

THE FAILURE OF CHARITY AND THE LOSS OF PERSONHOOD: BEYOND THE ENLIGHTENMENT IMPASSE



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ABSTRACT

*Pfau elaborates the arguments he develops in *Minding the Modern*, and devotes particular attention to the question of the incommensurability of premodern and modern accounts of personhood and agency. He highlights the distinct nature of humanistic forms of inquiry (including history and theology) and examines their hermeneutic character, noting the priority of meaning over method. He emphasizes the interdependence of affection, volition, and cognition, and also analyzes varying descriptions of relationality. The article closes with a meditation on a section of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* and the insights it provides to the themes mentioned in the essay.*

I

Ever since the rise and prolonged dominance of historicism in the early nineteenth century—initially in higher biblical criticism, though quickly metastasizing into other fields (politics, law, and aesthetics)—historical inquiry has modeled the study of objects and phenomena on a quasi-scientific, Baconian conception of method. Under this new dispensation, the underlying aim of inquiry becomes one of “objectivity” rather than “truth,” as Stephen Gaukroger has remarked with reference to Bacon (Gaukroger 2006, 236). In due course, nineteenth-century historicism emulated the impersonal, detached, and critical methodology first pioneered by the empirical sciences. In so

doing, a historicist mode of inquiry has consistently foregrounded the need for maintaining distance from the phenomena and practices under investigation and, in so doing, achieve cognitive dominion over its objects. Analyzing this development in *Minding the Modern*, I remark how, “under conditions of modernity, all history is merely prehistory” (Pfau 2013, 36) and, as such, is both studied and put to rest by triumphalist and retrospective narratives constructed in the present.

That nineteenth-century humanistic and sociological inquiry (e.g., Comte, Feuerbach, Durkheim, et al.) had originated in seventeenth-century empirical and quantitative methodologies bears keeping in mind for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Baconian and Cartesian conceptions of method offer at best a decidedly incomplete account of human knowledge. For the migration of an (inherently problematic) conception of method from the empirical sciences into humanistic inquiry is an important feature of late-Enlightenment thought. Its pivot is found in Kant’s late-Enlightenment idea of “critique,” in particular Kant’s insistence of preserving human cognitive autonomy *vis-à-vis* forms of “experience” (*Erfahrung*) said to have originated in seemingly inchoate empirical data. Thus, in his 1784 “Ideas for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Kant sharply distinguishes between individual intentions, meanings, and practices (which he deems all but rationally unintelligible) and aggregate patterns of behavior that, unbeknownst to the historical individuals who display them, can be retrospectively invested with an actuarial logic of sorts. On this model, historical meaning is significant precisely to the extent that it is *not* available to the individuals or communities said to have inadvertently generated it.

Kant here anticipates Hegel’s essentially retrospective model of cognition, namely, as a belated, dialectical salvaging of meanings whose fullness necessarily eludes the individuals and communities that have produced them. Hans-Georg Gadamer characterizes this as the emergence of historicism, not as a reaction *against* a supposedly un-historical Enlightenment, but as the apotheosis of its critical and emancipatory idea of secular reason. In its dominant theological form—that of the so called Higher Criticism first shaped by Wolf, Eichhorn, Ernesti, and the Protestant Tübingen School and subsequently extended by Strauss, Feuerbach, Comte, Renan, and others—historicism secures theological meaning precisely at the expense of its relevance. For like another institutional creation of the Romantic era, the modern museum, historicism claims to “know” means precisely *not* to participate in meanings but, instead, to quarantine them within putatively separate past contexts. As Gadamer points out, historicism fundamentally reenacts the Enlightenment’s vaunted emancipation from history by arresting and inventorying the past, draining it of its relevance, and by “reconstruct[ing] the old because it is old” (Gadamer 2004, 275).

Nineteenth-century historicism marks the culmination of a process long in the making, involving “a kind of detachment of the ‘real’ historical world from its biblical description” wrought by the Enlightenment’s insistence on “a logical distinction and a

reflective distance between the stories and the ‘reality’ they depict.” Hans Frei offers a compelling account of this development, noting that “once literal and historical reading began to break apart, figural interpretation became discredited both as a literary device and as a historical argument” because it contravened “the elementary assumption that a propositional statement has only one meaning.” The resulting historicist protocol amounts to conceptual naturalism. That is, it confuses “history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference).” As Frei goes on to note, to so conflate the mimetic and referential functions of narrative “meant that one lacked the distinctive category and appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized” (Frei 1984, 3-5, 12).

