have not taken the personalistic mantle and forged ahead. However, there are periodic signs of a resurgent interest in personalistic philosophy, theology, and ethics.

In this essay I introduce the present generation to the first systematizer of American Personalism, Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910). I shall discuss some of Personalism's chief tenets, the background of Bowne, persons who influenced his development, his influence on others, and his stance on major social issues.

Personalism

Personalism is any philosophy for which PERSON is the dominant or fundamental reality, and for which the person is the highest—not the only—intrinsic value. There are at least a dozen types of personalisms, ranging from the most abstract and least typical form, i.e., the atheistic personalism of J. M. E. McTaggart (1866-1925), to what Albert C. Knudson (1873-1953) referred to as the most concrete type, viz., the normative or typical theistic personalism of Bowne and his disciples.

The type of personalism discussed here is radically theistic, holding that metaphysics (theory of reality), epistemology (theory of knowledge), and ethics must reach the theistic conclusion or belief in a personal God as the
fundamental cause of all things and the solution to the problems of reality, knowledge, and the moral life. The two chief cornerstones of Personalism are PERSON and FREEDOM. Personalism is radically empirical, since it always begins with and returns to self-experience. Its theory of knowledge is activistic and dualistic. That is, the mind is active in the knowledge process, and there is a dualism between the idea and the object of knowledge. Personalists conclude from this that there are no demonstrative truths. The method of Personalism is analytic-synoptic, which means it considers all relevant data and evidence in the search for truth, analyzes each part, relates the parts to each other, and to the whole. The emphasis is more on synopsis than analysis. The criterion of truth is growing empirical coherence. In addition, personalism is thoroughly idealistic, which means that spirit and matter are not two separate realities, but two aspects of a single process—the process of the activity of the divine will and thought. Reality, then, is a society of interacting selves and persons, with God as the creative center.

Personalism is not simply a philosophy to read, be taught, and written about. Although essentially a metaphysics, Personalism is much more than this. It is an attitude; a way of life—a way of living and relating together in the world. Its genius is found in its emphasis both on the intrinsic value and sanctity of the person as such, and as the key to the solution of life's most pressing socio-political and economic problems. Personalism is, at bottom, a philosophy to be lived. This remains its most distinctive and appealing feature.

Although the term personalism came to be closely associated with Bowne, it was first introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1799. But Schleiermacher and other scholars only made casual use of the term. Accordingly, "the term was first made 'a going concern' by its American disciples." Amos Bronson Alcott was among the first Americans to use the term in the late 1850s.

In the early 1860s Walt Whitman introduced the term personalism in Democratic Vistas, although not in a philosophic sense. He did, however, stress the centrality of the self or person. Among free "colored" people during this period none wrote and spoke more passionately and eloquently about the sacredness of persons (a basic principle of Personalism) than Frederick Douglass and Anna Julia Cooper (a chief forerunner to the present day womanist movement).

5See Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice From the South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) [1892], 80–126. Louise Daniel Hutchinson points out that Cooper rejected the idea of the relative value of women, and was critical of those who did not attribute to woman "absolute and inherent value" [Hutchinson, Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 91]. Cooper wrote eloquently on what she called that "Singing Something" within persons, which she attributed to the God of all. She likened this to the inherent dignity of all persons.
There was also John Wesley Edward Bowen who was the first African American to earn the Ph.D. degree at Boston University (1887). Of the classes Bowen took under Bowne he left extensive notes from the course in Theism and Ethics during his first year of seminary. Alcott, Whitman, Douglass, Cooper, Bowen and others are forerunners of the personalist movement in this country, but it is to Bowne that we must look for the development of systematic, thoroughgoing personalism.

Bowne, unlike any before or during his day, sought to push the personalistic conceptuality to its logical conclusions in philosophy, psychological theory, ethics, and theology. Bowne is considered "the father of American personalism." He made Personalism a method of philosophy, a way of thinking about and solving the basic problems of philosophy and the world. Although his personalism was popular for a period of time, his own influence was rather limited.

Bowne experienced his greatest popularity in Methodist Episcopal Church circles and in the New England area. Apart from his trip around the world in 1905, he did not travel extensively. Nor did he join professional philosophical societies. He was called to Boston University as professor of philosophy in 1876, and became the first dean of the Graduate School in 1888. This appointment bogged him down with administrative and related responsibilities. So devoted was Bowne to Boston University that his wife said: "Mr. Bowne was the graduate school."

