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Shallows and Depths
The Rise of (Post) Modern Images of Humanity

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> What man tells himself he is
> manifests itself soon enough in what he does
> and may even predetermine what he can do.
>
> Richard Weaver

Modern understandings of the essence of humanity and the nature of the self are the result of complex interactions of numerous social and intellectual forces. Before attempting to identify some of these, my premise is that the self is formed in the matrix of the self's encounter with the "not-self" which the self apprehends as "reality." While it is obvious that selves interpret, reinterpret, and redefine the nature and boundaries of their reality, less obvious is the fact that such interpretations, redefinitions, and reinterpretations are driven by forces which operate consciously and unconsciously.

Perhaps apparent but of critical importance is the fact that redefinitions of reality inevitably entail redefinitions of the self. While the reverse should also be true theoretically, i.e., redefinitions of the self entail redefinitions of reality, on a practical level self-consciousness and self-reflection are more intentional and sophisticated moves than the self's initial encounter with and apprehension of "external" reality (although this unquestionably presumes and is shaped by the "self"). In practice, redefinitions of the self are entailments of redefinitions of reality and not vice versa. All of which is to say that modern images of the self are more nearly dependent variables accompanying the rise of new ways of viewing reality.

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The Foreshadowing of Modernity

It is customary to date the rise of modernity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By this time an identifiable revolution—an intellectual, social, and cultural upheaval of the first magnitude—was well underway. This period, the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, is one in which we can identify the foundations of modernity—basic understandings of reality and attendant views of the self.

While it is common to identify this period as shifting from dependence on faith in religious authorities, institutions, and traditions to confidence in human reason, it is less commonly noted that previous ages also highly valued reason and perhaps even placed no less value on reason. Reason, however, was differently understood prior to the Enlightenment. Classical views had tended to envision being rational as being properly attuned to the universe. The universe itself was understood as ordered by a transcendent Good existing beyond but manifested through the universe's rational order and harmony.

In Plato, for example, sensible realities derive their existence and order from the intelligible ideas behind them. Aristotle perhaps more so understood that the universe and the human self are so constituted that the pursuit of truth (use of reason) and the attainment of goodness are inseparable—one cannot truly acquire intellectual virtues without or apart from attaining moral virtues.[1] Similarly, Augustine, arguably a Christian neo-Platonist, understood heart and mind to be illuminated by and drawn to a transcendent good reflected within the order of the Creation.

The Enlightenment, and particularly Descartes, constitute a major shift in this vision of the universe and of the nature of the human self. It should be noted, however, that significant precursors of this shift were in

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[1] *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13

existence well before Descartes. Robert Sokolowski, for instance, argues that a major change in the relationship between faith and reason can be seen as early as the eleventh century with Anselm (1033–1109). Whereas Anselm continued to follow Augustine and envisioned himself as believing in order to understand, he nonetheless not only used reason within faith, he also viewed faith as an object suitable for rational examination. Sokolowski states that with Anselm reason tends to "establish a distance toward faith; it seems in contrast to what it had done in previous centuries, to come out with a kind of independence, almost a claim to judgment over faith . . ."[2] According to Sokolowski's analysis it remains an open question whether Anselm did in fact more than he realized and set in motion theological attempts to establish the existence of God through reason apart from antecedent belief in him.

Jesuit scholar Michael Buckley has offered a similar assessment of Thomas Aquinas. Buckley notes that Thomas, although asserting that the one way and the truth are made manifest in Christ, nonetheless argued that God's existence is "convincingly manifested" in the five ways (classical proofs) apart from and with no mention of Christ.[3] Significantly, here the commitment of faith is rendered dependent upon a prior philosophical inference regarding the existence of God.

According to Buckley, the existence of God is thus presented essentially as a philosophical problem. This, in turn, whatever Thomas' intent (i.e., whether the *Summa* is taken as one argument or many), has a critical impact on subsequent Christian thought. Augustine's maxim, *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"), is reversed and Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding") comes to function

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[2] Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982), 6.

[3] Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987), 342.

within the context of antecedent philosophical inferences. This opens the way for philosophical prolegomena and natural theology to provide the foundation for Christian theology—and eventually to govern Christian theological reflection.

