

The Rescue of the Self: Man's Metaphysical Vocation and the Dignity of Being in Relation

Theodor DAMIAN

*Rev. Prof. Emeritus, PhD
Faculty of Human Services and Education
Metropolitan College of New York*

Abstract:

Man does not possess his own self. As image of God, man is a mystery to himself. Yet he is called to explore that mystery, not to explain it, so that he can discover his authentic vocation in life which requires him to transcend knowledge as it is commonly understood, meaning to become metaphysically realistic and keeping his original dignity by building a cruciform type of relationship: on the horizontal with his fellow man, and based on that, on the vertical, with God.

Keywords: *self, image, God, absolute, understanding, knowledge, participation, dignity, deification*

Introduction

The more I am looking at the world we live in, full of violence, egoism, lies, distortion, greed, vanity, atrocities, cowardice, hypocrisy, corruption, imposture, theft, indecency, envy, revenge, etc., the more I think of Baudelaire's undignifying picture of his own world, not much different from ours. In the famous poem "To the Reader" from his book *Flowers of Evil*, he talks about "folly, error, sin, avarice," "pleasant remorse," "clandestine pleasure," proclaiming that "every day we descend a step farther toward hell," a picture very much in accordance with Abraham Heschel's warning who says that "today our concern seems to be to protect ourselves against the abyss of the future" (Heschel 1965: 15).

Here, a moral dilemma confronts us: How can one pretend to be a moral person while living in an immoral society (a reference to the title of one of Reinhold Niebuhr's celebrated books), when one is part of that society and is contributing to its development? We can think of people who, while living in such a society are still navigating against its trend. And still,

even if one was completely free of the vices listed above, the question remains: how can one achieve that kind of purity in such an environment? What does it take to have the strength to go against the current? What are the risks involved, the strategies used and how can one keep the result untarnished?

In other words, we have to once again ask the eternal question: Who is Man? (as Abraham Heschel titles one of his most popular books), which brings forward the issue of the self.

What is the “self”?

Many things can be said about the self. One can suggest a cataphatic description (*via positiva*), where one uses terms that indicate that it is knowable or has some kind of knowability. But if one takes every item of such a description and then asks the question: is that what the self is? The response would be: no. The self, we will realize, is beyond any such affirmation and even beyond all affirmations taken together.

Going beyond such descriptions, we then turn to metaphysics. Just as when speaking about God, a better approach might be to say what the self is not: it is not such and such, or so and so. That is the apophatic way (*via negativa*), which is more appropriate when we are trying to speak about mystery. By definition, we cannot say mystery is such and such, because then it would no longer be a mystery. But we can say *ad infinitum*, it is not this, it is not that.

When Matthew McManus describes the self as “a potentially infinite consciousness attempting to authentically participate in and understand, the Absolute of God” (McManus 2016: 52), he speaks in clear apophatic terms.

The term “potential” has both physical and metaphysical dimensions; the term “infinite” is part of metaphysics; the term “consciousness” is more in the realm of metaphysics than of physics; so is the term “authenticity”. What does “authenticity” mean? Conformity with the self? Then, what is the self? This is similar to the questions: What is truth? Conformity to reality? What is reality? Is the soul real? Is there a soul? Is consciousness real? Is there a consciousness? What is it? And what is “Absolute”? Is there such a thing? In contrast to what can we understand it? To the relative? But the relative, being relative, is unstable, even unreal. Illusion? *Maya*?

And finally, “God.” Who is God? What is a divinity? If we say anything about it, how do we know that what we say is accurate?

So, McManus’ definition is beautiful, philosophical, but in fact, it is nothing. Yet it makes sense if we look at it theologically, meaning not through the prism of our knowledge but through the prism of our faith. Because, yes, man is not only a rational being, as reason itself is not explained in definitive and irrevocable terms, thus capable of some sort of knowledge; man is also a being capable of belief, of intuition, of feelings, of contemplation.

Thus, if we look theologically at the definition of the self, we discover a rich and wonderful array of possible ways to say something about the human being. The major theological premise about man is that he was created by God, in God’s image. Based on divine revelation we believe that God is a rational being, sentient, with free will. Being in the image of God, man has the same attributes, not as God has them but at a human, creaturely level. Then, when we speak of potentiality, to use McManus’s terminology for the self again, we understand that God created man with a possibility of becoming. Indeed, the likeness announced by God at man’s creation, according to Christian theology, refers to a possibility that man may reach a state of sanctity that would lead to immortality, as God Himself is holy and immortal. The image was given to man at creation. The likeness was given to him as a possibility for perfection, based on the characteristics of the image.

In his book *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola puts it wonderfully:

We have given you, oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven, nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you

will be able through your own decisions, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine (Pico 1956: 7).

