

Meaning, Hermeneutics, and Ethics: Post-postmodern Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the assumption that theories of meaning and concepts of selfhood are inseparably interwoven, this paper takes the current philosophical turn toward ethics as a revival of humanistic concerns in order to argue for a formulation of selfhood as hermeneutical, ethical, and social that goes beyond both modernist and postmodernist views of the self. Drawing on the works of Michael Polanyi, Emmanuel Levinas, and John Macmurray, I argue that being human entails the creating of meaning, requires a personal-relational framework, and needs an irreducible ethical boundary. These essential elements of the self, however, require the re-admittance of the religious into our discussion about what it means to be human.

After the linguistic turn, philosophical reflection has entered a new phase, the so-called ethical turn. After years of deconstructing both the human subject and its arrogant aspirations to divinity or absolute knowledge through metaphysics, postmodern philosophy has begun to realize that deconstructing the human self can become as dehumanizing as the god-like self of its metaphysical predecessors. Postmodernism has succeeded in replacing the Cartesian or scientific epistemology of absolute certainty, objective detached knowledge and its concomitant atomized self (cognito) with the equally dogmatic position that all knowledge is interpretation and that all interpretation is determined by economics of desire, power, and capital. The self becomes a mere construct, even if a required one for the sake of identity, an identity tenuously held together by the constantly shifting interpretation of the determinant forces of culture, economics, and power. A determinist self and the godlike self share the same problem: They are inhuman. We can neither live up to godhood ("I can know things with absolute certainty") nor does a determin-

ist self truly allow for ethical accountability among ourselves ("Ideology made me do it"). Hence the renewed interest in reconstructing the human subject is driven by the need to secure a fixed aspect of the human self which may serve as an anchor for ethics; it is in effect a return to the ancient humanistic question: "What does it mean to be human?" Yet this return occurs after the deconstruction of modernist (and sometimes caricatures of) Cartesian subjectivity and thus offers real possibilities for a more holistic articulation of the human subject which no longer views the human self as a disembodied mind or soul but includes such constitutive factors of selfhood as emotions, agency, linguistic-cultural embeddedness, and sociality.

There are, to be sure, still unresolved issues that obstruct a truly open, interdisciplinary dialogue on subjectivity. These concerns are voiced mainly in the natural sciences and philosophy. The scientist is afraid that introducing the role of emotions and cultural influences to our interpretation of reality will vanquish the achievements of objective knowledge and open the door for rampant subjectivism and relativism. Since the scientist knows that radical relativism does not work in the empirical world of research, he/she soon loses interest in discussions of subjectivity.

The philosopher, on the other hand, fears that a renewed discussion of subjectivity will permit metaphysical and, worst of all, theological presuppositions to be smuggled into the discussion and regress from the postmodern achievement of the closure of metaphysics and the consequent rejection of metanarratives. I want to address both of these concerns by drawing on the thought of three important thinkers of the twentieth century: Michael Polanyi, John Macmurray, and Emmanuel Levinas. All three of them point out the limit of scientific epistemology which presupposes a limited view of the self. Furthermore, all three figures indicate that the possible consequence of the return to ethics is a renewed discussion of religion: The question is not so much whether one chooses to be religious or secular but rather that both outlooks go wrong when relying on either an atomized or constructivist self. The way forward

lies in the conception of the self as social, ethical, and rational, a conception of the human, which, on philosophical grounds, is inseparable from either the metaphysical or the religious.

