

# After the Relational Turn: Recent Studies in Personhood

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## ABSTRACT

*This brief article provides a critical review of several recent interdisciplinary studies of human nature, personhood, and the self (with particular attention given to the work of Christian Smith) and offers some tentative suggestions as to how those interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi might contribute to this area of on-going inquiry and reflection.*

Ten years ago, F. LeRon Shults documented the “turn to relationality” in late modern Western philosophy and science and examined the consequences of this turn for our understanding of human nature (Shults 2003). He identified a number of “reconstructive opportunities” that have emerged in the wake of this development and laid out how these opportunities afforded new perspectives on familiar problems (Shults 2003, 164). He also sought to demonstrate that the turn to relationality had important implications not only for the content of the intellective enterprise but for its practice as well: the relational turn, he argued, encouraged a rethinking of precisely which strategies and habits are most effective for providing students with opportunities for “transformational learning” (Shults 2003, 61-76).

Since that time, the question of personhood has continued to occupy many working not only in the areas of philosophy and science but in pretty much every area of formal inquiry. The purpose of this brief essay is to examine several more recent efforts that demonstrate the abiding influence of the “turn to relationality” on contemporary studies of personhood. First, I will summarize the research contained in two interdisciplinary anthologies. Second, I will review Christian Smith’s more integrative attempts to employ the concept of the person as the foundation for a constructive research program. Finally, I will offer some cursory suggestions as to how those interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi might contribute to the further study of personhood.

In *Rethinking Human Nature* (2011), Malcolm Jeeves presents a series of papers first discussed at a conference sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the conference was to bring together scholars from a range of disciplines to consider the question, “What is our real knowledge about the human being?” These studies explore personhood from historical, philosophical, scientific, archaeological, and theological perspectives, and together provide a very informative and erudite summary of the state of the question.

The two essays in the first section examine the question of personhood from a historical perspective. Felipe Fernández-Armesto suggests that “mutual recognition” provides a more stable and “elastic” foundation for securing human rights than do functionalist anthropologies, but also highlights how tenuous communities of mutual recognition can be (11-29). Fernando Vidal analyzes modern expectations of the relationship between the material and immaterial dimensions of human experience, and suggests that controversies about human nature and identity are often symptomatic of deeper “aspirations and anxieties” having to do with our seemingly intractable inability to live up to our own ideals (30-57).

The second section includes three essays of a more philosophical bent. Jürgen Mittelstrass examines the on-going quest for a “rational” ethic, one that is both “normative” and “universal,” and compares and

contrasts what he describes as anthropocentric, pathocentric, biocentric, and physiocentric approaches to this project (61-69). Evandro Agassi suggests the proliferation of specialized studies in the empirical and human sciences represents both an opportunity and a challenge inasmuch as it provides us with a wealth of perspectives to the question of personhood even as it raises the question of how to integrate or reconcile these perspectives (71-81). Franco Chiereghin considers whether or not aesthetics affords a particularly incisive approach to the question of human nature and identity, and proposes the “production” of art much more so than its “evaluation” gives us an especially important clue to this question (82-104).

Like the collection as a whole, the section dedicated to studies from the sciences adopts an avowedly interdisciplinary perspective, and includes insights gleaned from genetics, evolutionary theory, neuropsychology, sociology, and archaeology. Graeme Finlay provides a very thorough and detailed introduction to contemporary genetic theory but in the end judges that genetics is not able to provide a comprehensive account of human nature (107-148). Similarly, R.J. Berry reviews a number of evolutionary theories (both pre-modern and modern) but likewise concludes natural selection is ultimately incapable of accounting for the full range of the human experience (149-175). Jeeves himself examines recent studies in neuropsychology and argues nonreductive physicalism does a better job of accounting for the correspondence between mind and brain than can either dualism or monism (176-205). David Myers notes that any account of human nature must include some consideration of the social dimensions of human identity and experience, and outlines some of the more important forms of social attachment (206-223). Alison Brooks draws on archaeology and paleontology in order to highlight the difficulties involved in efforts to clarify human distinctiveness by way of morphology (227-268).

Finally, Joel Green and Janet Martin Soskice offer two theological reflections on human identity. Green bears down in a more focused and extensive manner on a problem that crops up in several of the earlier essays, namely, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Although he appreciates the contributions of other disciplines, he resolutely grounds his account of human distinctiveness in the doctrine of the incarnation and suggests christology provides the most stable foundation for any consideration of not only the doctrine of the *imago Dei* but any comprehensive account of human identity (271-294). Martin Soskice extends this line of thinking by way of her analysis of the way the doctrine of the *imago Dei* bears on gender, and like Green suggests the concept of human nature signifies an eschatological reality (295-306).