As we can see from the text, the self is, in Pico della Mirandola's view, in constant becoming, it is "a project, a matter of self-definition, in a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation" (Bradatan 2012: 732).

Back to Matthew McManus: The "self is a potentially infinite consciousness attempting to authentically participate in, and understand, the Absolute of God." So, the self attempts to participate authentically. The attempt is an inner drive toward something, it is a longing.

This attempt by the self to participate and understand the Absolute of God requires authenticity. Without it the attempt leads nowhere. Then, what is authenticity, or what is an authentic self, since the participation is that of the self?

One response is to grow in the direction in which man was placed at creation: towards the likeness with God, meaning to live a life of sanctity that leads to immortality, because that is what it means to participate in God's Absolute. And in order to have a holy life man has to follow God's revelation in what concerns him and the life he is supposed to live, more precisely, God's commandments.

The Bible, as God's revelation through His special people, is exactly that: a guide towards a holy life, according to God's will. Authenticity: be as God wants you to be, as He meant you to be according to the existential vocation you received. Vocation is calling; in this context authenticity is when you hear God's call and respond, as a responsible being: Yes! Here I am.

We understand from here that we cannot participate in God if we lack authentic selves. That is the condition, the door to participation.

To participate in God's holiness and glory means to be saved, to be in final and eternal communion with God in His kingdom. Eternal, because in that state of existence man goes from glory to glory, as Gregory of Nyssa put it, and the ascension never ends, *epektasis*, as Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, because God is inexhaustible.

This participation, which is based on and starts from the image of God, meaning it is a rational, voluntary, conscious and deliberate process, implies a synergetic collaboration with God starting in this stage of life here and leading to what the Church Fathers call deification or *theosis*. As St.

Athanasius the Great famously put it: “God became man in Jesus Christ so that in Christ man can become god”. Participation is not disappearance into something else, it is, on the contrary, an existential fulfillment of man with all the gifts he received from God.

As McManus writes, through this participation man also attempts to understand the Absolute of God. To understand means to use reason to make sense of something. In this case of God’s Absolute. But what is this divine Absolute? We have no idea.

When we want to understand something about God, one question could arise: why do we need to understand something about God?

The words are used carefully here; it is not about understanding God which would be like the creature trying to understand the creator, or, as a classic example puts it, like pottery trying to understand the potter. It is about understanding *something* about God’s Absolute, *something* of God.

Another way to refer to God’s Absolute is to speak of the supreme truth. Thomas Joseph White writes that “the noble vocation of the human intelligence is to relentlessly seek the truth” (White 2011: 49). Similarly, Laurie M. Johnson believes that philosophy has to do with man using reason to approach the truth (Johnson 2016: 607).

If truth is part of God’s absolute, and as man is not an absolute being, then, to think about understanding it is a utopia. Yet seeking it, approaching it, is a different story. It can be like living in the divine light without necessarily understanding what that light really is.

McManus speaks of another possibility as well: “Our true desire is to understand ourselves as part of God” (McManus 2016: 61). To be part of God could be interpreted as being immersed in God and becoming one with God by nature with no distinction between the two. This is not what Christian Orthodox theology teaches; but participation could also be interpreted as being in close communion with God, man and God keeping their own distinctions. In fact, when we speak of participation, we never imply transformation of the participant into what he participates in. “Participation” implies becoming “part of” something, but in the case of man’s participation in God in the sense of communion, that implies reception and relation and not in the sense where the part has the same nature as the whole.

As Kierkegaard wrote, the self is ontologically, by structure, a relation: to itself first (James 2011: 591), but then with everything else, culminating in and with God.

This type of understanding is based on the Trinitarian theology according to which God is one person in three hypostases. God is essentially relationship and man being made in the image of the trinitarian God is also essentially, ontologically, a relation, a being-in-relation.

Anoushka von Heuer says the same thing when she writes: “Everything is connected. And intelligence is the ability to discern among all things the links that connect them all” (von Heuer 1980: 61).

The possibility of knowledge

If we speak about understanding and intelligence we have to speak about knowledge.

God, in ancient Greek etymology, means seer, from *theos*, from *theastai*, which means to see. God is almighty because He knows everything, because He understands everything, because He sees everything.

When Adam was asked to name things, he had to name the world. What’s in a name? It is meaning. How does one come to meaning? By knowing. How does one come to know? By seeing.

A. von Heuer summarizes the entire scenario: by naming things, Adam makes them pass from essence to their projection into existence, a fact that we call Knowing (von Heuer 1980: 9). Yet knowing should not be confounded with getting information (Herbst 2015: 649).