MICHAEL POLANYI: TO BE HUMAN IS TO INTERPRET

Usually the German philosopher Martin Heidegger is given credit for dismantling Cartesian epistemology and overcoming its concomitant subject-object division through his existential hermeneutics. In his early lectures on the hermeneutics of facticity, Heidegger states that hermeneutics is not a method, nor a doctrine about understanding, but our very mode of existence:

Hermeneutics is not an artificially devised mode of analysis which is imposed on Dasein and pursued out of curiosity....the relationship between hermeneutics and facticity is not a relationship between the grasping of an object and the object grasped.... Rather, interpreting is itself a possible and distinctive of the character of the being of facticity. Interpreting is a being which belongs to the being of factual life itself. (p. 13)

Heidegger's insight is quite limited, for the reduction of understanding to self understanding, as the "wakefulness of Dasein for itself" is problematical in its egocentrism. Heidegger's main point is, however, that we are homo interpretans, a hermeneutical being with the essential characteristic of meaning making. One who has expressed this idea much more clearly than Heidegger and who provides a corrective to Heidegger's definition of hermeneutics as self-understanding is the scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi. In his last publication entitled *Meaning* (1975), Polanyi argues that the making of meaning is what makes us human, and that interpretation is not just self-understanding or the wakefulness of self, but is the only way of coming to terms with reality.

Polanyi's (1975) accomplishment is to refute science's monopoly of real, factual knowledge by showing how the same interpretive approach underlies both the human and the natural sciences. According to Polanyi, the Cartesian culture on whose soil the modern

sciences matured, is obsessed with a desire for impersonal knowledge and absolute certainty. Modern scientific culture has inadvertently declared the human subject as split between knowledge (impersonal, objective facts) and belief (subjective, unverifiable faith). Polanyi argues, however, that all knowledge is personal, and that even the most rigorous scientific procedure requires personal commitment, imagination, and intuition. These human qualities are required for the production of meaning in any field, and together they form what Polanyi calls "tacit integration."

According to Polanyi (1975), knowledge consists in the ordering of facts or events (subsidiaries) within a greater framework (focus). In this act of integration, the subsidiary facts have meaning insofar as they contribute to the construction of the greater framework or goal.

Polanyi (1975) illustrates this "tacit integration" by describing a blind man probing an object with his stick. The man's coordinated bodily movements and even the stick are mere subsidiaries to the focus of determining the nature of the object under investigation. Polanyi makes two important points. First, the blind man "indwells" his stick. He cannot be critically aware of the stick while it serves him as a probe. If he does, his focal point is lost. For the duration of his investigation, he trusts and relies critically on the stick.

Secondly, the man's determinations of the possible nature of the object's nature move in a hermeneutical circle. His imagination and intuition, based on past experiences, project a hypothesis which is subsequently verified or corrected by his probing. Such, Polanyi (1975) argues, is the nature of all knowing, both in the sciences and in the humanities. Contrary to scientist's popular self-image, this act of integration and the validity of a cast of hypotheses depend not on a formal, empirically verifiable procedure but on an educated hunch: "It is only the imagination that can direct our attention to a target that is as yet unsupported by subsidiaries" (p. 57). Polanyi calls these educated hunches "perceptive anticipations," and believes that this anticipatory integration occurs not only in our interpretation of linguistic utterances but is "actually found at work in every deliberate human action" (p. 59). Moreover, intuition fuelled by the imagination is informed by hope and passionate

commitment. Even the scientist is always personally involved and never detached from his project. Polanyi thus confirms the philosophical insight of Hans-Georg Gadamer that personal involvement and prejudgments are not to be avoided but form the very canvas on which we create meaning. We should now be able to see that all our knowledge is inescapably indeterminate (Polanyi, 1975, p. 61).

In sum, all processes of knowing (including those of science) in no way resemble an impersonal achievement of detached objectivity. They are rooted throughout (from our selection of a problem to the verification of a discovery) in personal acts of tacit integration and not in explicit operations of logic. Scientific inquiry is accordingly a dynamic exercise of the imagination and is rooted in commitments and beliefs about the nature of things. According to Polanyi (1975), the very structure of knowing demands personal involvement: We dwell in the subsidiaries (in our theories, beliefs, commitments, etc.) and bring them to bear focally on an interpretation. In fact, the projection of an interpretation (a coherence) requires that the subsidiaries remain subordinate to the greater goal. When we bring the subsidiaries into focal awareness, the greater paradigm is lost and integration becomes impossible. Thus, the scientific ideal of detached knowledge, where each single fact is not only verified by empirical evidence but also held in critical abeyance while formulating a hypothesis, is not only illusory but actually undesirable because of its opposition to how perception and scientific discovery actually work. As Polanyi (1975) puts it,

