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The Trinity of Human Ontology: Relationships, Identity, and Meaning

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Abstract: To be human requires relationships, identity, and meaning; a trinity that is exemplified by God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Within our postmodern post-Christian, and individualistic culture, relational connectivity is unequivocally lacking. Such lack has resulted in the loss identity, initiating a loss of meaning, therein leading to the loss of ourselves. Utilizing the insights of sociology, psychology, and Christian theology, I will discuss an integrative understanding of humanity's ontology, regarding relationships, identity, and meaning.

Introduction

The postmodern, post-Christian, and individualistic culture we find ourselves in has created a void of relationships with reverberating consequences. Postmodern culture tells us we need to “leave it all behind to go find ourselves,” when according to Scripture, we need to “remain connected to find ourselves” (Prov. 27:17; Ecc. 4:9-12; Jn. 13:34-35; Jn. 15:1-17; Heb. 10:23-25). Should we lose relationships, as is perpetuated within our postmodern, post-Christian culture, we will lose ourselves. The ontology of humanity requires relationships, identity, and meaning, a trinity that is exemplified by the Holy Trinity.

As Newton's Third Law informs us, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The loss of relational connectivity in our culture has initiated a reaction resulting in the loss of personal identity. The loss of personal identity has initiated a reaction resulting in the loss of individual and communal meaning. For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss the place of relationship in understanding human ontology.

Relationship

Only in relationship with others does one recognize his or her uniqueness.¹ One only recognizes their uniqueness in relationship with others. Relationships inform us of who we are in the face of crisis, challenge, success, fear, hope, and so forth. A person knows they are selfish, or kind, or capable, because person-to-person interaction informs them of such.

Alfred Adler, the father of Individual Psychology, was among the first theorists to understand the unity of the person as being contingent upon relational connectivity to others and the world. Individual Psychology largely rests upon the concept of social interest, seeing persons as incapable of reaching true success or happiness without such. *Social interest* is “the capacity to cooperate and contribute to something bigger than oneself.”² Social interest is done out of equal concern regarding the needs of others alongside the needs of oneself. Humanity’s happiness and success are dependent upon the indivisibility of the individual among others, as one is embedded within the whole of humanity and cannot be understood in isolation.

“Since we can trace the embodiment of human personhood back to the creation of humanity, it must follow a particular paradigm, that which was intended by the One who created it.”³ Genesis 1:26 states, “Then God said, ‘Then God said, let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’”⁴ Two ontological elements are seen within this one verse. The first element is that of the “Our” language, as God is clearly not speaking to Himself in singular language, rather to the existence of others and their *relational* image. Although, there is no clear consensus on the proper understanding of the “our” language the understanding within this paper’s context views God “speaking as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (i.e. the Trinity of the Christian tradition) or in some kind of early recognition of plurality within the Godhead.”⁵ Notably, the plural connotation of the “our language” is occasionally understood in terms of the “royal we,” however, such an idiomatic expression within Ancient Near East

¹ Jack Balswick, Pamela Reimer, and Kevin Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2016), 39.

² Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 10th ed. (Cengage, 2017), 102.

³ Nate Collins, *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Zondervan, 2017), 186.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New American Standard Version.

⁵ Mark Harris, “The Biblical Text and a Functional Account of the Imago Dei,” in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Stanley P. Rosenberg (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2018), 52.

culture is difficult to verify.⁶ Additional considerations have noted the plural address as denoting the heavenly assembly of angels – a common perspective from the Hebrew Bible (i.e. 1 Kings 22:19-22).⁷ However, co-creating with the heavenly assembly of angles contradicts the overarching message the Creation Narrative within Genesis as well as Scripture as a whole. Additionally, as seen in John 1:1-3 a relational image origin is expressed, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

The second ontological element denoted within Genesis 1:26 is one of intentionality and *meaning*, as it is from intentionality and meaning that humanity is created. In other words, it is within a purposed (meaningful) decisive (intentional) act that God created humanity in His image and likeness. In the context of Genesis one, humanity is being taken out of nothing and given meaning via the relational image imparted upon them. In Genesis 1:2 the Hebrew combination *tohu vavohu* (formless and empty) hermeneutically implies wilderness or wasteland (Deut. 32:10; Job 6:18); results of destruction (Jer. 4:23); or things that have no meaning or purpose (Is. 41:29).⁸ A common thread when *tohu vavohu* is used in Scripture is that of something which lacks order or purpose (i.e. lacks meaning).