The dilemma just sketched ultimately reduces to this question: does a modern conception of knowledge derived from the univocal, scientific methodologies first developed in the age of Descartes and Bacon have any place for hermeneutic practice, that is, for discerning the layered and interconnected nature of meanings as we encounter them in philosophical and theological traditions? If not, one would then have to ask whether meaningful hermeneutic activity is even possible in the absence of traditions and genealogies of inquiry. My argument, which I have developed in greater detail in *Minding the Modern*, is that both humanistic and theological inquiry cannot effectively proceed, and will likely erode their institutional relevance, unless we acknowledge and honor in our hermeneutic practice the indispensable role of tradition. Doing so requires first and foremost that we acknowledge the full extent to which a dynamic, evolving, and participatory model of tradition stands in direct conflict with the methodological prescriptions and epistemological assumptions of historicism. For in its methodical commitment to the attenuation of past meanings within a matrix of underlying material causes and background reference, historicism betrays its implicit discomfort with the possibility of meanings issuing from the past and having an enduring and potentially transformative hold on the present.

For a number of reasons, the development I have sketched thus far remains of particular relevance to theological inquiry, particularly as regards its exegetical and speculative manifestations. For it is here that achieving orientation in our own, inevitably damaged and disoriented present requires that we surrender the epistemological pride and *libido dominandi* enshrined in modern, science-derived epistemologies. Theological inquiry in particular requires our ongoing, reflective participation in the complex interplay of those voices that have preceded us. It is only in virtue of our “background awareness” (to borrow Polanyi’s term) of these voices that the hermeneutic quest for substantive, relevant meaning can possibly succeed. The key difference between hermeneutic and scientific inquiry has to do with how these two forms of knowing treat those background conditions. Echoing Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, Michael Polanyi also notes how “scientific rationalism has been the chief guide towards

all the intellectual, moral, and social progress on which the nineteenth century prided itself.” Yet unlike Gadamer, Polanyi not only rejects the applicability of scientific methods to hermeneutic inquiry; he also insists that the idea of strictly value-neutral and context-independent, scientific methodology is a misguided fiction and, “strictly speaking nonsensical...Successful induction can be conducted only in the light of a genuine problem. An inductive problem is an intimation of coherence among hitherto uncomprehended particulars” (*KB*, 130-131).

Hence, if even within the empirical sciences inductive discovery entails “an oscillation between movements of analysis and integration in which, on balance, integration predominates,” the same is even more emphatically true of interpretive fields (*KB*, 130-131). For, as Polanyi insists, “no human mind can function without accepting authority, custom, and tradition; it must rely on them for the mere use of a language. Empirical induction, strictly applied, can yield no knowledge at all, and the mechanistic explanation of the universe is a meaningless ideal” (*KB*, 41). For scientific inquiry to generate not just formally correct information but the kind of knowledge that a community of learners would regard as positively meaningful, a vast and largely unarticulated body of background conditions must be presupposed. This “tacit dimension,” Polanyi notes, involves a “large area of hidden and yet accessible truths far exceeding the capacity of one man to fathom” (*KB*, 128). Indeed, in the course of investigating a particular, sharply demarcated problem, the scientist gradually achieves what notably was not being sought *per se*, namely, a fuller awareness of the antecedent coherence and inherent significance of these background conditions.

Of critical importance here is Polanyi’s insistence that “focal and subsidiary awareness are definitely *not two degrees* of attention but *two kinds* of attention given to the *same* particulars” (*KB*, 128). Background awareness attends to the ways in which some particular is embedded, how its texture is revealed and distinguished by its more or less conspicuous and functional relation to and interaction with other particulars. Here, then, the claim can be made that in interpretive fields, background awareness is precisely an awareness *of* tradition absent which our hermeneutic efforts of understanding a text or artifact could not even get underway. Polanyi thus stresses how, even under the strictest methodological protocols, the truly revelatory moments of scientific discovery happen to lie *beyond* what could be anticipated, predicted, or controlled. Both hermeneutic and scientific inquiry exhibit an aleatory or serendipitous quality, one in which focal awareness is found to have depended all along on tacit, background conditions: “Each scientist,” Polanyi notes, “starts...by sensing a point of deepening coherence. His questing imagination, guided by intuition, forges ahead...in one continued act of tacit integration—like making out an obscure sight, or being engaged in painting a picture, or in writing a poem” (*KB*, 82). That this should be so reflects Kant’s insight “that no system of rules can prescribe the procedure by which the rules themselves are

to be applied.” To the extent, then, that human cognition aims at the discovery of new meanings, rather than the confirmation of existing ones, it depends on the constant, if often tacit operation of “judgment”—that faculty (*prohairesis*) whose proper concern, according to Aristotle, lies with “what can be otherwise” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a30).

