

**The Crisis in the Psychological Concept of Self or Person:
A Neo-Thomist and Personalist Answer¹**

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To begin, a few words about vocabulary. I will use the terms "self," "person" and sometimes "identity" relatively interchangeably. I hope that any differences in the meanings of these terms will be made clear by the context. The concept of "person" is the largest of these notions, since person includes the totality of the body, the mind, and the spirit. The self is a sub-category, if you will, of "person"; self normally does not include spirit or the totality of these three terms. It is a part of them. "Identity" is a sub-category or component of the "self." But for our purposes they will be generally interchangeable.

Let me provide somewhat more detail: the modern self is the familiar self, namely the presumably autonomous integrated willful self that creates its own significance through choosing successful ways of self-expression. This is the self of self-actualization and today's emphasis on self-fulfillment. It is, as mentioned, a smaller notion than person, primarily because the modern self has lost track of the spiritual and bodily and holistic characteristics of the person. Identity is a very central part of the self and involves the self's conscious understanding of its interpersonal, social and cultural character. It is the identity aspect of the modern self which has begun to unravel and upon which the postmodernists have especially focused attention. They have particularly noted the way in which identity and other aspects of the self arise out of

social constructive processes, rather than from some implicit intrinsic "authentic" qualities of the self.

Now, a list of the major problems of both the modern and postmodern self:

1. The modern self by emphasizing autonomy and separation has ignored the importance of interpersonal relationships, especially those early in life, in the formation of the self.

2. The objective validity of the self as rooted in the body has been ignored. (This is a major weakness of both the modern and postmodern positions.)

3. The modern self has had no systematic intellectual rationale. Instead it has received a varied, often intuitive justification--and frequently the modern self has been implicitly

captured by the philosophic assumptions of total individual autonomy.

4. Finally, there has been little understanding of the formation of the adult social self within a cultural and historical context. (This is the basis of the postmodern critique of today's modern self.)

The transmodern person or self

As an answer to the modern and postmodern problem, we should consider an alternative understanding of the person, one which has been emerging recently. I use the term "transmodern" to describe this new vision of the person and perhaps the new mentality which will follow our present postmodern period (Vitz, 1995a, 1995b, 1998). Transmodern means a new understanding which

transforms the modern and also *transcends* it. This new approach does not reject most modern contributions but transforms their meaning. Moreover, the new meaning is in part of a higher, transcendent nature--sometimes explicitly theological or spiritual or idealistic but always with an emphasis on higher meaning. With respect to the person, the theoretical writers have been primarily theologians and philosophers, but their ideas are directly relevant to psychology, as will be shown here, and in due time these ideas may dramatically affect the culture in general. In part, the significance of this approach comes from the fact that these theorists articulate an understanding of the person that is intimately connected with the Judeo-Christian tradition; this approach therefore speaks to a core tradition of Western culture.

Toward a specific solution

The empirical evidence for a new understanding of the self, however, is coming from contemporary cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Many researchers in these fields seem unaware of the broader implications of what they are doing, although a few are venturing into explanatory theories. One of the most fascinating questions to address is this: How is the self actually formed, not formed in some final way, but how does it initially get started and developed over time? Answering this question addresses the first two of the problems noted with the modern and postmodern selves.

To begin with problem #2, the importance of the human body has been ignored in theories of the self. It is now clear that

there is a self that might be called the visual and perceptual self. Sometimes it is called the *ecological self*. Specifically, as the human infant looks around and somewhat later moves around in the world, he or she is clearly aware of a spatial or perceptual world in which it is in the center. This center of awareness is non-verbal, and this early sense of individuality or self is also biological, that is, rooted in perceptual/sensory experience and hence in the body; it is not, however, distinctly human because probably most of the higher animals have a similar invariant centering.

A second aspect of the bodily self that emerges is the proprioceptive self. This is the fact that I know where I am in space because I feel my body directly. I know I am at this desk, I am sitting, I can feel the cues of sitting, and so on. These

internal kinesthetic or proprioceptive cues allow me to know where I am in space, and I've known this spatial center since I was an infant. This center also gives an invariant center for the identity of a person.