Taken together, the essays in *Rethinking Human Nature* provide a far-reaching introduction to many of the issues and problems associated with the contemporary study of personhood and human nature. Despite the variety of perspectives, the essays all seem to move more or less in the same direction, and the reader is left with an appreciation of both the complexities of the subject as well as a nascent awareness of the need to integrate the various perspectives in a cohesive and comprehensive manner.

As does Jeeves, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and Erik Wiebe bring together an impressive range of interdisciplinary studies in their anthology, *In Search of Self* (2011).<sup>2</sup> In some ways, the essays in this volume are a bit more focused than those in the collection edited by Jeeves: most of the contributors demonstrate a particular concern for questions having to do with selfhood and identity. However, because several of the authors come to radically different conclusions about the nature, origin, and dynamics of the self the overall effect of this volume is not as unified or cohesive as is Jeeves’s *Rethinking Human Nature*.

Unlike Jeeves, who organizes the essays in his volume according to various disciplinary approaches to the question of personhood, van Huyssteen and Wiebe organize the essays in their volume around larger questions pertaining to the self. The first section includes studies that explore the origins of the self, the second essays that examine the relative integrity of the self, the third investigations into the concept and experience of self-identity, and the fourth essays that describe the emergent character of the self. Again,

although this strategy provides the reader with an expansive survey of current research, the differences between the various essays make it difficult to reconcile them to one another.

The five essays in the first section draw on evolutionary theory, neuroscience, morphology, and linguistics in their attempts to identify the origins of the self. Ian Tattersall examines the emergence of language and its effects on the evolutionary history of the species (33-49). Ian Hodder elucidates the connections between the self, the community, and material culture by drawing on insights from archaeology (50-69). Barbara King tackles the problem of the similarities and differences between humans and other animals (70-82). Eric Bergemann, et al., explore the boundaries between neuroscience and spirituality and propose the self is nothing more than a “cortically mediated and culturally sanctioned illusion” (83-103). Emma Cohen and Justin Barrett seek to ground their account of the self in a developmental schema that accounts for both nature and nurture (104-122).

The second and third sections of *In Search of Self* explore territory that does not receive much attention in Jeeves’s *Rethinking Human Nature*, namely, the integrity of the self in the face of the threat of fragmentation. Léon Turner suggests the “pluralization” of the self, far from being maladaptive, is in some instances not only understandable but necessary (125-140). Pamela Cooper-White rejects both strict singularity and strict multiplicity in favor of a “braided” understanding of the self (141-162). Hetty Zock presents Hubert Hermans’s theory of the “dialogical” self as one that accommodates the experience of an integrated “true self” while also resisting “monological closure” (163-181). Helene Tallon Russell and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki provide readings of both Kierkegaard and Whitehead that highlight the inevitable multiplicity of the self (182-197). Maxine Sheets-Johnstone finds a certain consistency between Husserl’s understanding of temporality and Buddhist meditative practice, but also notes these two perspectives offer different judgments with regard to the perdurance of the self (198-219).

In the third section, the perspective shifts towards more phenomenological accounts of the experience of the self. Calvin Schrag revisits Kant’s account of the “transcendental unity of apperception” and then examines how the “hermeneutical turn” and the “historical turn” in Western thought both contributed to the emergence of a different understanding of the self (223-242). Jennifer Thweatt-Bates draws on the work of Katherine Hayles, Andy Clark, and David Chalmers in an attempt to elucidate a cybernetic, “posthuman” account of the self (243-255). Jan-Olav Henriksen considers the apprehension of the self within the context of the experience of desire and love as expressed both between human beings and between the human and the divine (256-272). João Biehl presents a chilling case study that illustrates what can happen when the self is subjected to “pharmaceuticalization” and the person is transformed into the “material and means of a continual process of experimentation” (273-298).

Finally, the fourth section takes up the question of emergence and the dynamics associated with the manifestation and perdurance of the self. Catherine Keller sketches a theological approach to the problem and draws on pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology in an effort to provide an account of the self that accommodates “cooperative autopoiesis” and “infinite unfolding” (301-318). James Haag, Terrence Deacon, and Jay Ogilvy reject what they regard as the false dichotomy of eliminativist or existentialist accounts of meaning and provide an alternative account of teleology, agency, and subjectivity (319-337). Roger Scruton, moving in a rather different direction, grapples with the challenge of neurobiology and ends up suggesting the “self-conscious subject is in principle unobservable to science” (338-356). Finally, Philip Rolnick draws on twentieth-century studies in mathematics and physics in his exploration of an account of knowledge and agency that avoids both determinism and nihilism (357-374).