Scientific inquiry is accordingly a dynamic exercise of the imagination and is rooted in commitments and beliefs about the nature of things. It is a fiduciary act. It is far from skepticism itself. It depends upon firm beliefs. Nor should it ever give rise to skepticism. Its ideal is the discovery of coherence and meaning in that which we believe exists; it is not the reduction of everything to a meaningless jumble of atoms or accidentally achieved equilibrium of forces.

(p. 63)

Thus science itself is merely another expression of our basic hermeneutical desire to make sense of the world
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around us. To be human means to create meaning, to unite the fragmentary elements of our existence into a coherent story; whether this story is expressed in scientific, religious or artistic terms, all these forms of human self expression are an attempt to interpret human existence within an objective reality.

Polanyi's work shows that the creation of meaning requires a meta-narrative. Interpretive metanarratives are moral ideals because through them we try to understand how and to what end reality works. Hence the interpretation of facts and experiences do not require an a-moral point of view but involvement of personal moral ideals and beliefs. Polanyi (1975) points out the great danger in the otherwise well-meant desire for scientific detachment and a-morality. Man is a moral animal and needs to fill and act on his inclination for moral ideals. The scientific requirement of moral detachment has led to the suspicion of all moral ideals and sentiments (nihilism). In fact, however, moral ideals were simply replaced with material purposes. When nihilists become political activists for whatever cause, their homeless moral passions are poured into a purely materialistic framework of purposes: "The moral needs of man, denied expression in terms of ideals, are injected into a system of naked power to which they impart the force of a blind moral passion" (p. 17). For example, the scientific enterprise is only possible under the assumed ideal of a cosmological, universal tendency toward unfolding meaning.¹ Thus, when scientists insist on the impersonal and value-free knowledge which supposedly sets their discipline apart from the human sciences, they not only deny the very structure of their own research but they also pave the way for the destruction of humanity because the scientific myth of impersonal knowledge leaves no room for ethics. Polanyi (1975) wrote: "As long as science remains the ideal of knowledge, and detachment the ideal of science, ethics cannot be secured from complete destruction by skeptical doubt" (p. 29). A scientific—and hence naturalistic—worldview collaborates with nihilism in suspecting all moral ideals as illusory. Polanyi argues that the most disastrous ideologies in the scientific age, Nazism, Stalinism, and Communism, have thrived on this naturalistic naiveté. In the absence of a natural moral order, homeless moral passions were poured into the purely

immanent, materialistic framework of purposes provided by Hitler, Stalin, and Lenin.

Polanyi's (1975) indictment of scientism as dehumanizing applies with equal force to the postmodern denial of metanarratives. In Polanyi's terms, the dogmatic dismissal of frameworks of coherence with universal intent is inhuman, for such dismissal effectively prevents tacit integration. Both postmodernism and scientism alike focus on the subsidiaries, with the only difference that these subsidiaries are facts in the sciences and personal or at best communally valid stories in the postmodern context. The effect, however, is the same. Even though in postmodernism we are allowed to create meaning, the universal intent of our interpretation of reality is denied. Thus, what makes meaning meaningful, namely, its claim as an interpretation of a universally valid truth claim is thus condemned to opinion. If Polanyi is correct, the very virtue of postmodernism, the denial of metanarratives in order to avoid totalization and oppression, turns out to be a dehumanizing vice. So we need metanarratives, but what kind of ethical restraints can prevent them from forcing the particular individual into a totalizing metanarrative? Are not ethical norms themselves oppressive? The Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas has given a great deal of thought to this problem.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS: TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE ETHICAL