From Adam’s job to name all things in the created universe flows our innate aspiration towards universal knowledge (White 2011: 48). However, this knowledge is not possible since we are within a system that does not allow us to look at it from the outside, but only from the inside, and even there, partially. Just as mathematician Herman Bondi put it: it is not possible to know something without knowing everything.

Nicolae Steinhardt explains it in his own way:

The great absolute truths we cannot know due to the Michelson Morley experiment. We are inside the system. We cannot make absolute conclusions as we cannot have certitudes. What can we have? Just intuitions, presuppositions, beliefs (Steinhardt 2008: 208).

We can think of the difference between God's knowledge of the universe as He created it, being outside it, beyond it, and Adam's knowledge, who is only inside the created order and discovers it as he explores it, and then names it. In a sense, what Adam did by naming things is equivalent to what scientists do until today as they explore the world, the universe and give names to their findings. However, what we know, according to Steinhardt, are trivialities such as: the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to one hundred and eighty degrees; the heart has two atriums and two ventricles; or that on an international scale from the six degrees up earthquakes will be devastating, and so on. The big, absolute truths, however, we cannot know (Steinhardt 2008: 207-208).

Rabindranath Tagore put it beautifully in his book *Stray Birds*: "The water in a vessel is sparkling / The water in the sea is dark / The small truth has words that are clear / The great truth has great silence" (CLXXVI).

The superficial or partial character of our knowledge and implicitly of our capacity to know is admitted by Kant in his *Critique of the Pure Reason*, when he wrote: "That by which I know something I cannot know as I know that thing" (see Polka 2016: 583). In other words, I can know things but I cannot know the instrument, the ability that allows me to know. In that case how do I know that I know? What if the instrument through which I know is defect? What if the lens is stained? How can I understand a disease if I don't understand the tools I am using to deal with it? I can have some knowledge about the disease by its effects and manifestations but what if in order to counter its effects I am using devices that I don't understand? Kant's statement raises this question as well: how do we call that by which we know?

He admits that we can know things. Yet what kind of knowledge is that when we discover them little by little and we never know if we achieved full knowledge about them? Let's think of concentric circles. Maybe we get to know the external circle, and the second one inside, and a few more. When do we know precisely that we exhausted all of them? We can also think of the infinite implied in the theory of systems according to which each system, with its two major characteristics: *status quo* and change, is in constant interconnectedness with the other systems, as everything is a system in itself but at the same time part of another system.

Again, Bondi's question: How can we know something without knowing everything?

We could pretend that we know a particular thing when we understood all its possible connections – as a part for example – with everything else out there. That, however, is not possible.

It is just like one would ask: what is the purpose of that thing being there? Or this question: Why do we die? Why are we here?

If we admit that rational thinking allows us to have some kind of knowledge, partial or superficial as it may be, it is also the same rational thinking that would determine us to recognize the limits of our knowledge and that this very limit indicates that every thing, in itself, transcends us. Such kind of realization is called by Thomas Joseph White metaphysical realism as he speaks about our capacity for metaphysical reflection (White 2011: 49-51) and which should be an imperative of any philosophy.

In other words, rational thinking goes up to a certain limit and beyond that we have to rely on intuition and belief. That is why one should not be afraid or shy to accept the compatibility of reason and faith as two complementary tools for man's understanding of the world and of his being in the universe. It is in this context that Nicolae Steinhardt explains that man's specific attribute is the theological thinking (Steinhardt 2008: 209), reminding us that in fact, ontologically, man is a religious being, just as both Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade put it when they spoke of *homo religious*. To combine faith and reason and to live in the perspective of God is only logical since human being, according to Kierkegaard, is "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal" (see James 2011: 592). It is a historical fact that belief in God structured, informed and transformed the human civilization, and as one philosopher warns, "when we lose eternity as a horizon we can end up with totalitarian or individualistic nightmares nurtured by materialism" (see Dietrich 2011: 413).

As image of God, man lives *sub specie aeternitatis* and he cannot take that away from himself. To paraphrase J. P. Sartre, we are condemned to eternity and as such, proving metaphysical realism, man should see eternity as a divine gift and make the best of it in a life lived according to his authentic vocation. Created in the image of God, man is a deiform being

and his calling is to keep that form and make it shine and thus speak of God in the place God assigned him for his destiny.

Human dignity

Human dignity is an entitlement that we have by virtue of our mere existence. However, to paraphrase A. Heschel, it is not the fact that we are human beings that is important and that confers dignity: rather it is being human that is important and brings about dignity (see Damian 2017: 131).

Entitlement implies receiving a title as when you do something meritorious and someone else gives you a distinction. However, in man's case, being the image of God, the dignity is an existential feature and a title does not come from man's meritorious acts but it is a divine gift. In a sense, just like one inherits a title, let's say as in a royal family, without any special merit of one's own.