Here it bears recalling how, at the beginning of Western thought, a nearly obverse understanding had prevailed, namely, of tradition as something received, not made, and of divine rather than anthropomorphic character. Thus Plato regards tradition as “a gift of gods to men ...tossed down from some divine source.” A bequest to human communities, rather than an anthropomorphism in its own right, tradition is said both to originate *in* and, in turn, point back *to* its transcendent source: “the ancients, who were better than we and lived nearer the gods, handed down the tradition that all the things which are ever said to exist are sprung from one and many and have inherent in them the finite and the infinite” (*Philebus*, 16c). What distinguishes the role of the ancients is not that they originated a tradition (they did not), but that they were closer in time to its source: “anyone who accepts and ‘believes’ that tradition is relying...not on the ‘ancients’, but on the gods themselves” (Pieper 2010, 28). J. H. Newman evidently concurs and remarks, “when nothing is revealed, nothing is known, and there is nothing to contemplate or marvel at; but when something is revealed and only something, for all cannot be, there are forthwith difficulties and perplexities.” What is most integral to Christianity turns out to be most vexing to modern historical method, namely, that “revelation consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed, of doctrines and injunctions mysteriously connected together” (Newman 2013, 213). Lurking behind historicism’s apparent impatience with a continuously developing tradition, Newman sees the hubris of a modern secular epistemology viscerally uncomfortable with the possibility of a knowledge received on terms it does not control.

Yet to surrender the desire for dominion over what we are given is precisely what is required if traditions are to become intelligible at all. Inasmuch as it enjoins the recipient to cultivate humility and gratitude *vis-à-vis* what it offers, tradition fulfills what Paul Griffiths identifies as the twofold characteristic of the gift: a distinctive group of “things [that] can be given away without being thereby lost to the giver” and that, concurrently, “will be lost if they are not given away” (Griffiths 2009, 58). Indeed, inasmuch as historical inquiry proceeds on grounds other than purely quantitative and determinative ones, it remains necessarily entangled with the practice of hermeneutics and, ultimately, the teleologically ordered power of judgment. Meaningful and intellectually sound historical practice finds us involved in a complex and open-ended interpretive process that is dialectically structured and experientially realized as dialogue. The partners in that dialogue, I submit, are other interpretive voices that have preceded us, and that constitute a living and evolving tradition of inquiry. Historical

cognition, on this account, amounts less to a scientific method than an art (*techne*) on the order of Aristotelian *phronesis* in the course of which we come to understand our implication *in*, rather than separation *from*, the true aims of inquiry.

Before moving on to show the ethical implications of our epistemological commitments, in particular as they impinge on our understanding of the human person, let me recapture the above in a series of thesis-type propositions:

- THESIS 1: *The choice of method must be secondary to an understanding of the aims pursued by interpretive inquiry.* Inasmuch as method furnishes the *structure* of inquiry, it must be preceded by an awareness of the ultimate *function* that it is meant to serve.
- THESIS 2: *The aim of interpretive knowledge is not information or “context” but significant meaning.* Here we may recall Husserl’s distinction between “correctness” and “disclosure” (see Husserl 1977, 120-127). Contrary to the “truth of correctness,” which others may confirm independently simply by adhering to the methodological template that had yielded it, the “truth of disclosure” is characterized by a distinctive (and not obviously reproducible) narrative quality. The latter can never be fully and conclusively assimilated to the former but, as something *lived* rather than *owned*, shows inquiry to have a fundamentally *hermeneutic* dimension.
- THESIS 3: *The objective of interpretive knowledge does not consist in accumulating contextual information.* By its very nature, a method is a form of iteration, an invariant template. It construes the facts, objects, and phenomena to which it is applied as essentially equivalent *types*. Hence its product, information, remains of necessity always something of an abstraction. Thus, method cannot produce meanings but, at most, can help establish the preconditions for the discovery of meaning.
- THESIS 4: *What sets theological, literary, or philosophical inquiry apart from other forms of historical study (e.g., social or economic history) is that its “object” of inquiry is itself of complex semantic nature, rather than being some value-neutral, material entity.* Indeed, our inevitably fluid, complex, and often bewildering socio-historical reality will disclose its distinctive features, tendencies, and significance only when filtered through various interpretive traditions and their underlying conceptual frameworks.
- THESIS 5: *A philosophical hermeneutic must reject what has long been a prevailing methodological axiom among intellectual historians, viz., that ideas themselves arise in, perhaps even in default of, their “historical context.”* In a recent essay, Peter Gordon (2013) argues that what truly defines meaning are not the material (a-semantic) causes and contexts said to have generated

it. Rather, the force and significance of meanings pivots on their adaptive potential, their enduring capacity to inspire reflective participation in them in times and settings far otherwise than those from which they issued. Meaning in history is inseparable from the study of its dynamic transmission, inflection, and re-articulation over time.