The validity of Levinas' (1998) claim that the human self is primarily ethical in nature depends on his interpretation of Western philosophy. In its obsession with self-understanding and the concomitant movement towards self-consciousness, Western philosophical thought equates the conscious self with activity. The "I" is always the initiating agent, aiming at control and systematization and thus denying the primacy of the subject (p. 59). Levinas (1969/1998) believes that all of Western philosophy from its beginnings to the present age is premised on an "imperialism of the same" because it defines knowledge as dependent on totality and egology (p. 39). Things can only be known to the backdrop of a neutral, totalizing matrix, whether this be Spinoza's substance or Heidegger's Being, and are recognized only as repre-

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sentations to the respective meaning-giving framework of a knowing ego. In this economy of the same, the self represents things to itself; it com-prehends (French: prendre—to grasp), that is, it tries to grasp and represent to itself other beings in their totality. Western philosophy is thus obsessed with control: The positing of the non-I depends on economy of the same over the other and denies the transcendent element required for our mutual responsibility and the recognition of difference.

Much like Martin Heidegger, Levinas thus advances another panoramic view of Western philosophy: Against Heidegger's portrayal of Western thought as the forgetfulness of Being, Levinas characterizes philosophical history from its inception to the present as "egology," or, more trenchantly, as atheism. Both terms describe our equation of the knowing subject with mind or consciousness, insisting that all knowledge and understanding proceeds from the self and its attempt to grasp things and thereby excluding genuine input of knowledge from the outside. While Levinas is not interested in revelatory religion in the commonly understood sense either, he wants to preserve the radical otherness or alterity that it conveys. For Levinas the human other (l'Autrui), like God, is irreducible to an interpretive theme and encounters me as exterior, radical otherness, a master who teaches me in a personal face-to-face relation.

Western philosophy, by contrast, tends to dehumanize the Other by objectifying him. In rather colonial fashion, we like to conquer things by knowing them, rather than attending to their self disclosure, letting the other thing or person really speak to us by "caressing it" as a lover would the object of her love rather than interrogating it (Levinas, 1969/1998, p. 258). Such megalomania leaves no room for revelation in either the biblical or the philosophical sense. In light of this development, Levinas's goal is to recover the idea of infinity inherent in every human being. He believes that already in Plato, but particularly in Descartes, we find the notion that each self contains the idea of infinity whose very existence indicates transcendence and breaks the egocentric mode that stands in the way of the ethical relation.

This infinity, argues Levinas (1969/1998), is the presence of the Other in me, his ethical demand on me. Only in such a way can we achieve the necessary balance of a unique self that is at the same time open and accountable to others. The irreducible individuality of the I, (rather than its subsumption into a totality of objective morality) also calls for “a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I” (p. 245).

Levinas reminds us that philosophy is eminently practical: How we conceive of selfhood determines how we act. His primary illustration for this truth is the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger who is often credited with dismantling the modernist subject and whose thought has greatly shaped postmodern thought. Levinas, too, had drunk deeply at the well of Heidegger’s criticism of Western metaphysics and upheld its claim to have uncovered our original rationality and thereby achieved a turn away from the objectifying explanatory approach of positivist philosophy toward a concrete philosophy of existence (Altwegg, 1988).

Heidegger’s commitment to Nazi movement, however, shocked Levinas into a more critical appraisal of Heidegger’s thought. Levinas writes: “I was shaken in my conviction that an unbridgeable gap eternally separates the insane and criminal hatred, which evil proclaimed on the pages of “Mein Kampf,” from the intellectual acuity and extreme analytical virtuosity of Being and Time” (Altwegg, 1998, p. 110). Levinas has come to see what he considers the most profound philosophical effort of the twentieth century not merely as compatible with evil but as part of the dehumanizing legacy of the twentieth century.² Levinas sees the principal connection between Heidegger’s philosophy and Hitler’s totalitarian regime in shared view of the self as object. In Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, the subject still remains an object of thought that is to be understood. Other human beings are reduced to objects of understanding which are situated within the horizon of being and thus placed beyond the particular. In other words, while Heidegger attempts to deconstruct Cartesian metaphysics, his thought still follows the Western philosophical tradition obsessed with self-under-