Most of the essays in *In Search of Self* make a more determined effort to engage distinctly religious and theological concerns than do some of those in *Rethinking Human Nature*. Many of the contributors

to the former are anxious to explore the possibility of reformulating traditional doctrines in a manner they expect is necessary given contemporary research and sensibilities. Unfortunately, several proffer arguments that are unnecessarily tendentious. Others, however, provide insights and perspectives that are potentially much more fruitful; the essays by Zock, Russell and Hewitt Suchocki, Schrag, Henriksen, Scruton, and Rolnick are especially noteworthy in this regard.

One topic that (surprisingly) does not receive more attention in either *Rethinking Human Nature* or *In Search of Self* is the practice of medical ethics in light of contemporary accounts of human nature. Biehl's contribution to *In Search of Self* is the only essay to take up this problem in an extended manner, but the conclusions he draws from his analysis of the hazards of "pharmaceuticalization" may not readily transpose to questions pertaining to abortion, reproductive technologies, stem cell research, or cloning. Kevin Corcoran's *Rethinking Human Nature* (2006) is thus a helpful supplement to the essays in these two volumes, not only because he includes some consideration of each of these issues but also because his nonreductive physicalism represents another effort (like those in the collection edited by van Huyssteen and Wiebe) to wrestle with the theological implications of contemporary philosophical and scientific accounts of human nature.

What neither Jeeves's *Rethinking Human Nature* nor van Huyssteen's and Wiebe's *In Search of Self* ultimately manage to do (or even, it should be said, set out to do) is integrate the considerable variety of perspectives they each employ to analyze human nature, the self, and personhood. Thus, one of the clearest things to emerge from both volumes is the need for an interdisciplinary strategy capable of coordinating the many opportunities for additional study and reflection in a comprehensive, integrated conceptual horizon.

Enter Christian Smith: for the last several years, the Notre Dame sociologist has been engaged in the development of a research program organized around the concept of the person and aimed at reforming the way sociology is both practiced and taught. His first draft of this program appeared in his *Moral, Believing Animals* (2003), and he has more recently presented an elaborated version in his *What is a Person?* (2010).

In *Moral, Believing Animals*, Smith appropriates insights from late modern moral philosophy and epistemology to address sociological problems and questions (not the least of which is the way sociology itself is conceived).<sup>3</sup> First, he argues that purposive human action is always embedded in a horizon of meaning and value, and that social and cultural institutions are organized around (indeed, *as*) morally structured principles and purposes (7-43). Second, he argues we must include in any account of knowledge a willingness to accept the determinative influence of the fundamental assumptions that shape our worldview(s), assumptions that are neither self-evident nor universal (45-61). This leads, third, to a narrative account of culture, identity, and the negotiation of pluralism; not only are we animals who make stories, we are animals who are made by the stories we make (63-94). Smith then considers, fourth, the place of religious belief in the creation and perpetuation of culture, which leads him to suggest that contemporary sociological treatments of religious faith and practice are somewhat lacking (95-123). Finally, he examines several sociological attempts to account for human motivation and action (Bourdieu, Swidler, Shusdon, et al.) and finds them wanting because of their tendency to collapse motivation and action into some other category (125-145). After all is said and done, Smith suggests, the "most adequate approach to theorizing human culture and social life must be a normative one that conceives of humans as moral, believing, narrating animals and human social life as constituted by moral orders that define and direct social action" (147-148).

Smith's *What is a Person?* further elaborates all of these themes and then some. The broad contours of both works are quite similar: they each open with an identification of primary sources and fundamental commitments, include critical analysis of trends in contemporary sociology, argue for the primacy of persons

(i.e., their motives and purposive actions) as the key to understanding social and cultural dynamics, and devote significant attention to related moral and ethical questions. What distinguishes *What is a Person?* from *Moral, Believing Animals* is the level of detail and sophistication of Smith's arguments.

The first two chapters of *What is a Person?* are taken up with introducing Smith's primary arguments and identifying his principal resources.<sup>4</sup> One of his overarching concerns has to do with recovering an appreciation for the complexity of persons and their experience. He decries the various forms of reductionism that influence late modern thought and devotes a significant amount of attention to exploring the dynamics of emergence (25-42). He then further complicates things by presenting a veritable laundry list of the parameters and capacities that characterize human experience and behavior, all of which need to be taken into account in any comprehensive attempt to describe human nature and identity (43-59). In light of all these complex, emergent capacities, Smith suggests we should think of the person as a “conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication who ... exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships” with other persons and with the world (61; cf. 73-75). The rest of the book is to some degree nothing other than an exploration of the ramifications of this definition.