- THESIS 6: *Hermeneutic practice entails our essential involvement in the transmission of those meanings and traditions that are its object. Moreover, the fact that no method can (nor should) seek to immunize us against the semantic complexity and dynamism of our objects of (historical) understanding points to both an epistemological and a moral dimension to interpretation.* Sound practical reasoning (*phronesis*) involves acknowledging the complexity and enduring fecundity of historically constituted meanings. Inasmuch as inquiry unfolds as a process of hermeneutic participation *in* (and not methodical emancipation *from*) our object of inquiry, it enjoins a stance of humility.
- THESIS 7: *Conceptual frameworks are logically antecedent to the historical situation they help render intelligible. At the same time, their potential is only ever realized by historically situated humans engaged in a hermeneutic quest for self-awareness and self-legitimation.* Conceptual and narrative frameworks constitute a received and oblique “tradition” whose tacit efficacy has been variously characterized as “implicit reason” (Newman), “background awareness” (Polanyi), “pre-judgment” (Gadamer), or simply as a tangle of narratives absent which living and breathing human beings would remain bereft of all perspective on their existence. Hence, the ability of individuals and communities to achieve a reasonably articulate perspective on their very existence pivots on an active and sustained engagement of antecedent, narrative, and conceptual frameworks.
- THESIS 8: *The narrative pattern of any tradition in which historical inquiry remains essentially implicated will be dialectical in kind.* In dialectical inquiry, the yet unfathomable fullness of a conception that has sponsored a coherent and evolving hermeneutic tradition will itself acquire progressively greater clarity as that inquiry proceeds. Being integrative rather than disjunctive in its operation, a dialectical narrative implies an apophatic concept of its *telos* and, consequently, can advance knowledge only by way of retroactive clarification. Issuing from the awareness that first principles are precisely what is *not* known, the ethical stance underlying interpretive inquiry is one of reflective involvement rather than peremptory skepticism. To be a participant in the dialectical movement of a tradition involves recognizing oneself as both the agent and the witness of its continued unfolding. Whereas historicism’s

long-standing preoccupation with method aims at tabulating verifiable and putatively value-neutral *information*, inhabiting a tradition means acknowledging its proximity to, not distance from, us.

II

Michael Polanyi's 1961 essay "Knowing and Being" opens with an anecdote about a "distinguished psychiatrist" explaining to his students how to tell apart a genuine epileptic seizure from a "hystero-epileptic" episode. As he explains, merely directing focal awareness on apparent symptoms won't suffice; what is required is "extensive experience"—in particular a capacity, acquired over time, to learn to read and "relate to the delicately varied expressions of the human face which we can...identify without being able to tell quite how we recognize them" (*KB*, 123). It is no coincidence that Polanyi's observations concerning "a close analogy between the *elucidation of a comprehensive object* and the mastering of a skill" and a "structural kinship of the arts of knowing and doing" should happen to surface in the context of that most elemental of human activities: learning to read the face of another human being and thereby fathoming the incommunicable reality and presence of the other *as a person* (*KB*, 125ff).

For the past three centuries, the alleged universalism of modern epistemological method has also occluded the double distinction that Polanyi is trying to recover: first, between knowledge as the uniform (and ultimately illicit) application of an impersonal method to all phenomena and knowledge as practical art (*phronesis*) and, second, between the human individual alternatively determined as an objective *species* or acknowledged as an incommunicable *person*. In extension of more detailed arguments set forth elsewhere, I would likewise premise that a number of modern philosophical developments, each of them notably diffident or outright hostile to theological reflection, have dramatically impoverished our conception of the human person. In particular, I am thinking of the naturalism of Hobbes, the hedonism of Locke and Mandeville, and the skepticism of Hume's earlier efforts.

In their own ways, and other important differences notwithstanding, these approaches all tend to consider the human being as axiomatically self-contained—though less by choice than in virtue of the allegedly overriding, determinative role that these thinkers accord to embodied passions, sentiments, and desires. In the case of Hobbes and Mandeville, the implacable causality of the passions renders rational, interpersonal exchange an alternately adventitious or competitive occurrence and ends up reducing the human person to what, in an alarmed paraphrase, Edmund Burke was to call "our naked shivering nature" (Burke 1986, 171).

