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**From the Modern Individual  
to the Transmodern Person**

Paul C. Vitz

**Institute for American Values**

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*From the Modern Individual to the Transmodern Person*<sup>1</sup>

Paul C. Vitz  
New York University

To explore the question of what is a "person," I will begin with a description of the secular person--or what is really, as we will see, the secular individual. I am primarily concerned here with the concept of the individual (person) as it has developed within recent psychology. This psychology has permeated much of our culture and is now relatively familiar to all. Today, we describe the ideal individual or person with such terms as "self-actualized," "independent," "autonomous." The essential idea is that each individual is an autonomous being whose fulfillment is guided entirely by personally-defined values and goals without serious concern for others or community. The heavy emphasis on autonomy or freedom implies independence or separation from others, and in many cases results in a kind of social isolation. The psychological theorists who have emphasized this autonomous individual or self have included Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow whose influence has been enormous, especially on education; also part of the same cultural expression are the self- and ego-psychologists found within the neo-psychoanalytic schools. Besides such official psychology, there has been a plethora of popular psychologists whose books especially in the 60s, 70s and 80s had an enormous social impact. Recall such titles as I'm ok, you're ok, Looking out for number one, etc. As these psychological understandings became commonplace throughout much of American society, it was not long before cultural observers began to sound the alarm. We still remember the expressions summarizing these critiques: The "me generation," the "culture of narcissism," the "cult of self-worship," etc. The same critical theme came somewhat later in Robert Bellah's well-known cultural study, Habits of the heart, as well.

We will return to this secular understanding of the person or individual in a moment. But first, let me briefly introduce an alternative understanding of the person which has been

emerging recently. Here the theoretical writers have been primarily theologians and philosophers, but their ideas are beginning to have impact in psychology and in due time they may dramatically affect the culture in general. (The names for this new conceptual approach, especially as developed by Catholic and continental thinkers, are "personalist philosophy" and "personalist psychology.") In part the significance for the culture of this approach is due to the fact that these theorists articulate an understanding of the person that is intimately connected with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This new understanding of the person places a heavy emphasis on relationships and on the person as brought into existence, or created, by God. It is important here to make clear that the very concept "person" originated as a special term in the Christian theological debates of the first few centuries. These theologians had the task of defining God as a person, and the Trinity as made up of three persons. The original Latin word "persona" (and its Greek equivalent) referred to the mask worn by a character in ancient theater, but the subsequent development of the notion of person was theological, and Christian.

Now, of course the notion of God as a person, and human beings as persons created in the image of God, is a fundamental notion in the Hebrew Scriptures, which is, of course, where Christian theologians got it. The essential idea is not only that we are a person because we are created in the image of a divine person but also that we are made for relationship, for dialogue, with God--a person--and for relationships with others. The relationship is explicitly one of love and involves serious commitment. This foundational idea is summarized in the two great commandments: "Thou shalt love God" and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." These principles are firmly articulated in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, the Jewish understanding of themselves as a Chosen People, as a distinctive community, also contains within it a profound sense of the inter-relatedness intrinsic to being a person. The interpersonal aspect of Judaism, of each person's relationship to God and to others, has been expressed clearly by Martin Buber in I and Thou (1922/ 1958).

In the Christian emphasis on God as a Trinity, the concept of loving relationship is yet further developed. The Protestant theologian T.F. Torrance (1983, 1985) has done much to illuminate the interpersonal implications of the Trinitarian concept of God in an historical framework. He identified two basic understandings of God as a person: the first view, the dominant one in Western philosophy, comes from Boethius. The other derives primarily from the patristic period of the Church (especially from the Greek world) and also from the 12th c French philosopher and theologian Richard of St. Victor.

Boethius defined a person as "an individual substance of a rational nature." In this concept of "substance" there was a strong emphasis on separateness: on what divided one substance from another. The Fathers and Richard of St. Victor, in contrast, derived their concept of the person from the Holy Trinity. As Torrance noted, Richard defined a person "not in terms of its own independence as self-subsistence, but in terms of its ontic relations to other person, i.e., by a transcendental relation to what is other than it, and in terms of its own unique incommunicable existence..." (1985), p. 176). In summarizing Richard's view, Torrance says: "A person is what he is only through relations with other persons," 1985, p. 176).