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standing and a movement toward self-consciousness. Still unable to break free from Western thought, Heidegger cannot handle real difference in others. Heidegger’s very de-centering the modern Cartesian subject subordinates the relations between beings to the totalizing structures of being, “metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to the existential.” Levinas (1998) argues that the notion of understanding as disclosure in Heidegger, as a letting be, collapses the differences between a human being and any other object (p. 5). Against Heidegger, Levinas insists that the human subject is not something disclosed by Being, but is its own individual being who reveals himself only through the address of discourse. Consequently, not the impassive contemplation of Being, but the active discourse motivated by sympathy and love should characterize our inter-human relations.³ Even Heidegger’s sociality, his *Miteinandersein*, rests on an ontological relation, in which mutual understanding is predicated upon the disclosing horizon of Being. For Levinas (1998), such a relation does not recognize individuality; it is just one more system which assimilates the individual to the reflexive consciousness. In the proper face-to-face relation, by contrast, the Other circumscribes a unique and passive subjectivity which can only disclose itself to me through careful and respectful address (p. 7).

Levinas (1998) concludes his critique of Heidegger with his famous call to ground human relations not in ontology but in ethics: “The relation to the other is therefore not ontology. This bond with the other is not reducible to the representation of the other, but to his invocation, and [this bond] in which invocation is not preceded by an understanding I call religion. The essence of discourse is prayer” (p. 7). Against any totalizing discourses, Levinas wants to affirm the human by setting it apart as holy and sacred. Ethics exists prior to reflection, and ethics requires transcendent grounding from which it can break open totalities (p. 57). The iron cage of abstract and thus inhuman terminology resulting from philosophy’s reduction of the self to consciousness requires Levinas’ use of religious conceptuality in expressing his idea of ethics as first philosophy. Already in his early work, *Totality and Infinity* (1969/1998), Levinas implies a religious dimension of ethics by anchoring of the transcendent self in God as the ultimate Other. For

Levinas, the face of the other person bears the trace of God and as such grounds his otherness as an ethical demand.⁴ True humanism, according to Levinas, requires a messianic, eschatological transcendent dimension that has been neglected by Western philosophical and scientific thought. The philosopher Simon Critchley (1999) gives the best summary of Levinas' humanism:

Levinas' point is that the humanity of the human signifies precisely through this inability to be autarchic, where the subject is overwhelmed by an alterity that it is unable to master. The subject is no longer the self-positing origin of the world; it is a hostage to the other. Humanism should not begin from the datum of the human being as an end-in-itself and the foundation for all knowledge, certainty, and value; rather, the humanity of the human is defined by its service to the other. Levinasian ethics is a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being. (p. 67)

Levinas' demand for an ethical self strikes at the root of both modern cultural and philosophical individualism: Intellectual, social, and economic egoism is untenable in light of an ethically constituted self. Before we think or act we are already subject to an ethical demand from our fellow human beings.

Levinas appears on the philosophical scene like an Old Testament prophet, pronouncing the ethical demand with a gravity and urgency reminiscent of Isaiah's demands for justice. His insistence of the self's passivity as hostage to the Other's demand gives rise to equal concerns regarding my own freedom. Moreover, Levinas' account seems to bypass human reason with its unequivocal, pre-reflective demand of the other in me. The ethical relation takes place at the level of sensibility, not at the level of consciousness; "the ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject" (Critchley, 1999, p. 65). A more nuanced account of the Other is offered by the British philosopher John Macmurray and his concept of the self as person in relation.