Another important early understanding that develops in the infant at about the same time is the beginning of the interpersonal self (Problem #1 above). Even before speech has begun, the infant and the mother (or mother figure) begin interacting in a way that is proto-conversational. One of them makes certain sounds or responses, and then waits, and the other laughs and responds, and this interaction continues often for many minutes. It is very much like adult interaction but relies on body communication (plus speech from the mother but not yet comprehensible by the infant), though the mood or affect in the

speech seems to be understood by infants very early. Somewhat later, early interpersonal relationships involving speech and social interaction with the mother, then the father and other family members, develop. Although each of these relationships, which are strongly internalized, are unique to each child, they also share common features across societies. These early relationships are part of a central self that is thus neither arbitrary nor later capable of much change.

In short, it is now becoming clear that the self has an origin in the body and in early interpersonal relationships which are unique in particulars to each individual and yet have much in common with people everywhere.

The third problem is that the modern self has lacked any systematic intellectual rationale. Historically, in the West, the

self or person was defined as "an individual substance of a rational nature" (Boethius). This expression meant reason operating in a body. However, over time, the term substance lost its clear meaning, and as a result Western philosophers increasingly ignored the body. A person or self became a kind of dis-embodied individual rationality. In philosophy and psychology, we ended up with the concept of the autonomous self.

The extreme emphasis on such ideas as independence, will, freedom and autonomy by modern Western philosophies was no doubt supported by the neglect of the body. After all, the body puts limits on such interpretations.

Historically, the last major philosopher to emphasize the body and realism was Thomas Aquinas. However, many have interpreted Aquinas as failing to appreciate and recognize the

importance of relationships as central to the notion of the person. Recently, a significant neo-Thomist response to this problem has been published by Norris Clarke (1998) who argues that relationship was always at least an implicit part of the Thomist understanding of person or substance. In any case, Clarke has explicitly remedied the situation by developing a systematic Thomist description of a person as a rational or intellectual *substance in-relationship*. By this formulation, a firm philosophical grounding of a person as a body-in-relationship with others is now available (see especially, pp. 13-24).

An even larger, richer theoretical rationale comes from a biblical understanding of person or self. In particular, from Genesis it is clear that a person is made from matter, i.e., has a body; in addition, some persons are male and others female in

body. It is equally clear from the Judeo-Christian scriptures that humans are created for interpersonal relationship--both with God and with other human beings. (For important theologies of the body, see Benedict Ashley, 1985; also Karol Wojtyla [John Paul II], 1997.)

In the last few decades, a new Christian personalist rationale for the importance of relationships to the nature of person has emerged out of Trinitarian theology. Thomas Torrance (1983, 1985) is one good Protestant example. Concurrently, Joseph Ratzinger (1970, 1990) and Karol Wojtyla ([Pope John Paul II], 1979) have provided a very similar Catholic Trinitarian interpretation of person. (See also Conner's translation and interpretation of Wojtyla, 1992.) Finally, the Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas (1985) has developed yet another

similar and highly supportive Trinitarian understanding of person as involving relationships. This is a remarkable confluence of interpretations.

Aside from the previously cited contributors to this new Trinitarian approach to the person, other scholars include Grabowski, 1995; Vitz, 1995a; Lowery, in press; and Stratton, in press.

Finally, we must address the fourth problem, the cultural critique of the postmodernists. Here again, a biblical understanding of person provides an answer. The two great commandments to love God and to love others clearly identify love as at the core of relationship and provide a cultural and historically invariant way to express the self or person. Loving God and loving others are the two universal coordinates--one

vertical, one horizontal. They are applicable to all people at all times as guidelines for forming and expressing one's self, and one's identity. However, these general rules are worked out in specific detail very differently from culture to culture and from one historical period to another. Thus, these two commandments, which speak to Christian and Jew alike (indeed probably to all theists), allow an invariant authentic core person or self to exist, along with the valid insights of the postmodern relativists who identify the many masks and roles that they have, often rightly, shown that we wear.