To be sure, in so sketching modern thought as a preponderantly naturalist and reductionist enterprise, I am admittedly asking you to grant me a very large premise indeed. Those disinclined to accept it may well point to more nuanced and

humanistic accounts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, such as reflect widespread misgivings about the perceived inadequacy of their contemporaries' mechanist and reductionist arguments. How, you may ask, does the above hypothesis accommodate the Cambridge Platonists, Shaftesbury, or Joseph Butler in England? What about Rousseau's rapprochement with Stoicism or the partial revival of Plato in the work of Hemsterhuis, Herder, Goethe, Moritz, Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher, all of whom were undeniably anxious to overcome the perceived dead-end of Enlightenment hyper-rationalism, mechanism, and skepticism, respectively?

Now, it is certainly true the thinkers just mentioned are eager to shelter the human individual as a dynamic, self-aware, and responsible agent from a certain epistemological overreach felt to afflict the intellectual work of the preceding generations. Even so, to frame the later Enlightenment as vindicating the self's capacity for practical reason and unfettered moral deliberation risks conflating the species-concept of humankind with the idea of the human person and, thus, to beg the main question. Indeed, running together the idea of a self distinguished by its rational aptitudes with that of the human person is nothing less than a category mistake. For the former, species-based concept is taken to be instantiated by *all* individuals and, in so doing, treats them as *equivalent* and *convertible* bearers of specific capacities (biological, cognitive, linguistic). By contrast, the reality of the human person is not grounded in contingent acts of *definition* (including self-definition) but, instead, pivots on a specific mode of *recognition*. Person, Robert Spaemann reminds us, is not a "what" but a "who" (Spaemann 2006, 11). Its proper locus is not the discursive (and historically changing) domain of political, legal, or economic claims and aspirations but the Augustinian *ordo amoris*, the domain of virtue—and preeminently that of love (*caritas*). Fundamentally, the difference here is between a naturalist conception of existence as subjective self-enclosure (*homo incurvatus in se*) and a model of life wherein the spiritual and ethical place of the person pivots on its relational character within a community of persons. Antecedent to all legal, economic, or taxonomic wrangling, the *communio* of persons is not a choice or preference but rather our God-gifted, enduring responsibility.

These preliminary observations mainly serve to safeguard against attempts to assimilate personhood to a capacity- or rights-based notion of the modern autonomous subject. As I have argued elsewhere, with few notable exceptions—Hegel's account of "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) perhaps being one—most political and ethical thought since Hobbes does just that. In some cases (Hobbes, Mandeville, Hume, Schopenhauer), a radical naturalism leads philosophy to mount a critique of the individual as, in fact, holding very little by way of rational capacities. A naturalist epistemology that perceives "reason [to be] the slave of passion" (Hume) is bound to carry over into a pessimist, nihilist, or proto-existentialist ethic. It cannot surprise that where Enlightenment notions of rational self-governance have been thoroughly dismantled on the basis

of our supposedly animalistic and hedonist constitution, questions concerning the human person are unlikely to be granted relevance or philosophical standing to begin with. Yet that situation remains fundamentally unchanged even where Enlightenment thinkers respond critically to the extreme naturalism and skepticism of the writers just mentioned. What prompts these efforts is the question, already puzzling to Locke and his heirs (Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, A. Smith, and Rousseau), of whether and how an ethical community might be built on so brittle a foundation as the modern individual. Can one plausibly identify as the Archimedean point for a just and ethical community a being defined above all by its claim to autonomy *from* all other such individuals and aspiring to live its life within a cocoon of economic, political, and personal rights and preferences? Where individual self-possession and subjective notions of fulfillment are taken to designate the very *being* of the individual, “person” only survives as synonymous with the political, economic, and legal fiction with which Roman culture had identified *persona* long ago.

For any formal criteria even to be recognized as rationally meaningful and ethically binding, some antecedent, teleologically ordered view of the human person has to be presupposed. For to introduce an ensemble of “rights” or a deontological “ought” as the sole criterion of human personhood only furnishes us with a definition but not, alas, with a warrant such as would compel us to honor that definition in thought and practice. Put differently, the very intelligibility and efficacy of sociological, political, or legal definitions of the individual as a self-possessed, rights-bearing, and happiness-seeking agent rests on an underlying normative view, an oblique consensus that this is indeed how personhood *ought* to be understood. And yet, Robert Spaemann notes, “with persons, *esse* is not the same as *percipi*,” and “the recognition that a person is ‘someone’ is not reached by analogy [with object perception].” For even “to acknowledge personal status is already to express respect” and, hence, to grasp in practice (rather than as a formal-logical syllogism) that “persons are beings that other persons *speak to*,” rather than “things merely *spoken of*” (Spaemann 2006, 180-183). For human individuals even to feel induced to overcome their ostensible isolation from one another and participate in a social, political, and economic community, some intuitive sense of *belonging together* and owing their very reality as persons to that relatedness must be presupposed. So as to arrive at a fuller grasp of that underlying reality we must begin by acknowledging that the convertibility of personhood and *communio* is something far more elemental than a transient agglomeration of individuals drawn out of some primordial isolation by evolutionary forces or by considerations of political or economic expediency.