It is further significant not only that the self is envisioned as having the capability of arriving at such an inference, but also that, implicitly, Christianity as such possesses nothing with which to engage the fundamental issue of God's existence.[4] Herein, according to Buckley, lies the origin of modern atheism, viz., the turn from confidence in Christian revelation to the certainty attained on the basis of human reason and argumentation.

Theologian William Placher finds a major change underway with the work of Aquinas' influential systematizer and interpreter, the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suarez (1549–1617).[5] Suarez developed a theory of analogy and the analogical use of language which had the effect of radically altering Aquinas' own views but, due to Suarez's role as Aquinas' interpreter, was mistakenly attributed to Aquinas himself and became influential on subsequent developments of Thomistic thought. Whereas Aquinas saw analogical language as protecting the mystery and unknowability of God, Suarez's understanding of analogy leads in the opposite direction. That is, Suarez argued that we can understand how terms applied to God differ from the same terms applied to us—they do not, as Aquinas argued, limit our understanding of God. Aquinas had said, "The first cause surpasses human understanding and speech. He knows God best who acknowledges that whatever he thinks and says falls short of what God really is."[6]

Suarez, by contrast, argues that we share the property of being with

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[4] Buckley, 342.

[5] William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 74.

[6] As quoted in F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), 136.

God and therefore can attribute "being" univocally to God and to creation: God must have as much "being" as the things he creates. The analogy of attribution, so developed, now means that God's nature can confidently be understood and explained with considerable precision.

For Placher, the influence of Suarez's interpretation of Aquinas is the first stage in what he designates the "domestication of transcendence" largely through the "univocist drift" and its corollary—the elevation of human reason by virtue of attributing to it the capacity of comprehending God.[7] Suarez's views heavily influenced not only Roman Catholic thought; they also influenced Protestant theology for the next two centuries.

Whereas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin had all understood faith to consist in assurance rather than in comprehension, increasing attention to the philosophical prolegomena to theology and the use of philosophical terminology and argumentation in theological reflection inevitably had far-reaching implications.[8] According to Placher, this influence, coupled with the pressures for clear and precise dogmatic formulations driven by doctrinal conflicts and increasing encounters with skepticism, led Protestant theologians to turn from Luther and Calvin's understandings of transcendence and mystery to an increased dependence upon philosophical language and argumentation in both the grounding and the exposition of Christian faith. Placher, for example, cites Reformed teachers by the end of the sixteenth century contending that one must learn to understand scripture by first understanding philosophy; "Scripture speaks of life, philosophy defines it."

Modernity: From Descartes to Kant to Nietzsche

Rene Descartes (1590–1650), arguably the initiator of modern philosophy and certainly a key contributor to modern understandings of reality, was

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[7] Placher, 76.
[8] Placher, 68.

heavily influenced by Suarez. In the midst of intellectual and social crises accompanying the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, the Thirty-years War, and the rising tide of French skepticism, Descartes accepted Cardinal Berulle's invitation to establish faith on a firm foundation.

Descartes sought a rational method applicable to any subject matter and capable of yielding results with the precision and certitude of mathematical calculations. He found the starting point for indubitable certainty within the self's consciousness of itself. Even the doubter, surrounded by dubitable realities, must acknowledge the existence of the thinking/doubting self—the *cogito*. From this point, Descartes, using a version of the ontological argument, undertook to establish the existence of God, arguing that God's existence is more evident than that of the world. In fact, Descartes argued that all that can be known about God can be found in and by human reason.

The immediate gains of this strategy are immense. Belief in God is accorded an intellectually defensible place apart from tradition, superstition, and ecclesiastical authority. The liabilities, however, are also considerable. Descartes' *cogito* differs significantly from Augustine's *intelligam*. Subtle and far-reaching changes distinguish the two. Whereas Augustine's *intelligam* discovered itself as immediately dependent upon God—illuminated from beyond itself,[9] Descartes' *cogito* contains no awareness of the immediate presence of God. The existence of God is a sure and certain inference made by the self's intellectual powers that they derive from a cause which explains their existence. Immediately obvious is the shift of confidence placed at least methodologically in the powers of the *cogito* which, in principle, can know all that can be known about God. Obviously, revelation and theology are relegated to a supportive role to philosophy—in time to become for many unnecessary and irrelevant.