*General Summary of the Solution to the Modern/Postmodern Self
(Person)*

Part 1: The Theological Rationale

God is a person. Human beings are made in the image of God and therefore are also persons. As persons, we are made from earth and have bodies as do other animals. Explicitly, humans are made male and female in body (and this is good). As humans we are made for relationships with others. Adam for Eve, Eve for Adam, and both for relationship with God. The particular relationship humans are made for is love which is understood as self-giving. This follows from the great commandments to love God and others. It also follows explicitly from trinitarian theology since God is three persons in a mutually self-giving loving relationship, and we are made in that image. (All of this is developed much more fully in the various writings on the theology of the body and the theology of the Trinity.)

Part 2: The Philosophical Rationale

From a Thomist or Neo-thomist perspective, the human being is a rational substance in relationship. Thus both substance and relationship are primordial properties of the person. "All being, therefore, is by its very nature as being dyadic, with an 'introverted,' or *in-itself* dimension, as substance, and an 'extroverted' or *towards-others* dimension, as related through actions... to be is to be *substance-in-relation*" (Clarke, pp. 15-17).

For a philosophic understanding of the importance of the body to understanding the human mind, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999).

Part 3: The Psychological Rationale

The visual-acoustic proprioceptive self, derived from these bodily sensations and perceptions, is formed very early in life and sets up a core bodily-based self similar to that of other human beings but specific to each person because of individual bodily and environmental differences for each child. Early language experience also establishes an early foundational self; early language constructs an interpersonal and even social-cultural self as well. Other early relationships especially with the mother as conceptualized by psychoanalysts (e.g., Object-relations theorists) and by those who study early attachment (e.g., Bowlby) make it equally clear that we are formed as persons/selves in interpersonal relationships. (For an expansion of this psychological rationale, see Vitz, in press.)

Part 4: The Neurological Rationale

Neurological evidence is clear that the human being is highly conditioned by the body. This evidence is substantial and widely understood as strongly conditioning each person's self. In addition, early relationships such as mother-child bonding are well known to have a neurological/biological basis, e.g., oxytocin. Thus, we are biologically based in our bodies and in relationships which release chemicals cementing interpersonal bonds.

Part 5: The Cultural Rationale

At the higher level of the social or cultural self, it is quite true that today's dramatic new communication technologies combined with family and cultural disintegration have done much

to undermine the stability of the person or self. Nevertheless, the core of the person as previously described remains unchanged, and personal self disintegration or incoherence is a form of suffering. The answer to this condition requires some culturally and historically invariant framework for maintaining an integrated, stable self. The two great commandments--Love God and love others--provide such a framework while allowing the specifics of how to respond to these commands to vary with a person's culture and historical period.

All of the above can be condensed into the following integralist representation.

Level 1: Theological

A person is a being, created by God in His image, with a body and soul, including intellect and will. A person is called through grace to an eternal loving communion with God and others, but is fallen through original sin.

Level 2: Philosophical

A person is a rational embodied substance in relationship with others, who seeks happiness through exercising free will in ethical and unethical actions.

Level 3: Psychological

A person is a human being (*homo sapiens*) with a body, a mind, and a social nature, who seeks growth, fulfillment, and

meaning, but who is vulnerable to physical, mental and interpersonal pathologies.

In this framework we see a theological and philosophical foundation clearly undergirding psychology. We also see parallel conceptual terms at each level, which allows the definitions at each level to mutually strengthen each other. For example, "original sin"; "ethical and unethical actions"; "mental pathologies"; also "loving communion with God and others"; "relationships with others"; "social nature."

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¹ An expanded version of this paper will appear in *The Self: Beyond the postmodern crisis*, Paul C. Vitz and Susan Felch, eds. [under review].