JOHN MACMURRAY: TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE IN RELATION

In his Gifford Lectures, John Macmurray (1961) argues that being human is to be a person in relation and that viewing the self as an isolated, mental construct is wrong both biologically and philosophically. On the level of biology, Macmurray argues against the still popular view of homo sapiens as rational animal. He contends that for too long have we let Greek thought govern our ideas of the human. Aristotle defined the human in analogy to his observation of plant and animal life as an organic entity which unfolds in its adaptation to the environment from an instinctual to a rational mode of existence. Macmurray objects that this view inverts the nature of the self as person. We are of course organisms, but our organic nature is not what makes us human. Being a person in relation does. The organic aspect is a negative which is subservient to the personal and to which we can descend from the category of the personal. There is, however, "no way for thought to ascend from the organic to the personal. The organic perception of man excludes, by its very nature, all the characteristics of human beings. To include them, we must change our categories and start afresh from the beginning" (Macmurray, 1961, p. 47).

According to Macmurray (1961), we are genetically motivated from infancy by the desire for personal communication rather than by the mechanics of environmental adaptation. A baby does not ascend to rationality but requires it from the beginning because its life depends upon rational activity (p. 47). Macmurray concludes: "We are not organisms, but persons. The nexus of relations which unites us in a human society is not organic but personal. Human behaviour cannot be understood but only caricatured if it is presented as adaptation to the environment" (p. 46).

Instead, humans are first and foremost made to be cared for; we are designed for communication. Communication sets the human apart from the plant and animal life and is fundamental in all personal experience and determines its form. From the need to communicate derive our personal motivations to action: Love, fear, and hatred. We require love, we

fear to be isolated from community, and we respond with hatred to those who deny us communication. Human rationality is thus motivated by emotions, which presuppose a human Other so that our actions motivated by these emotions are incomplete without reference to a personal Other. Likewise, knowledge is from the very first knowledge of the personal Other with whom I am in communication, who responds to my cry and who cares for me. According to Macmurray, this emotional reason “is the very starting point of all knowledge and is presupposed at every stage of its subsequent development” (1961, p. 76).

Besides the dehumanizing organic analogy bequeathed on us by science, philosophy has handed down to us an equally distorting image of the self as mind. Macmurray (1991) believes that just as science mistook a negative aspect of humanness, the organic, for our actual positive human nature, so philosophy erred when it considered the thinking self as the starting point of apperception. Macmurray objects that the self is not a mind but primordially an agent: “The Self has its being only in its agency, and its reflective activities are but negative aspects of this agency. The Self as “the Mind,” which is the Self as non-agent, is a non-entity” (p. 15).

The wrong starting point of the solipsistic thinker, unimplicated in the dynamic relatedness of our existence, soon transforms itself unwittingly into an existential solipsism: “We are imprisoned in an ‘egocentric predicament,’ and there is no way out. We are committed to explaining knowledge without reference to action” (Macmurray, 1961, p. 21). This disembodied view of the self leads to all kinds of unnecessary philosophical problems and inventions. It creates, for example, the infamous philosophical problem of other minds, a non-issue if the ‘I do’ precedes the ‘I think.’ It also engendered the “faculty psychology” of mind and will, a dualism which Enlightenment thinkers tried to overcome by positing a common rationality: “If we think logically, we think the same thing in the same connection; if we act rationally, we all do the same thing in the same circumstances” (p. 19). This philosophical sleight of hand, however, conceals any real substantive differences by forcing every person into the same pattern of logic and reason. These differences are then relegated into the realm of the irrational and psychological so that

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we may escape into “a logical heaven, where error and evil cease to trouble us, where the clash of our mutual contradictions is stilled and the struggle of our antagonistic purposes resolved” (p. 20). Once the self has been split, philosophy has to invent a universal rational mind in order to find common rational ground. Objective truth thus becomes pure access to substantive universal reason which demands in turn an isolated, reflective existence through the negation of personal prejudices, emotions and the particular historical existence of other selves.