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[9] Augustine, *City of God,* xxxvii.2: "minds irradiated that we judge rightly."

Further, with Descartes a particular understanding of the self became deeply embedded in Western culture, which, along with its subsequent mutations, remains influential until the present.[10] On examination, Descartes' *cogito*, or "thinking ego," is an artificial self, a mind abstracted from its own historicity, corporeality, and affectivity. It surveys the surrounding world with an imperialistic eye. With Descartes, the "disengaged subject stands in a place already hollowed out for God; he takes a stance to the world which befits an image of the Deity."[11]

Descartes' own theology notwithstanding, an orientation was now set in place which, in time, would mutate not only into Deism but also into forms of religion which were no longer Christian—and were even fundamentally anti-Christian. While the First Cause and Moral Orderer of Enlightenment Deism could be seen as a rational and therefore superior understanding of the Christian God, others would find even the conceptually thinner God of Deism to be incompatible with the dignity of the thinking self and the need for free rational control of human life.

In time, first Hume and then Kant would challenge the capacity of reason—both inductive and deductive reason—to establish claims regarding supersensible realities, including deity. Through this, the rational self survives but is denied purchase on access to questions of metaphysics and transcendence. While versions of traditional morality do survive, they assume different forms and are differently anchored. For Kant, morality resides in the structure of the rational autonomous self. The rational self is morally obligated to itself and to other rational selves in order to avoid self-contradiction.

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[10] William Barrett, *The Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (New York: Anchor, 1987), 20.

[11] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989), 315.

Kant, of course, argues that the existence of God is an implicate of practical reasoning. It is important, however, to note that Kant grounds his belief in God in his morality and not vice versa.[12] Further, the existence of God is not necessary as the source of morality or of morality's authority. Rather, Kant finds the existence of God necessary in order that the self's sense of justice can be brought to final resolution. Significantly, perhaps even prophetically, Kant asserts:

> Granted that the pure moral law inexorably binds every man as a command (not as a rule of prudence), the righteous man may say: I will that there be a God . . .[13]

Arguably, the language here displaces both the conclusions of reason and the language of historic Christian faith. Kant's words, "I will that God exists," are unmistakably the language of self assertion—one of the dominant characteristics of the modern world. These words place Kant at considerable distance from Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. They even distance him from Descartes. Kant's invalidation of the proofs of the existence of God, his demonstration of the limitations of speculative reason, combined with his portrait of the dignity of the free rational man, all prepare the way for a will unbounded by external reality and unanswerable to any external criteria for

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[12] Although Kant states this in numerous ways, the following is illustrative: "This is not to say that man is entitled, on the grounds of the Idea to which his conscience inevitably leads him, to posit such a Supreme Being as really existing outside himself—still less that he is obligated to do so. For the Idea is not given to him objectively, by theoretical reason, but only subjectively, by practical reason which obligates itself to act in conformity with this Idea. And only by way of analogy with a lawgiver for all rational beings in the world does this Idea merely guide man to think of conscientiousness as responsibility before a holy Being distinct from man yet present in his inmost being, and to submit himself to the will of this Being, as the rules of justice. Man's conception of religion as such is here only 'a principle regarding all his duties as if they were diving commands.' " Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals, Pt. II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 105–106.

[13] Barrett, 101.

choice and action, a will which in time confidently asserts, "I will that there be no God." As Iris Murdoch has observed,

> It is not such a very long step from Kant to Nietzsche . . . In fact, Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer.[14]

Theological Adjustments to Modernity

Inevitably, Christian thought came to reflect the influences of new social and intellectual challenges accompanying the Reformation and Enlightenment. Anti-atheism drove many thinkers to adapt Christianity to the rationalizing temper of the age in search of an intellectually defensible faith.[15] Equally important, religious wars and competing confessional claims led to the need for more convincing argumentation and clearer doctrinal distinctions which could be found in philosophical language.

In this process, however, Christian theology and the understanding of Christian faith underwent critical redefinition. By the seventeenth century, and well before David Hume, Christian theologians had accepted a distinction between "the natural" and "the miraculous," defining a miracle as "a violation of the natural order."[16] This distinction, which had the effect of significantly limiting God's direct involvement in the creation, also brought attention to miracles as evidence for the truth of the Christian faith and placed them under close philosophical scrutiny.