Inasmuch as we can understand the human person only within a non-hierarchical and differentiated model of *communio*, the conceptual and methodological frameworks of contemporary sociology, political science, anthropology, or evolutionary biology are

bound to fail us in this quest. Concerned with objectivity rather than truth, these disciplines reject from the outset the possibility of any reality anterior and inaccessible to their positivistic conception of knowledge and it is this incommensurability of modern forms of inquiry with the reality of the human person which prompts me to draw instead on two alternative modes of human inquiry that, profound differences notwithstanding, do not presuppose from the outset all knowledge to be an exclusively verificationist and predictive undertaking: theology and literature.

III

Since the first council of Nicaea, the doctrine of the Trinity has served as the framework through which to approach the idea of person and its essentially *relational* (as opposed to contingently *social*) character. Augustine envisions the Trinity as the archetype of the ideal, organic community wherein the identity of the persons comprising that unity is inseparable from their relations, even as it is neither transferentially projected upon nor mimetically derived from the other persons in that community. While arguing that the Trinitarian framework reappears within the human person as the triad of memory, will, and understanding, Augustine takes care not to slip into a faculty psychology as we find it in Descartes or Kant. Instead, he insists on the mutually constitutive nature of all human capacities: “[W]hen I name my memory, understanding, and will, each name refers to a single thing, and yet each of these single names is the product of all three” (*De trinitate* IV:30). The underlying claim here is that the human person is the expression or manifestation of an all-encompassing order, rather than a subject capable of unilaterally fashioning an account of its inner constitution and its relatedness to other human beings. Hence, for Augustine, there is nothing elective or adventitious about human sociality, community, and relatedness, a point to be kept in mind lest we misread Augustine’s observation elsewhere that “*socialis quiddam est humana natura*” (*De bono conjugali* c. 1). Only then is it clear that person and self belong to different categories and that “the person can be neither a variety nor a promotion of the individual.” Echoing this observation by Gabriel Marcel, Henri de Lubac (1988, 33) notes, “a person is not an idealized individual nor a transcendent monad.”

Now, if modern accounts of the self unwittingly presuppose relational and communal characteristics long associated with personhood, they are also keen not to look too far into this crucial presupposition. Modern moral and political philosophy’s apparent preference for grounding its arguments in a concept of the *individual*, rather than confronting the reality of the human person—at once incontrovertible and unfathomable—can be seen as a *prima facie* instance of what Hegel calls “the cunning of reason” (Hegel 1970, 365). For in the case of the individual, or the “self,” no apparent normative dimension intrudes on the various rights claims and subjective preferences whose ideally unfettered pursuit modern political philosophy takes to be the very essence of

human flourishing. Once Locke had filed down the rougher edges of Hobbes' political theory, the utopian intimations of social contract theory and the Scottish political economists gradually furnish otherwise isolated and hermetic individuals with a strictly elective and opportunistic template of socialization. Where covenants between human beings only serve to uphold legal obligations and to reconcile competing economic interests, socialization will be understood as involving only contingent relations among essentially anonymous individuals. The I-Thou dynamic of personhood is supplanted by a species-concept of so many interchangeable individuals consumed with the pursuit of interests, the assertion of rights, and the barely restricted enactment of (ostensibly licit) desires. In the world shaped by Lockean contract theory, Scottish political economy, and Humean naturalism, the communion of human persons is de-potentiated into a society of individuals, with "society" denoting little more than a minimalist regulatory framework—an ephemeral association of the terminally dissociated. Inevitably, such an anthropocentric framework elides the reality of the human person qua *imago Dei*, that is, as the locus of supra-individual norms and transcendent ends. For if due consideration were given to this tacit dimension, human reason would confront unconditional limits on the scope and enactment of human desire, interest, cognition, and rights-claims. Conversely, once self and person are "desynonymized" (as Coleridge likes to call it), we find that setting limits to the scope of individual desire and interest, as any rational community must, presupposes a normative framework whose transcendent source modern thought cannot acknowledge without exposing the inherent contingency and limitations of procedural reason.