Material existence does not necessarily equate to meaningful existence. “The starting condition in Genesis 1:2, the pre-creation situation that describes nonexistence, is a condition that is not (necessarily⁹) lacking material. Rather, it is a situation that is lacking order and purpose.”¹⁰ In other words, when read in its historical context, *tohu vavohu* may not simply refer to immaterial nothingness, but rather what is meaningless and without purpose. *Existence*, therefore, within an ancient Israel perspective, can be inferred as that which now maintains a meaningfully ordered relationship. As God ordered creation into relationship via night and day; earth and sky; land and water; so too He placed humanity in relationship with one another and Himself.

However, as quickly as relational order was created it began to unravel. The loss of relationship began when sin entered the human story in Genesis 3.

⁶ Scott Swain, “Is the Trinity in Genesis 1?” The Gospel Coalition, January, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/trinity-genesis-1/>

⁷ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 133-34.

⁸ John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origin Debate* (InterVarsity Academic, 2015).

⁹ Author added.

¹⁰ Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 28.

As Eve ate the fruit, and Adam following suit, an immediate break of the person-to-person relationship, as well as the person-to-Creator relationship occurred. The beauty of the Genesis 3 story is, of course, that just as immediately as the relational break occurred God set into action a plan to remedy the break through the culmination of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Through Jesus Christ all relational brokenness is restored, even if the fulfillment is unable to be fully known until the day all things are remade in the new creation.¹² Relational brokenness is restored in Jesus Christ as isolation and loneliness were never an original plan of the created order.

Relationship Redefined

Although relational loss is nothing new to the human condition, the embrace of an isolationist culture is fairly new. This embrace has occurred, not because humanity has adapted beyond created order, nor because relational connectivity is no longer needed for personal identity and meaning, but because lesser truths have been accepted. Such an acceptance has occurred due to humanity's creative ability to redefine personal health and societal progress. As Philip Rieff, a Jewish sociologist points out regarding progress, "in fact, evil and immorality are disappearing, mainly because our culture is changing its definition of human perfection."¹³

The redefining of human perfection happened to reduce what Social Psychology terms *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance is experienced when two conflicting cognitions occur simultaneously, therein causing distress or anxiety.¹⁴ For example, the individual that wants to become physically healthier, but happens to also think donuts taste great will face cognitive dissonance when they drive past the local Krispy Kreme donut shop and see the "hot and fresh" sign on. The individual will face mental distress or anxiety due to thinking of becoming healthier while also thinking that just one more donut will not hurt. As a result, the individual will likely attempt to reduce the tensions felt due to the cognitive dissonance in one of two ways: (1) either change both cognitions to make them more compatible with one another (i.e. "There are worse things I could eat to be unhealthy, donuts aren't that bad.") or (2) add more cognitions to help the original two cooperate (i.e. "I'll eat this donut, but workout later so it won't be that big of a deal."). In either case the

¹¹ Genesis 3:15.

¹² Colossians 1:17.

¹³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (ISI Books, 2006), 6.

¹⁴ Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 11th ed. (Worth, 2012), 180.

reduction of cognitive dissonance is a direct result of shifting thoughts to ensure comfort with the desired outcome is achieved.

Redefining has occurred regarding relationships because the cognitive dissonance concerning being known in such a context provokes too much discomfort. Relationships require authenticity and accountability, two states which are often quite uncomfortable. Sigmund Freud, the father of Psychoanalytic Theory, provided the masses with an alternative definition of relationship, one that predominantly ushered in the postmodern perspective. Freud believed that the modern individual, when faced with the challenge of merging one's life into community, would find such an experience potentially guilt inducing and suffocating. Therefore, Freud encouraged the modern individual to use the community as a place for self-enhancement – always aiming at self-enrichment and self-service rather than accountability or authenticity.¹⁵ This inward turn wherein the self is the highest sought-after relationship has created in many ways a culture that loves the self too much. As McMinn states in *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, “to be healthy, we need to move beyond a preoccupation with the self.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, in order to reduce this discomfort, a redefining of what constitutes healthy relational connectivity developed, social media being a prime example for today. Social media promised greater connection in a more psychologically safe environment for the self; however, it has equated to greater feelings of isolation at greater numbers than ever documented in human history.¹⁷ “If technology promised greater connection, it has delivered greater alienation. If it promised greater cohesion, it has led to greater fragmentation, both on a communal and individual level.”¹⁸

Should one think “I want to have authentic relationships with others” yet simultaneously think that “I only want the good parts of me to be known by others,” the anxiety of cognitive dissonance will be experienced as the two thoughts are psychologically inconsistent. Social Learning Theory informs us that should the greater society (i.e. an individualistic society) perpetuate one thought over another as being more acceptable the individual will likely choose the societally supported thought even if that thought is not the most personally preferred. In other words, when one's desires conflict with one another, they

¹⁵ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 44.

