

Introduction: From the Modern and Postmodern Selves to the Transmodern Self

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In the broadest sense, this book addresses the modern and postmodern selves; the crises and dilemmas that confront them; and, finally, the recapturing of the self within a new, positive framework. This is, of course, a large topic with many important dimensions, which are treated in the essays that follow. Here, however, I will present in a simple, brief way the central core issue: namely, the serious weaknesses of the modern and postmodern selves. I will then take up, again briefly, an answer to the problem; this answer will be called the “transmodern self” throughout this book.

First, 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 subcategory, 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 subcategory or component of the self. But for our purposes they will be generally interchangeable.

THE MODERN SELF

We begin with what is commonly called “the modern self.” This is the familiar self, which has been around for at least a couple of centuries. Many historians place the beginning of the modern self in the period of the Renaissance and Reformation. (For a scholarly historical treatment, see Charles Taylor 1989; for an insightful summary, see Gil Bailie in this volume.) The modern self is characterized by such things as freedom and autonomy, by a strong will, and by the presumption that the self is self-created by the will, operating freely in its construction. The self is assumed to be strong, capable, and above all coherent; it is also largely conscious and heavily indebted to reason or at least reasonableness. Perhaps, as already implied, the self began in what is called the “Renaissance Man,” but in recent years

it has become the presumed goal or ideal of almost everyone. This is the self of self-actualization, of self-fulfillment. It has, of course, strong American roots going back to the Declaration of Independence and to the notion of the self-made man, and it was often explicitly articulated and praised by the American Transcendentalists.

The critique of the modern self has also become familiar (see Vitz 1977, 1994; Lasch 1978; Bellah et al. 1985). Three dilemmas or weaknesses are of particular concern. The first is that the modern self commonly leads to social alienation or isolation or loneliness because this self emphasizes separation: the breaking of bonds to become independent and supposedly autonomous. Second, the modern self decomposes society into isolated individuals and destroys social solidarity, neighborhoods, civic concern, and relationships of all kinds. Third, this idea of the self simply fails to understand how we, as selves or persons, are created by our personal relationships, our culture, and our language. In other words, the modern self is undergoing a crisis of intellectual legitimacy since social reality makes the whole notion of pure autonomy quite unconvincing.

THE POSTMODERN SELF

Although the term “postmodern” is hard to define, and although it contains different strands of thought, I will use it in a relatively straightforward and familiar way. By “postmodern” I mean a form of late modern or hypermodern thought and mentality. This postmodern mentality is characterized by a rejection of universal truth and objectivity and by a rejection of systematic, binding morality. In other words, for the postmodern, both truth and morality are true or good only for the individual. We have all run into this phenomenon: People say, “That’s okay for you, that is your truth; this is mine” or “That’s your moral system; I have mine.” This particular strand of postmodernity has been traced back to Frederick Nietzsche and the notion that, as Dostoyevsky wrote, “If God does not exist, everything is permissible.”

The postmodern also rejects all large theories: Marxism, socialism, libertarianism, and, of course, Christianity and other religious worldviews. It rejects all the grand narratives, all the big stories that are supposed to describe how we live, or should live.

Postmodernism also rejects the authority of the author with respect to understanding a text. Indeed, it rejects the idea that a text has an author in an authoritative sense. In some literary forms of postmodernism, theorists criticize what they would call any “privileged interpretation,” any general interpretation; instead they claim that the individual reader is free to

determine the interpretation just as the individual reader determines, say, truth or goodness or beauty. Not only truth and the moral life but also the meanings of the text are relativized.

This critique of general or universal interpretations by the postmodernists is actually aimed at the secular modern Enlightenment mentality. Though the postmodernist might criticize Christianity in terms of its worldview, Christianity itself is not seen as a suitable target because it is not understood as an important player in today's intellectual world. It is precisely because such theorists spend their time criticizing modernism that postmodernism is a kind of late modernism. It uses the "logic" of modernism itself to deconstruct modernity. These theorists are going after the Enlightenment understanding of objective reality, science, reason, and the other concepts that have developed from it.