Critical realism, personalism, and phenomenology are the principal theoretical resources Smith uses to make his arguments. The first Smith sees as an alternative to (on the one hand) “positivist empiricist” reductionism and (on the other) “constructivism, postmodernism, and certain versions of the hermeneutical perspective” (92; cf. 198). The second, he admits, is a term that refers to a “broad philosophical school of thought” that does not admit to easy generalization but nonetheless offers a viable alternative to various late modern accounts of human nature and identity, including individualism, collectivism, and materialism (98-104). By the third he chiefly means the post-critical perspectives developed by Charles Taylor, Michael Polanyi, and others who have sought to move beyond the vacuity of modern objectivism and reductionism (104-115; cf. 207-220).

With these tools in hand, Smith turns to the task of critically analyzing various trends in contemporary sociology he believes undermine the possibility of properly understanding social behavior and interactions. He distinguishes between “weak” and “strong” forms of social construction, and suggests the former “need some maintenance” but the latter are “simply bankrupt” (134). Strong constructionism is ultimately self-stultifying but managed to take hold in late modern thought because “conditions were ripe in the last decades of the twentieth century for many people in particular knowledge class positions to want to believe it” (147). Structuralist accounts of experience, knowledge, and language were distilled through the intellectual frustration and pessimism that followed the collapse of existentialism, resulting in diminished and jaundiced accounts of human identity and experience (149-157). Smith readily acknowledges the reality of social construction, but contends knowledge and language should be seen less as a “confining prison” and more as an “enabling medium” whereby we make contact with reality (171-173). The reality of social construction may mean we have no “objective, indubitable, absolute, general, positive knowledge,” but we can have personal, engaged, responsible, skillful, and purposeful knowledge (179-184; cf. 217-218).

Following this more general critique, Smith turns to an analysis of network structuralism, also known as relationalism or network analysis. He identifies three different forms of network structuralism, i.e., the determinist, instrumentalist, and constructivist varietals. Only the third, he believes, has any real staying power, owing to the fact that the first two are incapable of accounting for purposive action: determinism leaves no room for it, and instrumentalism conceives of it solely in contractual terms (226-228). Accounting for the influence and dynamics of any network requires accounting for the capacities, needs, motives, and actions of the agents embedded within the network, but this should not result in the

presumed dissolution of those agents (235-239). He examines the structuralism of several prominent network theorists, and focuses on “theoretically oriented structuralists” rather than on those devoted to “applied empirical work” in order to excavate the tacit assumptions associated with this school of thought (271). Harrison White’s approach seems to offer intriguing possibilities, but Smith ultimately rejects the conclusions of White, Stephen Fuchs, and (especially) Bruce Mayhew and Donald Black because of their “naturalistic, reductionistic, and antihumanistic” tendencies (241-272).

Similar arguments can be made, Smith suggests, about variables analysis and its tendency to “reinforce problematic models” of human identity and action (278-279; cf. 289-299). Basically, the problem with variables analysis is that it tends to encourage an understanding of the person as being nothing more than a “conglomeration of scores” (286) and thus undermines all accounts of “equality, dignity, and justice” (288). Variables analysis can indeed be a helpful tool for understanding the conditions that give rise to social relations (296), but oftentimes what goes on “*between* the variables” is more interesting than the variables themselves (306). Given the contingencies and limitations of our knowledge, we should not expect to be able to explain each and every dimension of our experience, and need to admit that sometimes not knowing something is preferable to knowing something erroneous, which is all too easy when we attempt to quantify every dimension of our experience (308-311).

Having outlined his approach and distinguished his efforts from others he believes are inadequate, Smith offers a constructive and programmatic account of persons and their social interactions. He first describes the emergence and development of stable social structures, and in this section picks up on many of the themes he introduced in *Moral, Believing Animals*. Structures to a significant degree embody the tension between human capacities and human limitations, and thus any description of action within social structures must account for both (331-340). The dynamics of structures simultaneously encourage unity and diversity, similarity and difference, dwelling in and breaking out, and because of these tensions will inevitably manifest “social inequalities of various kinds” (345-356). Any given culture will include a large number of such complex structures, all distinct but “tightly linked” both “horizontally” and “vertically” by way of material resources, conceptual categories, moral commitments, juridical codes, etc. (357-365, 369-377). Given the complexity of these structures, sociologists should aspire only to describe as accurately as possible what really happens within the context of these structures and should eschew the presumption of being able to identify nomothetic laws that determine what must or should be the case (367-368, 379).

