

*Dust of the Earth: On Persons*

University of Notre Dame (November 2-4, 2023)

"Personhood, Relationality, and Responsibility:  
Jewish Philosophers on Contemporary Technology"

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson

*Abstract:*

Created from the “dust of the Earth” (Gen. 3:19) as well as in the “image of God (Gen. 1: 26), the human is a mystery. How does personhood emerge? What does personhood consist of and what does it entail? Do non-human entities have personhood? If so, how should we interact with them? And why has personhood become problematic today? The lecture addresses these questions by considering four Jewish philosophers – Martin Buber (d. 1965), Hans Jonas (d. 1993), Emmanuel Levinas (d. 1995), and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (d. 2020). These influential Jewish thinkers understood personhood relationally, emphasized responsibility as the core of human personhood, and insisted on our duties for the common good rather than the rights of individuals. The four Jewish philosophers offer us a critical vantage point from which to assess the technologization of contemporary life that leads to the loss of personhood and the breakdown of our social fabric. Inspired by these Jewish philosophers, the lecture is especially critical of transhumanist futurism that disdains human embodiment, declares a “crusade” on aging and mortality, glorifies digital immortality, and venerates “superintelligent machines” that would presumably replace biological humans. The lecture defends the preciousness of being human, created from the “dust of the Earth.”