What, however, does objective truth actually mean? It certainly does not mean impersonal knowledge nor does it mean scientific knowledge. We have come to think of science as objective and equate impersonal knowledge with truth. Yet, the term ‘objective’ does not mean true for objective statements are often false. Nor is the term ‘scientific’ synonymous with correct for “the tracks of science are littered with scientific theories which have been abandoned as incorrect. If our generation tends to associate truth with science and objectivity, the association rests upon no logical implication, but only upon an emotional prejudice in favour of science” (Macmurray, 1961, p. 31). We can, and indeed we must, for reasons of analysis and reflection, look at people impersonally.⁵ The person as object is, however, merely an abstraction from our true human nature as persons in relation. Our misunderstanding of what constitutes objectivity is influenced by another commonly accepted dualism, a dualism stemming from the Stoics’ distinction between reason and the passions which tries to purge the emotional involvement of our actions. Here, reason is commonly associated with the mind and passion with human agency and the will. We thus contrast two forms of behaviour: “The one rational and objective, the other subjective or emotional. The first has an intention, but no motive; the second a motive but no intention, since the motive fully accounts for the behaviour which flows from it as a cause determines its effect” (p. 32). Objective knowledge is deemed free while subjective knowledge is deemed determinate and explicable through cause and effect.

Macmurray (1961) believes that exorcising “the ghost of the old faculty psychology which still haunts our philosophies” with its metaphysical fictions of mind

and will allow for a more holistic conception of reason: “We can insist that all our activities, whether practical or theoretical, have their motives as well as their intentions, and are sustained by an emotional attitude” (p. 33). Hence human reason becomes, “the capacity to act and only in a secondary and derivative sense the capacity to think, that is to say, to pursue a merely theoretical intention” (p. 26). In this way rationality encompasses the entire scope of our emotions, motivations, and historical-cultural situatedness; the dualism of a rational and an empirical self disappears (p. 27).

Macmurray’s (1961) relational self thus defines objectivity as relational knowledge. His concept of emotional reason is nothing less than a hermeneutic stance which defines us as human by replacing an erroneous instrumental view of reality with a perception motivated by love. Genuine love is never introspective and selfish. Hence emotional reason simply means being open to reality, “maintaining and increasing our sensitiveness to the world outside irrespective of whether it gives us pleasure or pain” (p. 51).

CONCLUSION

Clearly, meaning is bound up with our conceptions of selfhood. When the self disappears, meaning also vanishes. We enter the new millennium after passing through the modernist view of the self as autonomous and the postmodern dismantling of these very aspirations to epistemological divinity. Both views, however, are detrimental in their dehumanization of meaning: by making meaning an impersonal affair of scientific and universal reason, the one empties meaning of its humanness and makes it effectually meaningless. By denying metanarratives and universal aspects of humanness, the other deprives us of our

human need for communication and meaning making in its very advocacy of tolerance, plurality and difference. Ironically, while modern and postmodern conceptions of selfhood were motivated by their noble quest for human freedom from oppression, they both end up by denying our humanity.

It is their failure, however, which allows us to conceive of the self and meaning in a more human way. In light of our examination, the self emerges as neither an individual consciousness nor as a mere construct but as a socially constituted, relational entity whose effort to make sense of the world is grounded in its primary need of communication. To be human not only entails meaning making, for which metanarratives are required (Polanyi’s argument) but meaning can only exist within a social context and its inherent ethical demand of the other person (Levinas’ point). For human knowledge to be objective, and objective should mean knowledge that is true to its object, it must correspond to who we are as persons. To be objective and rational hence means to include all that makes us persons (Macmurray’s conclusion).

Such a view of rationality as openness necessarily includes the religious as the primary source for interpretive frameworks of ethical and social quality.⁶ Macmurray, for example, believes that the whole nature of religion is bound up in the assertion that all men are equal and that fellowship is the only relation between persons (p. 205). Religion is the highest form of such fellowship. Similarly, Levinas’ ethical demand is essentially a religious demand. Thus as we set the tone for discussions of our selfhood and meaning—in short, of our humanity—this desire for a new humanism should not neglect the religious an essential element of our subjectivity.