¹⁶ Mark McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Tyndale, 2011), 52.

¹⁷ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (Random House, 2018).

¹⁸ Patricia Snow, “Look at Me: On Our Need for Real Presence in a Distracted World” *First Things*, May 2016, 2. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/05/look-at-me>.

will look to a larger authority for determining a course of action. The larger authority within Social Learning Theory is one's social system. I should note here that the act of looking to an external authority, even if the external is an individualistic society, implies the relationality of personhood. The person, amidst uncertainty, looks to an external for validation of personal choice (i.e. a validation of who they have chosen to be – a validation of *identity*).

Relationship Culture

Postmodern post-Christian culture has seen that we have lowered not just our definitions, but lowered the authorities in our lives as well. As we have sought to reestablish what feels comfortable we have moved away from a relationship with a perfect God who has called us to lives of holiness, “so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ In culture's fight for comfort, we have hidden, as Adam and Eve, from one another and from our Creator. In culture's fight for comfort we have not found ourselves; rather we have lost our identity amidst the isolation.

Within what Rieff would declare is the third world²⁰ culture, *fiction* reigns supreme rather than *faith*.²¹ *Faith* was declarative of Rieff's ascribed second world culture, a culture that was ushered almost entirely out of existence in the early-mid 1900s as the postmodern era began. Fiction reigns supreme in the third world because there are no absolute truths or interdicts within this particular culture. Second world was a culture that understood the vertical of authority and therein the personal responsibility to live in relationship with the Creator, as well as creation.

Humanity within second world *faith* is understood as possessing the *imago Dei*, the very image of God. Being created as an *imago Dei* brings

¹⁹ 1 Peter 1:7.

²⁰ Philip Rieff describes the history of the world as having traversed through three overarching cultures: fate, faith, and fiction. Culture, according to Rieff, is that which possess the power to supply the messages of how to live, respond, and believe. Rieff defines each culture as a world of their own. The first world of *fate* is defined by pagan religious practices which believed in mythic gods (i.e. Greek gods and goddesses) wherein one simply hoped in fate that they might find favor in the gods' eyes. The second world of *faith*, is defined by trust and obedience to one absolute authority, the one and only God who acts in history by law and grace. The third world of *fiction* is defined as a world without sacred order, a world made up of fantasy to suit the individual wherein truths are constructed or deconstructed at will (arguably, postmodernism).

²¹ Philip Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks* (University of Virginia Press, 2006).

implications depending upon where one stands within such a perspective. A primary implication of the *imago Dei* within theology is that of relationship. The Christian view of the *imago Dei* understands all of human development to stem from the relationality of the Trinity. Depending upon which world (second or third) one chooses to live in, one will, as James K. A. Smith states, “be disposed to see others as neighbors, as image-bearers of God, whose very faces call to me in a way that is transcendent, or I will have a take on others as competitors, threats, impositions on my autonomy.”²² As one’s relationship with the vertical authority is eliminated, the capacity to view others (the self included) as sacred and purposed beings diminishes.

Relationship Loss

As noted above, impositions upon one’s autonomy are a primary fear of many individuals. The fear of losing oneself to another or of being absorbed at the cost of self elimination is not uncommon. This common fear is the fuel for the isolationist culture in which we have found ourselves. However, as the Gospel of John²³ clearly communicates, it is not in isolation or individualism that we will find ourselves, rather it is in relationship. Through relationship with God and others, self-awareness and a strengthening of each person’s particularities are possible. “We are unified not for assimilation or homogenization but for relationship with others – relationship that does not subvert but establishes and affirms the other, whether God or humans.”²⁴

Existential therapy perpetuates the need for relationship in the healing process, declaring that it is the very *presence* of the therapist that is cathartic. The presence of the therapist allows clients to reconnect to their pain where avoidance would have typically occurred, as well as provides opportunities for transformation of the pain.²⁵ Clients will often learn healthy boundaries, empathy, and responsibility by observing and interacting with the counselor. “In this sense, a good counselor is a minister of God’s grace, even to those who know nothing of a gracious God.”²⁶

The very fear that prevents an individual from joining into relationships with others, that of self-erasure, actually becomes realized when avoidance results in isolation. This fear, founded within the human imagination and perpetuated within modern society comes to fruition in a loss of the self. “It is

²² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Baker, 2013), 36.