No account of purposive action can neglect some consideration of moral value, so Smith next turns to a consideration of “the good.” He revisits the “naturalistic fallacy” and traces the tendency in late modern thought to try and separate descriptive and prescriptive accounts of human experience (386-396); indeed, it was precisely the attempt to do so that led to the moral catastrophes of the twentieth century (427-428). Because we cannot completely avoid moving from “is” to “ought,” we should be attentive to the means and motives we use to do so (388-391). Discerning the good requires that we recognize and affirm that human life is a narrative quest whereby we seek to overcome the limitations and brokenness of our lives without thereby imagining we can escape the contingencies of our existence (399-406). This effort is always undertaken within the context of concrete relations: thus, our own well-being depends immediately on our willingness to contribute to the flourishing of others (406-421).

All of this leads Smith, finally, to an account of human dignity. In light of the moral quality of all human action and experience, dignity is a constitutive part of human identity; social structures are likewise fraught with moral significance, and the moral character of persons and structures are interdependent (434-445). Dignity will be expressed in varying ways depending on social conditions, but the differences between cultures will not be as great as will their underlying similarities (445-446). The two traditional means of grounding human dignity are both problematic in today’s world: neither accounts grounded in

particular capacities nor those grounded in religious faith are likely to garner much agreement. However, a realist, emergent account of persons (i.e., human beings in both their individual and their relational modes of existence) can support a strong commitment to dignity because it fosters an awareness of the possibility of human flourishing in every dimension of our lives (446-461, 472-478). Thus conceived, dignity should be a particular concern for sociologists inasmuch as it provides them with a standard for analyzing actions within particular social structures, helps adjudicate difficult decisions about institutional practices and the allocation of resources, and curbs our tendency towards self-aggrandizement by keeping before us the challenges associated with securing dignity for all (481-488).

Smith recognizes his recommendations would require the “disruption or adjustment of a host of well-established assumptions, tendencies, beliefs, habits, boundaries, practices, methods, standards, and systems upon which a great deal of mainstream American sociology is built” (491). He also recognizes the need to supplement his arguments with additional studies and insights from psychology, feminism, juridical theory and practice, and medical ethics (493). It is to no small degree because his work evokes such a wide range of opportunities for further study that his work merits serious consideration.

In order to round out this brief survey, I’d like just to mention several ways those interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi might both appropriate some of the findings of the research described herein and also contribute to on-going efforts to clarify the nature of personhood. There are, obviously, many points at which Polanyi’s work lines up rather nicely with the themes and ideas explored in the works described above.

Everyone, it seems, agrees that the Western tradition is in the midst of a major reconsideration of the legacy of modernity. Polanyi’s account of moral inversion could help further refine the critique(s) offered by those dedicated to identifying and tracking the problematic dimensions of late modern thought and culture. More specifically, Polanyi’s reading of the intellectual history of modernity accommodates neither uncritical acceptance nor facile rejection, and would thus help balance more contentious readings of the modern project (and the Western tradition in general).

Polanyi’s exposition of the tacit dimension and the dynamics of indwelling provide an unsurpassed way of describing how it is that persons embody and actualize their practical, philosophical, and moral commitments. While it may be true to say more recent studies in embodied perception, cognition, and articulation can help refine some of Polanyi’s arguments, it nonetheless remains the case that Polanyi managed to situate his analysis of indwelling within a more general account of purposive action and meaningful experience in a way other theorists have not always managed to do.

Finally, Polanyi did not shy away from recognizing either the moral or the ontological ramifications of his account of knowledge, but neither did he succumb to the hubris of baldly asserting his metaphysical assumptions as self-evident axioms. He was thus able to conceive of the intellective enterprise—and, indeed, our whole lives—as a fragile, risky, but nonetheless authentic opportunity to actualize our highest aspirations (cf. Polanyi 1962, 405). His work represents an expansive, integrative, and compelling effort to account for the human experience in a way that encourages us to engage in life as a quest for truth, beauty, and goodness, mindful of our contingencies and brokenness but nonetheless inspired to strive for continual discovery and transcendence in a world that presents itself to us as nothing so much as a gift.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Parenthetical references that follow are to Jeeves 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Parenthetical references that follow are to van Huyssteen & Wiebe 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Parenthetical references that follow are to Smith 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Parenthetical references that follow are to Smith 2010.

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