Francis J. McConnell noted several reasons Bowne's influence was limited. He found advertising repulsive. He had little interest in professional philosophical societies. His devotion to theism did not win him much favor in popular professional philosophical circles. Not only was he a theist, but a Methodist—"and Methodism always has come in for considerable good-humored, not overintelligent patronizing by the professedly intellectual." He was not inclined to adhere to the popular philosophical views of the day, but tended to be an independent thinker, rarely citing the works of other scholars, unless for polemical purposes. His style of writing is often dry, repetitious, and without adequate illustrations of his key ideas. He was less than charming and diplomatic in his criticisms of opposing views, a point nowhere more evident than in his books, The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer (1874) and Studies in Theism (1879). He was ignored by many professional philosophers because he ignored them. In addition, Bowne primarily wrote textbooks for his students, rather than scholarly monographs that might have been more appealing to professional philosophers.

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*John Wesley Edward Bowen collection in The Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Archives and Special Collections Department, Atlanta, Georgia. (185) Reel 23.

*See letter from Mrs. Kate M. Bowne to Borden Bowne Kessler, January 6, 1912. Borden Parker Bowne collection at Boston University School of Theology Library.


Borden Parker Bowne has been praised as "one of the keenest of American metaphysicians,"\(^9\) and as "the greatest metaphysician of this age, perhaps of any age, greatest because clearest."\(^1\) William Ernest Hocking said that "there is no more powerful and convincing chapter in American metaphysical writing than that of Bowne on "The Failure of Impersonalism."\(^2\) Bowne was among the most original and independent thinkers of his day.\(^3\)

Bowne was born in Leonardville, New Jersey, on January 14, 1847. A great lover and inspirer of his students, Bowne suffered a heart attack while teaching one of his classes. He died at his home later that day in 1910.

Bowne was one of six children born to Joseph Bowne and Margaret Parker Bowne. Joseph Bowne was a farmer on inherited land. He was well respected both as a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and as the local Justice of the Peace. He was "a strong abolitionist," supporter of the temperance movement, and had a heart for social issues. Mrs. Bowne was considerably more reserved, "having in her a vein of religious mysticism probably due to her Quaker antecedents."\(^4\)

Borden had strong religious roots which served him well throughout his life. Although he read voraciously as a youth, he was more influenced by the Bible than any other book. It is said that the Bible completely filled him, as did devotion to a supremely personal and loving God who is forever near and present.

Upon completion of his degree at Pennington Seminary, Bowne entered New York University, where he excelled in all courses, and was the highest achiever of any graduate in the school's history.\(^5\) While in college he began writing what was to be his first book, *The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer.*

After graduation from college, Bowne "entered the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, class of 1872." He became a pastor in 1867, was ordained local deacon in 1872, and elder in 1882. He pastored the church at Whitestone, Long Island, for only a brief period, since he accepted an offer to go abroad in 1873 for additional study.

Although he opted for a career in the academy, Bowne remained rooted in the church throughout his life. He regularly attended Saint Mark's Methodist Church in Brookline throughout his thirty-four years at Boston University. Although he loved the Methodist Episcopal Church he was one of its sharpest critics. In this regard Frederick Mayer aptly described Bowne as

\(^1\)Quoted in William V. Kelley, "The Bownean Smile," *Methodist Review,* May 1922, 393.
\(^4\)Kate M. Bowne, "An Intimate Portrait of Bowne," *The Personalist,* Volume II, No. 1, January 1921, 7; also 5.
\(^5\)"An Intimate Portrait of Bowne," 8.
"the Socrates of the Methodist Church." Indeed, his was a "persistent criticism of officialism, especially of the ecclesiastical type." He cared little for General Conference elections and other major Conventions and Assemblies, and viewed them as "unprofitable works of darkness."

Bowne was very critical of the episcopacy, particularly in light of its failure to retain Hinckley G. Mitchell as Professor of Old Testament in Boston University School of Theology. Mitchell was brought up on heresy charges for teaching the "higher criticism" of the Old Testament. He ultimately lost his battle to remain on the faculty. Having heard the arguments of the bishops in the discussion in 1900, "Bowne avowed that, after listening to the utterances of most of the bishops, he could convict all of them whom he heard of heresy before any church tribunal which understood theology at all."

In 1904 Bowne himself was brought up on heresy charges by his Conference. He was charged with heretical teaching by a member of another Conference. At issue were his teachings on the trinity, miracles, the atonement, divine government and immortality, sin, salvation, repentance, justification, etc. Bowne was exonerated of the charges.