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ENDNOTES

1. “We are thus able to think that real discovery in science is possible for us because we are guided by an intuition of a more meaningful organization of our knowledge of nature provided by the slope of deepening meaning in the whole field of potential meanings surrounding us” (Polanyi, 1975, p. 178).
2. Levinas is convinced of Heidegger’s ongoing agreement with Nazi politics, or at least of his non-repentance concerning his Nazi involvement by three evidences. First, even after his separation from the movement did he continue to wear the swastika. Second, in his last Spiegel interview, Heidegger remains inexplicably silent about the Holocaust and its implications for his philosophy. Levinas judges this silence to be “evidence of the soul’s complete closedness [Verschlossenheit] toward sensitivity and like a condoning of the horrible” (Altwegg, 1988, p. 104). Third, this insensitivity is confirmed by an analogy Heidegger made between technology and the cremation of Jews in his unpublished Bremen lectures of 1949 (Das Gestell): “Farming is now a motorised industry of nourishment [Ernährungsindustrie], in principle the same as the fabrication of corpses in Gas chambers and death camps [Vernichtungslagern], the same as the blockade and starvation of countries, the same as the manufacturing of nuclear bombs [Wasserstoffbomben].”
3. Levinas writes: “Is our relation with the other a letting be? Is not the independence of the other achieved through his or her role as one who is addressed? Is the person to whom we speak understood beforehand in his being? Not at all. The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other” (Levinas, 1998, p. 6).
4. In fact, one way of understanding Levinasian ethics is to see them as the Jewish version of the later Christian concept of human dignity as grounded in the imago dei.
5. Here Macmurray offers a needed qualification to Levinas’ who seems to regard any objectivisation of the other human being as dehumanizing.
6. Of the three basic expressions of human rationality, science, art, and religion, Macmurray believes religion to be the highest form. Scientific reason remains abstract, and artistic expression remains too individualistic. Religion describes our interpersonal relations. According to Macmurray (1992), reason is revealed most strongly in the religious because here reason “reveals itself in the capacity to go beyond individual prejudice, bias and self interest, and to think and act in terms of a reality that is beyond ourselves and bigger than ourselves” (p. 202).

Postmodernism, in contemporary Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power. How is postmodernism related to relativism? Although some postmodernists reject the relativist label, many postmodern doctrines constitute or imply some form of relativism. I love postmodern and post-postmodern philosophy. What do you think that is? Is it just bad philosophy? Oh, I wouldn't say it's bad philosophy. Wait: if you've encountered any coherent school or trend going by "post-postmodern" in philosophy, I haven't. Post-modernism though had its characteristic narratives (anti-narratives) and tropes, and a certain commonality of terms and attitudes. Essentially, postmodernism deconstructs ancient archetypes (religion, cultural values, ethics, special stories) and replaces them with something else that validates all perspectives, making all things subjective; morals are relative, etc. Over the past year of my life, I've experienced more philosophical evolution than possibly any time in my life, even my adolescence. Furthermore, postmodernists join the concept of eternal return with the loss of the distinction between the real and the apparent world. The distinction itself does not reappear, and what repeats is neither real nor apparent in the traditional sense, but is a phantasm or simulacrum. Nietzsche is a common interest between postmodern philosophers and Martin Heidegger, whose meditations on art, technology, and the withdrawal of being they regularly cite and comment upon. Heidegger's contribution to the sense of de-realization of the... Postmodern feminism is a mix of post structuralism, postmodernism, and French feminism.[1] The goal of postmodern feminism is to destabilize the patriarchal norms entrenched in society that have led to gender inequality.[2] Postmodern feminists seek to accomplish this goal through rejecting essentialism, philosophy, and universal truths in favor of embracing the differences that exist amongst women to demonstrate that not all. Postmodern feminists are accredited with drawing attention to dichotomies in society and demonstrating how language influences the difference in treatment of genders.[1][3].