For Placher, as the intellectual defensibility of faith becomes a central concern, traditional understandings of transcendence are redefined or "domesticated" (e.g., transcendence as "distance" rather than the mystery and otherness of God) as God is located and defined within a rational system

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[14] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark, 1970), 80.

[15] Cf. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1985), 72.

[16] Placher, 136f.

of clear and distinct ideas. Understandably, Christian faith comes to be understood in terms of intellectual assent more than in terms of personal trust and commitment. And, as faith is based on rational argumentation, the authority of scripture is understood to be grounded on rational argumentation—ironically leading to the paradoxical stance characterizing fundamentalist arguments regarding the authority of scripture, viz., scripture is the sole authority for faith and practice; its authority is irrefutably established on the basis of rational argumentation.[17]

The Modern Ethos

Intellectual developments do not occur in isolation from their broader cultural surroundings. The underlying ethos within which all of this transpires is one marked by the simultaneous break-up of ecclesiastical hegemony over European social and political life and the scientific-technological explosion which transformed everyday life throughout European cities and villages. Between the opening of the sixteenth century and the close of the nineteenth, the steeple on the church, visible from the surrounding fields, ceased to govern the shared vision of reality and to order civic life. Rather, the center of everyday life become the public clock and, in time, the factory whistle. The guiding vision of reality came to be that of the universe as a vast machine composed of smaller interlocking machines.

The rapid advance of science and countless new technologies offered visible evidence of the awesome power of the human mind; it also inevitably led to a shift away from dependence upon ecclesiastical authority to confidence in human ability to understand and harness the forces of nature. The successes of the new sciences inspired a vision of inevitable progress and evoked

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[17] While a complete discussion of modernity should include the Romantic Movement (1780–1830), it is not inaccurate to envision Romanticism, both non-Christian and Christian versions, as reacting to, expanding, but not totally rejecting basic Enlightenment presuppositions. Schleiermacher and Coleridge, for example, would be impossible to understand apart from Kant.

utopian hopes. For many, science and the new technologies, rather than the church, were expected to "wipe away all tears."

This climate was clearly at odds with many of the central tenets of the Christian faith. Questions were raised, for example, regarding the relationship of reason and revelation—even the need for revelation. Questions were raised about the uniqueness of the Christian religion, the significance of Jesus, original sin, and other fundamental Christian beliefs.

As already indicated, while many theologians reacted to explicit problems and challenges posed by the Enlightenment mindset, many of these very same theologians had already unknowingly adopted the Enlightenment beliefs and attitudes. Still others, of course, eagerly and knowingly embraced the new knowledge.

Alienated from Ourselves

Early in the twentieth century, Max Scheler noted that in the modern era of unprecedented scientific and technological accomplishment, "man is more of a problem to himself . . . than ever before in all recorded history." [18] Under the dominance of scientific and technological successes, the tools for perception and self-understanding have been reduced to those available through "instrumental reason." [19] Thus restricted, modern interpretations inevitably mask the depths of reality and therein conceal from the self its own profundity. Not surprisingly, today shallow and truncated versions of the meaning of the human and the nature of the self abound. Consequently, we moderns find ourselves trapped in a condition of ever-increasing self-estrangement, alienated from ourselves by the very instruments we have so

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[18] Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature* (Boston: Beacon, 1958, orig. 1928), 4.

[19] Cf. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1991).

successfully employed to master the environment. Hans-Georg Gadamer offers both a sober warning and a difficult challenge:

> Only by the demythologization of science (which controls what is proper to it but cannot know the one whom it serves) can the mastery of knowledge and ability become self-mastery. The Delphic demand "Know thyself" meant, "Know that you are a man and no god." It holds true as well for human beings in the age of the sciences, for it stands as a warning before all illusions of mastery and domination.[20]

Until we find the courage to face and unmask our "illusions of mastery and domination," our apprehension of reality will remain diminished and our efforts to understand ourselves will remain tantalizingly unfulfilled.

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[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: MIT, 1993), 150.

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