The Church Fathers see the human dignity at creation, where in contrast to everything else that God created through the Word, for man's creation, God not only spoke but also worked "physically", taking clay and fashioning man and then breathing on him the breath of life. That narrative indicates that man is above everything else in the created order.

Gregory of Nazianzus goes even further to explain that as man is made in the image of God he is kin with God (*syngenia*), hence his special dignity.

This dignity is a kind of glory that is inherent in the human being. In one hymn from the orthodox funeral ritual one can find this singularly beautiful definition of man that reflects dignity in glory: "The image of Your ineffable glory I am, o God, even though I bear the wounds of sin." In other words, man's sin does not take away the inherent dignity he has, but only darkens-and diminishes it. It is up to man to use his freedom and put the divine gifts in him at work in such a way as to make that glory and dignity shine as intended at origin. And the place where this can happen is the world, where man, who is not an island, interacts with others.

As Johannes Gründel stated, the human being is oriented toward the encounter (Gründel 1973: 51); as image of the trinitarian God, man is a being-in-relation. Again, paraphrasing Sartre, we can say that man is condemned to relation. Without relation there is no fundamental understanding of anything (von Heuer 1980: 38).

Yet being in relation requires the highest art of all arts. Man is meant to be a builder of communion, a community maker and that seems to be the hardest thing to do in particular in a world where relations are more like collisions than harmony and cooperation. Indeed, it takes intelligence, strength, faith, seriousness, dedication, humility, patience, understanding, love and hope, readiness to serve and other virtues derived from those in order to be a factor of cohesion in such a difficult and fragmented world as ours. But this is exactly where human dignity resides.

Andreas Niederberger puts it in simple and powerful words: man's moral obligation is to not dominate others if he wants to live a life of self-respect (Niederberger 2015: 522). The 11th commandment: do not try to dominate!

Conclusion

Man does not possess his own self. (Fortunately, because, as Karl Barth says, whatever man possesses he destroys). As image of God, man is a mystery to himself. Yet he is called to explore that mystery, not to explain it, so that he can discover his authentic vocation in life which requires him to transcend knowledge as it is commonly understood, meaning to become metaphysically realistic and keeping his original dignity by building a cruciform type of relationship: on the horizontal with his fellow man, and based on that, on the vertical, with God.

References:

- Bradatan, Costica. 2012. "On Margins and Marginals". In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 17, nr. 5: 732.
- Damian, Theodor. 2017. *Gregory of Nazianzus' Poetry and His Human Face in It*. New York: Theotokos Press.
- Dietrich, Donald J. 2011. "Book review of *A Very Brief History of Eternity* by Carlos Eire, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2010". In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 16, nr. 3: 413.
- Gründel, Johannes. 1973. *Peut-on changer la morale?*. Paris: Cerf/Desclée.
- Herbst, Marcel. 2015. "The enigma of Knowledge" (book review of *Handbook of Knowledge and Economics*, ed. by Richard Arena, Agnès Fastré and Nathalie Lazaric, Edward Elgar Press, Cheltenham UK, 2012). In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 20, nr. 5-6: 649.
- Heschel, Abraham. 1965. *Who is man*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- James, David. 2011. "The Self-Positing Self in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*". In: *The European Legacy*, vol 16, nr. 5: 591.
- Johnson, Laurie M. 2016. "Book review for *A World without Why* by Raymond Geuss, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2014". In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 21, nr. 4-6, August-September: 607.
- McManus, Matthew. 2016. "Becoming to Belong. On the Relation between Infinite Consciousness and the Absolute". In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 21, nr. 1: 52.
- Niederberger, Andreas. 2015. "Esse servitutis omnis impatientem/ Man is impatient of all servitude: Human Dignity as a Path to Modernity in Ficino and Pico della Mirandola?". In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 20, nr. 5-6: 522.
- Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. 1956. *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Chicago: Gateway.
- Polka, Bryton. 2016. "How Do We Know What We Know?" (book review of *The Unpredictable species. What Makes Humans Unique*, by Philip Lieberman, Princeton, Univ. Press, Princeton, NY 2012). In: *The European Legacy*, vol. 21, nr. 5-6, August-September: 583.
- Steinhardt, Nicolae. 2008. *Jurnalul fericitirii [The Happiness Diary]*. Iassy: Mrea Rohia and Polirom.
- von Heuer, Anoushka. 1980. *Le huitième jour ou la dette d'Adam*. Geneve: Jean-Luc de Rougemont.
- White, Thomas Joseph. 2011. "Whether Faith Needs Philosophy". In: *The First Things*, nr. 215, August-September: 49.