Because it is primarily a critical and sometimes even nihilistic movement, I have often referred to postmodernism as "morbid modernism." Despite this relatively negative tone, postmodernism has nonetheless provided many valuable insights into the limits of reason, of science, and into the power structures that often lie behind objective systems of knowledge used in the service of goals or values that are far from objective. Much of postmodern thought, therefore, has been a kind of creative destruction. It has often served as an exposé, in the best sense of the term. And it certainly allows a much larger intellectual framework within which everyone, including Christians, can function. It provides a much bigger framework than that which existed fifty or a hundred years ago when the enlightenment rationalistic understanding of life was all that was seriously accepted. Retrospectively, the modern worldview can now be seen as a much narrower and more limited one than its adherents were willing to admit. But how does this postmodern attitude relate to the self, which is our primary topic?

Postmodern psychologists are among those who have criticized the modern self, although, as we shall see, their own constructions are not especially satisfactory. For most of us, the self has been considered a kind of unthought-about reality, intrinsically there. After all, we have magazines named after basic realities: we have *Time*, *Life*, *Money*, and we have *Self*. So these concepts should be solid. But that is not how postmodernists are thinking. For example, Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1998), one of the major critics of the self, proposes that the new self that is emerging be called the "saturated" self—a self that no longer has a coherent center. Gergen (1991) writes,

With postmodern consciousness the last few decades begins the erasure of the category of self. . . . [W]e realize increasingly that who and what we are is not [so] much the result of our "personal

essence” . . . but how we are constructed in various social groups. The initial stages of this consciousness result in a sense of the self as a social con artist manipulating images to achieve ends. As a category of “real self” continues to recede from view, however, one acquires a pastiche-like personality. (170)

Gergen thus characterizes the contemporary self as no longer coherent and integrated. It is a self without a center, created by a huge variety of interactions with different groups and environments. Gergen notes three important characteristics of this self. The first is “polyvocality” (1998); that is, the new self has many voices. There is no longer the voice of conscience; or if there is, it is drowned out by the many other voices that we have. This polyvocality comes from the variety of people we are dealing with, from the media we are bombarded by, from the cacophony created by the new channels of information (e.g., cable television, the internet). One of the important points made by Gergen is that the older modern self is dying in large part from the effects of the new technology, which, he proposes, is causing much of the disintegration of our identity. (For specific ways in which technology is undermining the modern self, see the essays by Kent L. Norman and John Bechtold in this volume.)

Second, we are also more plastic, according to Gergen. By “plastic” he means that because we are dealing with so many different groups and worldviews, we constantly create new ways of self-presentation and self-interaction. We do not live in a reliable social environment any more. We live in a world of new groups that require not only that we accept their points of view and set up internal polyvocality, but also that we become a plastic person, with a kind of chameleon self. It is as though we are all morphing into politicians: as we try to look good to many different groups of people, we lose integrity.

For example, an article in the *New York Times* reported that a number of major corporations have an 800 number to respond to people who call in to ask questions, but the corporations were discovering that the cost of hiring young American women to answer the phones and direct inquiries was too expensive. So they off-shored this job of answering the phones to a place in southern India. And, of course, they found a fair number of young women there who could speak English well. To facilitate their work of answering Americans’ questions, these women watched American television assiduously in order to understand how to speak American-ese and how to talk about different topics. All the operators also created false American identities; they had an American first and last name, an American town they lived in, American schools they had gone to. Each created an

entirely new identity for this new job and new medium. I don't know what this is going to do to traditional India, to small-village Indian identity. But here we certainly have plasticity! Likewise, many people get on the Internet now and create different identities, different names, different roles and personal stories. For example, "Today I'll be a 45-year old lesbian looking for a lover." They bend genders, they create new identities, and they often have several of these "persons" going on the internet at the same time. It is this kind of plasticity that Gergen identifies.