So far, then, I have merely traced an argument that I have unfolded at greater length elsewhere (Pfau 2013): viz., that defining of the modern autonomous individual or "punctual self" (to borrow Charles Taylor's term of art) is a set of interconnected epistemological, cultural, and political assumptions incommensurable with the reality of the human person as it has been progressively reflected in Judeo-Christian thought for the past two millennia. Distinct yet intimately entwined, these theological traditions have continuously explored the enigmatic reality and presence of the human person and, in so doing, also alert us to the intrinsic limitations of modern discursive reasoning in this area. From Nicaea via Augustine, Boethius, Richard of St. Victor, and Aquinas onward—yet also in the writings of Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas— theological reflection has been fascinated by the transcendent dimension thrown into relief by the mystery of human personhood—an unfathomable reality *in* which all human beings or individuals already find themselves, *from* which their discursive and social practices necessarily proceed and *to* which, ideally, their reasoning ought to return them. As Robert Spaemann and Robert Sokolowski have argued, the human person can never be captured in the modality of discrete propositions, even as legal definitions of personhood are required to protect persons from the myriad forms of abuse that the

hedonistic, violent, and self-interested propensities of human beings forever threaten to unleash on it.

This approach naturally inclines us to a consideration of love as the true human *Ur*-phenomenon. What modern epistemological, moral, and political accounts of the individual overlook—or reject for supposedly lacking a compelling warrant—is the fact that the recognition of the other *qua* person not only presupposes an underlying sense of relatedness, an antecedent community, but that such *communio* is phenomenally realized in the human *Ur*-phenomenon of love (*caritas*). Strictly speaking, that is, recognition of other persons is not a choice, let alone a value-neutral one. Rather, it is a reality to which, rightly understood, we shall *assent* yet which pride and lust of dominion so often cause our understanding to disfigure or, indeed, disavow outright. Understood as a manifestation of trust and hope in the mutuality of our essential relatedness *qua* persons, love is ontologically distinct from desire. Indeed, few things testify as poignantly to the desiccated anthropomorphism of modern thought as its insistent effort to assimilate the supra-personal reality of love to the mechanistic, naturalist operations of desire manifested as in random *cupiditas* or as an implacable *libido dominandi*. In either permutation, desire inevitably severs the essential bond between love and recognition and, thus, ends up consigning the human person to the realm of the notional and the unreal. Dante tell us, “*Sanza speme vivemo in disio*” (“Without hope we live in desire,” *Inferno* IV:42). Later described by Hegel as the first stage of self-consciousness, desire reigns triumphant in a world from which grace, charity, and hope have seemingly been expunged. In its attempted reduction of the epiphanic to the anthropomorphic, human desire, like an old photograph, ends up exposing time and again the negative of “despair” (*acedia*) from which it falsely promises to extricate us. A quintessential misconstrual of love, desire recognizes the self in relation to others even as, *qua* desire, it hastens to repudiate community and relatedness as putative threats to the prideful dominion of the modern autonomous self.

I close by considering one literary instance of precisely this failure of charity and the loss of human personhood that it precipitates. Modeled on the Buddha’s sermon about worldly things destined to be consumed by fire, Part III of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (Eliot 2015, 62-64) offers one of the more despondent moments of interpersonal failure and sin found in modern literature. The scene is the grimy metropolitan dystopia of London, the “Unreal City” filled “empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends”—a disenchanted place from which “the nymphs are departed...[and] have left no address.” “The Fire Sermon” features a speaker condemned, like his mythical forebear, Tiresias—and like Eliot’s poetic and intellectual *alter egos*, Dante and Pascal—to foresee and ponder the inevitable miscarriage and seemingly boundless depravity of humankind.

The particular scene in question involves the encounter between a humble typist and a nameless clerk whom she has invited for a dinner. Her confused expectations of

romantic love and unrequited desire arise from an all-encompassing sense of her banal, loveless, and insubstantial existence all but indistinguishable from the flat-line *durée* of modern, chronometric time. A female pendant to Prufrock (who has “measured out [his] life with coffee spoons”), the typist’s bewildered acquiescence into what can be described as a downward transposition of romantic love into impersonal desire recalls Prufrock’s dissociated experience of life as a solitary, inchoate, and meaningless sequence of prevarications: “[T]ime yet for a hundred indecisions.” Here, then, is the main passage:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
The typist home at tea-time, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
I too awaited the expected guest.
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house-agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall

And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
Bestows one final patronizing kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .
She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