Bowne's faith in the episcopacy was so shaken as a result of this debacle that it never fully recovered. Although he had the deepest respect for Bishop Edward G. Andrews who stood firm in support of retaining Mitchell, Bowne advocated the elimination of the episcopacy "root-and-branch, until the action of the General Conference of 1908 in taking doctrinal decisions out of the hands of bishops somewhat mollified him."

Bowne married Kate Morrison of New York. The couple bore no children of their own, which may explain, in part, their love for Bowne's students. In his correspondence Bowne very often referred to his male students affectionately as, "the boys." Mrs. Bowne had a keen aesthetic sense. She always exhibited great care, love, and support for her husband. Bowne drew much strength and inspiration from his wife. He always gave her the first copy of his books.

**Thinkers Who Influenced Bowne's Thought**

When Bowne went to Germany in 1873 he primarily studied with Hulderich Ulrici (1806–1884) and Hermann Lotze (1817–1881). One is struck by the fact that Bowne seldom quotes other thinkers, though we see the names of two thinkers frequently in his works—Herbert Spencer and Immanuel Kant. Because Bowne began and ended his career criticizing Spencer, and because Kant was so prominent in his ethics and theory of knowledge, it is important to say something about them.

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17. *Borden Parker Bowne*, 228.
18. Quoted in *Borden Parker Bowne*, 235.
Spencer influenced Bowne in a negative sense inasmuch as his philosophy represented most of what Bowne was against. Bowne used Spencer’s work as a philosophical cadaver. He disagreed vehemently with his uncritical application of evolutionary theory and his mechanical, impersonal metaphysics which was presumably able to derive the personal from some mechanical force Spencer characterized as “the Unknowable.” Spencer rejected the theistic interpretation of reality, although many passages in his writings imply theism.

Much of Bowne’s philosophy was a reaction against Spencer’s agnosticism. Reality, according to Spencer, is completely unknowable to human reason. Bowne disagreed, insisting that our knowledge of reality is imperfect and inadequate, “but to declare [knowledge] utterly false, is fatal to religion.” That we cannot know absolute Truth, does not mean we can know no truth whatever. That we cannot know all there is to know about God or even created persons, for example, does not mean we can know nothing about them. Bowne argues, instead, that since we and God are kin this itself implies that we can know something about God and other ultimate things.²¹

Bowne’s first and last books dealt with the philosophy of Spencer.²² He finally concluded that there are so many inconsistencies in Spencer’s system that he destroyed his own philosophical enterprise. “This modern Samson [Spencer] paralleled the ancient by pulling the temple on his own head.”²³ Spencer’s philosophy was, for Bowne, little more than a congeries of “bad science, bad logic and bad metaphysics.” He was, in Bowne’s view, confused and twisted in his thinking. Bowne said that Spencer’s so-called “New Philosophy” was little more than “an ambitious attempt, and a dismal failure,” and that he at best “confuses both himself and his readers with logical juggling and thimble-rigging over the absolute, the infinite, the unconditioned, the first cause, etc.”²⁴

One can see the Kantian influence in personalistic ethics from Bowne onward. For example, Bowne borrowed Kant’s emphasis on the good will as a disposition, and the idea that persons are ends in themselves and therefore have inviolable dignity and worth. For Bowne, persons are to be respected both because of their intrinsic value and because created and loved by a personal and loving God. In addition, we hear the Kantian influence in Bowne’s contention that persons should never be used as fuel to warm society.

Bowne was also influenced by Kant’s notion of the practical reason, which has less to do with thinking about concepts than thinking about acting. Kant often identified the practical reason with the will, implying that willing is as rational as thinking. Where reason is practical it influences or determines

²²His last book is Kant and Spencer (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1967) [1912].
²³The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer, 32, 49.
²⁴The Philosophy of Herbert Spencer, 282, 271.
our decisions and actions. That Personalism emphasizes the primacy of the practical reason means that more stress is placed on the will (voluntarism) than the intellect (rationalism). This led to Bowne’s agreement with Lotze’s and William James’ insight that life is deeper than mere logic alone.

Bowne acknowledged the influence of Ulrici and Lotze, but without ever stating how they contributed to his philosophical development. He acknowledged his agreement with Lotze that full and perfect personality exists only in God.\(^\text{25}\) Another acknowledgment appears in a letter Bowne wrote to Mrs. Bowne on May 31, 1909. Mrs. Bowne was often asked to characterize her husband’s thought. While away from home in 1909 she sent Bowne a letter asking for clarification of his philosophy. In his response he states publicly for the first time that he is the first thoroughgoing Personalist.