²³ John 5.

²⁴ Balswick et al., *The Reciprocating Self*, 38.

²⁵ Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 149.

²⁶ McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, 58.

clear how wise the ancients in the tradition of Jerusalem were to see the second commandment as itself next in importance to the self-revelation of the I; that identity upon I AM THAT I AM (Ex. 3:14), which all our otherwise incommunicable and irreducible identities are founded in the God-relation of our inwardness.”²⁷ In other words, through relationship with the Creator, identities are established not diminished, which is a characteristic of the *imago Dei* that humanity is capable of perpetuating to one another as well.

Within the relational understanding of the Trinity there is unity and diversity, the same is imparted upon humanity when lived in context of the created order. The differentiation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just as essential as their unity as one Godhead. *Differentiation* within Family Systems Theory is defined as when an individual is uniquely themselves yet remains part of a greater system. Should an individual not be uniquely themselves and become absorbed by the system, a breakdown of the individual, system, and ultimately larger relational eco-system will unfold. This breakdown is due to what family systems calls un-differentiation or *enmeshment*. Enmeshment occurs when individuals within a given system do not know where one begins and the other ends. The breakdown that unfolds as a result of enmeshment is termed many things within psychology: codependence, enabling, denial, and role confusion to name a few. Should an individual choose to be themselves only and without connectivity to the greater system a different breakdown occurs. This breakdown due to lack of connectivity is labeled *disengagement*. When one is disengaged then the capacity for intimately knowing or being known is lost.

Enmeshment or disengagement are two ends of the same spectrum of relational dysfunction, each stemming from a lack of healthy connectivity and each typically in reaction to relational fears. Differentiation in relationship is the goal, a goal which eliminates the fear that autonomy might be lost if one does not completely cut off from others as the search for the self ensues. Specifically, in a theological understanding of relationship, differentiation does not remove the individual from a given system for self-revelation, rather it empowers the individual to become fully themselves amidst such. “Everything is created by God to be and become what it is, and not another. We are distinct and particular beings.”²⁸ A reciprocating-self perspective is paramount to understanding how this type of lifestyle is to be accomplished. The reciprocating-self notion views personal relationships as based on mutual covenanting lived out in an atmosphere of mutual grace and mutual empowering, then each person in the relationship is drawn to freely communicate and express himself or herself to the other. The relationship is

²⁷ Rieff, *My Life Among the Deathworks*, 130.

²⁸ Balswick, et al., *The Reciprocating Self*, 42.

one of intimate knowing and being known. Not only are differences accepted but uniqueness is valued and respected in a way that confirms the other person.²⁹

Conclusion

Rather than move toward loving relationships with one another, the human temptation is to avoid relationships out of fear, pain, or personal insecurities. The tendency to do so is perpetuated within our postmodern post-Christian culture as an illusion of truly finding oneself *by* oneself. However, a theological understanding of our created order exemplifies that we were not created to be alone. The very ontology of humanity requires relationship, as humanity establishes humanity. In other words, there is very little in the human structure that induces one to embrace perspectives or values within isolation. In fact, through examining childhood development, we see “when children are nested within human community, they generally take on the attitudes and behaviors of that community.”³⁰

We have been created in the image of the Creator God, an image which declares relationship, identity, and meaning go hand in hand. When we lose connectivity to one another we lose identity. Without a knowledge of identity, we lose an understanding of the meaning for which we were created. Relationships create identity, identity creates meaning, meaning is lived out in relationship. We are designed to exist in, and derive our sense of identity from, our web of relations to others, in a way that is patterned after the very being of God as the Holy Trinity of love.

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²⁹ Balswick, et al., *The Reciprocating Self*, 72.

³⁰ Balswick, et al., *The Reciprocating Self*, 102.