As they emerge from their fleeting and dispiriting encounter, Eliot’s nameless characters verge on allegories of spiritual destitution and an utter misapprehension of love. Adrift in dystopic metropolitan space, the clerk and the typist, solely defined by their humdrum occupations, barely register the profound harm wrought by their hapless and fleeting encounter. The clerk’s furtive departure (“[he] gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit”) faintly recalls the pagan naturalism of Protagoras and Democritus—resembling as it does the trajectory of an atom, unintelligible to the “human engine” of the clerk, though foreseen with harrowing accuracy by the latter-day Tiresias of Eliot’s speaker. The fact that the mythical seer, Tiresias, had “foretold” and “foresuffered” all, also means that *The Waste Land* is more than some garden-variety narrative of cultural decline. Rather, the endemic failure of love and recognition exposes the neo-pagan, naturalist assumptions that account for the dissociated hedonist psychology defining of life in a liberal-secular, urban world. In Eliot’s dystopic portrayal of the clerk’s “metrosexual” persona, Augustine’s *ordo amoris* has been supplanted by the idolatry of subjective preference, and limitless self-fulfillment has all but expunged *communio* and *caritas*. As it retraces the mythic cruelty long “foresuffered” by Tiresias, Eliot’s “Fire Sermon” unfolds with bland exemplarity the neo-pagan failure of love and recognition, and how a coherent model of human personhood is eclipsed by the dissociative and often predatory tendencies of modern, urban psychology.

And yet, simply to speak of “failure” is to obfuscate the main issue (Lubac 1988, 33). To see why this is so, we might recall Heraclitus’s remark that “although *logos* is common to all, most people live as if they had a wisdom of their own” (also found as an epigraph to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*). Heraclitus and, following his prompt, Eliot are not just identifying a failure but intimating a fault. Thus, to embrace the solitary and hermetic “self” as the only way of being in the world is still to *choose* and *cultivate* a stance (however intellectualized) for which we will henceforth be responsible. The palpably dehumanizing and ethically indefensible actions of the clerk cannot be construed as inevitable entailments of his seemingly natural, feral disposition. Rather,

the clerk bears as much responsibility for his hedonism *per se* as he does for violating the spirit of the meal (a failed Eucharist is ever there was one) at which he is “the expected guest.” His existentialist way of being cannot be explained as a necessary entailment of some inexorable force operating within him. For the human person is not simply some generic, “pure” nature (as the 16th c. theologian Baius had hypostatized) to which a first name then becomes somehow attached. In fact, a person’s nature is not something inexplicably received but, rather, a potentiality progressively realized and confirmed in the temporal order of acts and habits. As Coleridge was to put it, the nature or character of a person arises from “a mysterious diversity between the injunctions of the mind and the elections of the will” (Coleridge 1993, 349). Something of the sort probably led Abraham Lincoln to surmise that every man over forty is responsible for his face. The “nature” that precipitates the clerk’s predatory behavior with such seeming inevitability is, ultimately, something he himself has made and for which he bears responsibility.

Arguing that “where there is sin, there is multiplicity, yet where there is virtue, there is unity” (*ubi peccata ibi multitudo...ubi autem virtus, ibi unio*; quoted in Lubac 1988, 33), Origen (184-253 A.D.) had stressed long ago that where love is disfigured by desire, and where the fullness, presence, and mutual recognition of persons in communion is compromised, we are not confronted with some incidental “failure” but with a fault of deliberation, choice, and will. The so-called failure of personhood is not a failure at all but, rather, a case of *sin*. Eliot’s clerk sins against the *imago Dei* not only of the typist but, just as plainly, also against his own. Read against the backdrop of Eliot’s carefully embedded allusions to the rape of Philomela, the impersonal and dispiriting encounter here unfolded proves if anything more ghastly yet. For in modern urban, secular, and casually hedonistic culture, the violation of love and, thus, of the human person whose reality and flourishing essentially arise from it, has become the new normal. What makes the scene’s closing lines so acutely disturbing is the seismographic sensitivity with which Eliot’s writing registers the slightest tremors of spiritual anguish in the typist’s “half-formed thought” (“Well now that’s done”) and in the distracted and mechanical movements (“She smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone”) with which she fends off awareness of her own casual violation and self-abasement. At its strongest, this is what modern literature does: to capture the human person’s grounding in the dynamics of recognition and love, if only *ex negativo* by showing how the failure of achieving personhood is ultimately one of will, not nature. Needless to say, it is a proposition wholly at odds with modern liberalism’s essentially Pelagian understanding of self-legislating and self-contained human existence.

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