A third characteristic of the new postmodern self is its transient nature. Obviously, high-tech media identities often do not last long. Within two or three years, perhaps, those young Indian women will have another job or will have gone on to college or gotten married—and they will have lost their old American "identity." There is a great sense of transience that flows from the new media and also from the frequent relocations in the corporate world. Even if one stays put geographically, the corporate world does not allow people much of a fixed identity within a given company because of mergers and similar corporate "morphs." One must recreate who one is. If one has lost his identity, for example, as an executive for Enron or Lucent, he must find a new way to make a living—and with the new job, a new self. It is becoming uncommon for workers or executives to spend all their working life at one company. These are all conditions causing slippage in the coherence of the self; this is the postmodern incoherence that Gergen describes as the source of the saturated self.

Another postmodern psychologist, Philip Cushman (1990, 1995), describes a different kind of self: the "empty" self. The traditional self, according to Cushman, was the self of relatively stable families and stable community life. A hundred years ago most people still lived in small towns or on farms where they had reliable traditional family lives. Everybody knew who the Smiths were: they had lived in Elmtown for three generations, maybe more. People knew one's uncles and aunts, the quirks and characteristics of one's family. Because of the stability of interpersonal relationships, there was stability to the self as well. But as we moved into the modern city, we lost that stability, and the self became empty. In the city, nobody knew who the Smiths were, they didn't know where Elmtown was, and people couldn't talk about their family: it had no meaning to other people. In this environment we began to search for a new identity. The modern identity, according to Cushman, was created by two new social institutions centered in the city. One was advertising and consumerism. Increasingly, what was meant by "image" advertising was the finding of an identity, a self, through the products one bought and the services one consumed. From the "Marlboro Man" to "I drive an Eddie Bauer jeep," we have gotten to know who we are. The

logo on a Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt tells us who we are. Do we own a barn jacket, even if we live in New York City where there is not a barn for fifty miles? (This aspect of modern identity—the consumerist self—is treated in this volume by David Burns.) In short, we get identity now through the commercial, advertising, and consumer world.

The other social institution that created modern identity, according to Cushman, was psychotherapy. Psychology gave us a self because we discovered who our family was and what our early childhood experiences were. Today, recovery groups are filled with people who can't talk about the Smiths from Elmtown but can talk about their dysfunctional family. You can talk about your inner child and how you had an alcoholic father and how your mother was a terrible enabler. Psychology gives us an identity constructed from our own, often painful, childhood and family memories. This identity is largely negative about, or critical of, the family, while at the same time it satisfies our own need to be of central importance.

Cushman claims that these two makers of the self have failed. As modernism ends, the self is shown to be increasingly empty. The problem with consumerism is that under its reign our desires—our always wanting more—are never satisfied. In fact, this is what advertising is about: keeping one permanently unhappy with one's identity and hence searching for a new product that will finally give one a truly satisfying self. Obviously, there is something very wrong with this quest, and many are beginning to become aware of it: thus, our emptiness and our knowledge of that emptiness. In addition, Cushman thinks that psychology too has become empty as a source of substantive identity. (An especially thoughtful critique of the weakness of much of the psychotherapeutic concept of self-love is given in this volume by David M. Holley.) What Cushman is saying is that the self as a modern construct has no lasting authenticity. It exists only in the way our particular society at this time in history creates who we are.

Cushman points out that one of the other forces behind the collapse of the modern self is the collapse of the modern family. It is not just technology with all its options that is creating the disintegrating self described by Gergen. Cushman and others note that one of the other determinants of this empty searching self is the social pathology in our families. The impact of divorce and of single-parent families and all kinds of blended families has marginalized the socially determined, stable self. These theorists are not talking about abstractions; rather, they are talking about two social realities that have impacted society and culture. Both technology and the proportion of people growing up with family pathologies have greatly reduced the stability of the self.