It is hard to classify me with accuracy. I am a theistic idealist, a Personalist, a transcendental empiricist, an idealistic realist, and a realistic idealist; but all these phrases need to be interpreted. They cannot well be made out from the dictionary. Neither can I well be called a disciple of any one. I largely agree with Lotze, but I transcend him. I hold half of Kant’s system, but sharply dissent from the rest. There is a strong smack of Berkeley’s philosophy, with a complete rejection of his theory of knowledge. \textit{I am a Personalist, the first of the clan in any thoroughgoing sense.}\(^\text{26}\)

There was great respect between Bowne and Lotze. McConnell reported an interesting exchange between them.

Lotze himself always paid high tribute to the work of Bowne. One afternoon in student days Bowne called on Lotze. As Bowne left he called attention to a heavy thunderstorm coming up a valley. ‘That is nothing,’ said Lotze, ‘to the storm of questionings you have raised in my mind concerning my own philosophic system.’\(^\text{27}\)

From this it is difficult to know who influenced the other most. By the time Bowne went to Germany to continue his studies in 1873 he had already laid considerable foundation for his own philosophy. He declined to take the doctorate under Lotze because of his disdain for degrees.

\section*{Points at Which Bowne Transcended Lotze}

Bowne primarily transcended Lotze by making both \textit{PERSON} and \textit{FREEDOM} touchstones of his philosophy. He built his entire philosophy around these. Although Lotze recognized their significance, it was Bowne who argued their centrality both systematically and methodologically. Lotze stopped just short of applying the category of personality to God, thereby leaving “the fundamental reality only less vague than Hegel’s absolute.” Bowne, on the other hand, “presses on to the assertion of personality in the World-

\textsuperscript{26}See Bowne’s letter (May 31, 1909) to Mrs. Bowne in \textit{The Personalist}, 1921, 10. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Borden Parker Bowne}, 37.
Ground with all that such an assertion implies.” This, said Ralph T. Flewelling, “is the chief point of difference between Lotze and Bowne.”

We see Bowne’s movement beyond Lotze most vividly in the revised edition of the former’s book, *Metaphysics* (1898). Lotze, who was greatly influenced by Kant, failed to correct a major Kantian error, viz., the tendency to undermine the importance of the mind’s active role in the knowing process. Bowne gave prominence to the self or mind in this regard.

By the publication of the revised edition of *Metaphysics*, Bowne had solidified his belief that the categories of thought are not more fundamental than the self. To claim that they are is an abstraction. It is precisely here that Bowne differed with Lotze. He was adamant about giving the self primacy over the categories, rather than the other way around. Bowne characterized this position as *transcendental empiricism*. This is the view that intelligence is not and cannot be understood through the categories of mind. Rather, the categories must be understood through intelligence. The categories of thought, e.g., being, space, time, and motion, do not determine or create our experience, but are instead revealed and understood in our experience. In this respect the self is the basic metaphysical fact, and explains everything but itself. Charles B. Pyle rightly held that transcendental empiricism is “the kernel of [Bowne’s] whole system.”

Bowne did not begin, but ended his career, as a Personalist. In his early works on metaphysics and philosophy of religion he characterized his position as *objective idealism*, the view that there is an objective order outside persons that they do not create but find. This order exists independently of us and implies the existence of a Creator. Bowne maintained that one must begin one’s philosophizing with the actual world (which is independent of us) and never lose sight of it. If one reads Bowne systematically one can see a natural progression in his thought from objective idealism in the early phase, to transcendental empiricism in the middle stage, and finally to the personalism stage. We can see in each phase an emphasis on the significance of the self. This emphasis becomes more pronounced as Bowne moves to each new level. By the personalism stage it was clear that the person has prominence in his philosophy.

**Bowne and Social Problems**

No statement on Bowne’s Personalism would be complete without reference to his position on the major social issues of his day. In comparison with

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29 *Borden Parker Bowne*, 115.
many of his Anglo male contemporaries, Bowne’s was an almost revolutionary stance on the issue of woman’s suffrage and the rights of children both in the home and the labor force. He wrote a pamphlet on suffrage for women and an essay on women and democracy in which he lambasted men for excluding women from voting and participation in the solving of social problems purely on the basis of gender. Bowne said that he never saw a reasonable argument against equal suffrage. He also addressed this issue in *The Principles of Ethics* (1892).

