



Forthcoming October 2013

# Minding *the* Modern

Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions,  
and Responsible Knowledge

Thomas Pfau

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“[A] learned, deeply important, and accomplished study . . . that calls upon a set of interpretive and communal traditions that, far from being fossilized, contain radical and renovating power, but whose power can be called on, extended, elaborated, and applied to the present and future only if one knows that those traditions can and do remain alive and available, and that we ignore or pronounce them ‘past’ at our peril. The sweep and comprehensiveness of the work are remarkable. This is not a history of philosophy at all. It is a call for us to rededicate ourselves to a serious, demanding practice of humanistic studies.”

—James Engell, Gurney Professor of English and  
Professor of Comparative Literature,  
Harvard University

In this brilliant study, Thomas Pfau argues that the loss of foundational concepts in classical and medieval Aristotelian philosophy caused a fateful separation between reason and will in European thought. Pfau traces the evolution and eventual deterioration of key concepts of human agency—will, person, judgment, action—from antiquity through Scholasticism and on to eighteenth-century moral theory and its critical revision in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Featuring extended critical discussions of Aristotle, Gnosticism, Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, Hume, Adam Smith, and Coleridge, this study contends that humanistic concepts they seek to elucidate acquire meaning and significance only inasmuch as we are prepared positively to engage (rather than historicize) their previous usages. Beginning with the rise of theological (and, eventually, secular) voluntarism, modern thought appears increasingly reluctant and, in time unable to engage the deep history of its own underlying conceptions, thus leaving our understanding of the nature and function of humanistic inquiry increasingly frayed and incoherent. One consequence of this shift is to leave the moral self-expression of intellectual elites and ordinary citizens alike stunted, which in turn has fueled the widespread notion that moral and ethical concerns are but a special branch of inquiry largely determined by opinion rather than dialogical reasoning, judgment, and practice.

A clear sign of this regression is the present crisis in the study of the humanities, whose role is overwhelming conceived (and negatively appraised) in terms of scientific theories, methods, and objectives. The ultimate casualty of this reductionism has been the very idea of personhood and the disappearance of an adequate ethical language. *Minding the Modern* is not merely a chapter in the history of ideas; it is a thorough phenomenological and metaphysical study of the roots of today’s predicaments.

**THOMAS PFAU** is the Alice Mary Baldwin Professor of English and professor of German at Duke University, with a secondary appointment on the Duke Divinity School faculty. He is the author and editor of a number of books, including *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840*.

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