Robert Landy (1993), another postmodern psychologist, argues that there isn't any self at all. He claims that there is no such thing as a self; there are only social roles, and one plays these social roles well or not so well. Landy, who directs the drama therapy program at New York University, maintains that these roles are similar to roles in the theater. According to him, all we have are social roles. This notion is not unlike the understanding of the self in some other cultures, where people seem to have one role in one setting and another in another setting. In such cultures, the self is a collection of roles without a center. Landy admits that there is a sort of executive function that chooses among different roles, but it is not an authentic self. In fact, Landy explicitly argues that the very concept of the authentic self is inauthentic.

Implicit in all postmodern critiques is the assumption that postmodern types of changes in the self should be observable in today's culture, especially in young people. Two empirical studies that investigate this issue are found in the essays by Jim Norwine and associates, the other by Sherri B. Lantinga.

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of these theorists, they point out that identity and the integrity of the self are for many becoming quite vague. Most of us have heard things like, "Look, I know that when we were married I promised to love you, but this is ten years later and I am a different person now, and so are you." Such statements imply that there is a weak sense of identity across a ten-year period. This loss of the integrated self is the loss of stability, not only in the individual but also in his or her relationships with others. Some theorists are beginning to worry about this loss because the morphing self calls into question the basic idea of a contract. How can one make a contract if one becomes a different person every few years? After all, if one has changed his signature, or his name, or even his sex, is he the same person? These questions raise serious issues about personal stability.

In sum, there are major problems with 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 no systematic intellectual rationale, instead it recognizes only total individual autonomy. (This weakness is exploited by postmodern critics.)

4. Finally, modern theorists of the self had little understanding of the formation of the adult social self within a cultural and historical context. (This is the major basis of the postmodern critique.)

THE TRANSMODERN PERSON

As an answer to the modern and postmodern problem, we should consider an alternative understanding of the person, one that has been emerging since the 1990s. I use the term “transmodern” to describe this new vision of the person and perhaps the new historical mentality that will follow the postmodern period (Vitz 1995a, 1995b, 1998). Transmodern means a new understanding that *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 often of a higher, transcendent nature—sometimes explicitly theological or spiritual 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.

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. William Hurlbut, whose integration of science and spiritual anthropology is included in this volume, asks the question: How does the self originate and develop over time?

The importance of the human body has been ignored in theories of the self (problem no. 2 above). 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 nonver-

bal, and this early sense of individuality or self is also biological, that is, rooted in perceptual 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 term acknowledges 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. (For more on the body-based self, see my essay as well as that by Glenn Weaver in this volume.)

Another important early understanding that develops in the infant at about the same time is the beginning of the interpersonal self (problem no. 1). Even before speech has begun, the infant and the mother (or mother figure) begin interacting in a way that is protoconversational. 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 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. (For outstanding treatments of the interpersonal nature of self in the work of Girard and Bakhtin, see the essays by Gil Bailie and Caryl Emerson in this volume. Karen Coats's essay discusses the central relevance of love to self-formation; and Bert H. Hodges presents the importance of interpersonal relationships to self-formation.)

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

The third problem mentioned is that the modern self has lacked any systematic intellectual rationale. Historically, 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 disem-

bodied 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. 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 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, that is, 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.

In the last few decades, a new Christian rationale for the importance of relationships to the nature of person has emerged out of trinitarian theology. Thomas Torrance (1983, 1985) is an example from the Protestant perspective. Concurrently, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI, 1970, 1990) and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II 1979; see also Connor's translation and interpretation [1992] of Wojtyła) have provided a similar Catholic trinitarian interpretation of person. 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. (In this collection there are two such trinitarian interpretations: one by Mark Lowery and another by Steve Stratton.)

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.

THE SOLUTION TO THE MODERN/POSTMODERN SELF/PERSON

In this volume, the authors will take up the challenge of proposing a solution to the modern and postmodern dilemma of the self. The solution will be developed from various perspectives, as summarized below.

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 Neothomist 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 1998, 15–17).

PART 3: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RATIONALE

The visual-acoustic proprioceptive self, derived from 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 selves/persons in interpersonal relationships.

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, for instance oxytocin. Thus, we are biologically based in our bodies and in relationships that 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.