A disturbing factor in Bowne’s stance on women’s rights, however, is that there is no indication of concern about the rights of all women. It seems that publicly he spoke and wrote only about the rights of women in general, making no distinction between the social, economic, and racial experiences of white and black women, thereby implying that there were no major differences. It is highly unlikely that Bowne was unaware of the plight of Blacks. He was a contemporary of Frederick Douglass, who frequently spoke on behalf of Blacks and women in the Boston area where Bowne taught. But even more noteworthy, the first National Conference of Colored Women convened under the leadership of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in Boston July 29–31, 1895. The event was well publicized. The inauguration of the first National Conference of Colored Women was a momentous event which should have elicited comment from Bowne. Yet in his ethical writings he is completely silent on the race question and black women’s rights. Indeed, in his text on ethics Bowne made but one reference to slavery, and that to Aristotle’s view that it is “founded in the nature of things.” Although it should be noted that Bowne was pointing to Aristotle as an example of a great ethical thinker who possessed a low estimate of the worth and value of persons, it is still disheartening that the father of the first comprehensive American philosophy which focused on the dignity of the person did not explicitly point to the incompatibility of personalistic ethics with slavery and racism in the American context.

McConnell reports that Bowne “protested against any schemes for the uplift of the Negro that would abate by one jot the Negro’s manhood rights,” and that “he flamed out always against any violation of human rights anywhere.” Although in principle Bowne’s Personalism was against all violations against persons and human rights, I have not yet been able to substantiate McConnell’s claim through Bowne’s extant writings. However, I have dis-

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32 Bowne, “A Man’s View of Woman Suffrage” (Copy in The New York Public Library and in the Library of Congress). In 1909 Bowne presided over a woman’s suffrage meeting at Boston University. He made the opening address: “Prof. B. P. Bowne on Suffrage,” *The Woman’s Journal: Boston*, March 27, 1909. (Copy in Bowne collection at Mungar Memorial Library at Boston University.)


covered evidence of racial and cultural bias and insensitivity in some of Bowne’s writings.36

Bowne was an advocate of the death penalty if (and only if) it could be shown to be an effective deterrent to capital murder. Here we get a sense of the strong situational element in his ethical theory. His overall penal philosophy was consistent with his emphasis on the sanctity of persons as such. He therefore maintained that every prisoner’s basic humanity must be respected when punishment is meted out.

Bowne was naive at best in his thinking on economics. He critiqued capitalism, but remained a capitalist and was critical of socialism. A staunch meliorist, he believed that even if the most serious social problems “are amenable to treatment the cure must necessarily be slow”37 (not a consoling idea to the systematically oppressed). Such a stance was due in part to Bowne’s lack of understanding of the significant role that institutions play in the emergence of social problems and the need to radically alter the structures of society in efforts to solve such problems.

Conclusion

In bringing this essay to a close I want to allow one of Bowne’s students to speak. About four weeks after Bowne’s death, George A. Coe (1862–1951) memorialized his teacher in an address before the alumni of the Boston University School of Theology. He talked of Bowne’s wit and his love for his students. According to Coe, Bowne had such a wonderful personality that many would have flocked to his classes no matter what philosophy he taught. As a personal idealist, Bowne did not just teach his philosophy, he lived it—a remarkable legacy of early Personalists. “His idealistic philosophy culminated, not in a set of propositions but in a living experience of the Father and of the communion of saints.”38 He was an extraordinarily good and witty teacher. His life was testimony to his personalism. Bowne tried to show in his life what a person can be.

The key to Bowne’s Personalism is the idea of the primacy and centrality of the person, an idea that bodes well with systematically oppressed persons of the world. Many present day ecological thinkers and activists may cringe at Bowne’s idea of the primacy of persons. However, Bowne acknowledged the worth of the plant and animal kingdoms, rejected the wanton destruction of these, and fostered a stewardship mentality regarding creation. Yet, when one considers the plight of African Americans, Native Americans,

36See Bowne, Theism (New York: American Book Company, 1902), 260, where he implies the superiority of the “Venus of Milo” (which depicts a nude white woman) in comparison to the “Hottentot Venus” (which is the image of a semi-nude African woman). The distinction appears to be based on race only.

37The Principles of Ethics, 265.

all women, children, and the poor it should be understandable why a philosophy which makes persons central would be appealing to such groups. Therefore, the genius of personalism lies in its emphasis on the concrete respect for all persons; the belief that whenever and wherever any two persons meet in the world they owe each other good will and respect. One is a person in the truest sense only when she or he actively exhibits respect for the humanity of both self and others, and when one is treated like a person by others.

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