The contemporary Catholic theologian Joseph Ratzinger (1970, 1973) has taken a position strikingly similar to that of Torrance, though the two writers are apparently unaware of each other's thought. Ratzinger (1970, p. 132) wrote:

...Christian thought discovered the kernel of the concept of person, which describes something other and infinitely more than the mere idea of the "individual." Let us listen once again to St. Augustine: "In God there are no accidents, only substance and relation." Therein lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today "objectifying thought." ; a new plane of being comes into view.

With a Trinitarian emphasis, Ratzinger (1973, 1990, p. 442) stated:

...person must be understood as relation... the three persons that exist in God, are in their nature relations. They are, therefore, not substances that stand next to each other, but they are real existing relationships... Relation[ship]... is not something added to the person, but it is the person itself. In its nature, the person exists only as relation.

The notion of person as relation has implications beyond the theological:  
... the phenomenon of complete [relatedness], which is, of course, realized in its entirety only in the one who is God... indicates the direction of all personal being. The point is thus reached [where]... there is a transition from the doctrine of God into... anthropology (1973/ 1990, p. 445)

Ratzinger's use of the term "anthropology" is equivalent to the term "psychology."

Ratzinger seems to imply above that a person is only relation, and by implication that substance is not a necessary component. Elsewhere, Ratzinger (1990), p. 132), qualifies this by writing that relation and substance are equally valid primordial modes (or principles) of reality. I also assume that person is both substance and relation. But the importance of relationship is central.

Much like Torrance, Ratzinger points out that the definition of "person" by Boethius, as an "individual substance of a rational nature," had unfortunate consequences for Western theology. He recognized that thinking of a person as substance emphasizes the isolated and autonomous notion of the concept, and that the lack of emphasis on person as relation was regrettable. Ratzinger also commented that Richard of St. Victor was an important exception.

Some of the psychological evidence for the importance of relationship in the formation of the person should be noted, however briefly. Relationships are necessary for normal human existence and development. It is literally true that without ordinary relationships our very substance would cease to exist. A newborn child that has no mothering relationship with another human will die, even if physical needs are met. A person learns to speak through relationships with others, beginning in the first weeks of life, when the infant first listens to its mother's voice. Without relations, a human being does not know language and without language we are hardly human. Certainly there is no reason to think that either an "individual" or a "person" could come into existence who had no relationships with anyone else. This is not to deny the legitimacy of substance. In the present model, substance and relationship are each necessary, but not sufficient determinants of person.

Let's look at this issue from the different perspective proposed by Samson (1981). He pointed out that "the Western epistemological tradition of Descartes and Kant that marks con-

temporary cognitive psychology involves an individualistic reduction centered around the "I think" (p. 732). In this dominant psychological tradition, "objects are seen to be the products of individual mental operations; the world "out there" is constituted by the individual's thinking and reasoning processes" (p. 732). Sampson interpreted this as an ideologically biased perspective and he argued that "I think" should in fact be understood as "we think" since our thinking is not just me thinking, it is initially a social construct before it is a private mental event. That is, for Sampson, "we think" comes before "I think." (Here, Sampson is indebted to Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, Sampson wrote as follows:

... in describing the process of internalization, whereby external operations gain an internal representation, Vygotsky notes the key role of other people in a given social and historical context. In his terms, "an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal process" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). In other words, the basics for the "I think" exists in the prior foundation of the social world; the interpsychological precedes and shapes the intrapsychological. (p. 732).

(For a recent profound discussion that examines the issues of separation, objectivity and the absence of relationship in the modern period, see Gunton, 1993.)

#### Additional problems with the modern concept of individual

It is clear that, when Carl Rogers entitled his well-known book On becoming a person (1961), he was simply wrong. What he wrote was a book on becoming an individual, and in particular an autonomous, self-actualizing, independent individual. An individual is created by separating from others, by breaking away, by concentrating psychological thought, energy and emotion on the self instead of on God and other people. The founders of modern psychology clearly knew this. The first expression of the ideas that Rogers made more widely known can be found in the earlier writings of Alfred Adler and especially Carl Jung. Adler called his psychology "Individual psychology"; Jung called the central process of self-development "individuation." So, Rogers should have titled his book On becoming an individual.

Thus in important respects a person is the opposite of an individual, for a person comes into existence by connecting with others, not by separating from them. That is, much of

modern psychology, especially humanistic self-psychology is the anti-psychology of a Jewish or Christian psychology.

Philosophy has long maintained the difference between the individual and the person. Jacques Maritain (1947) in particular has articulated important distinctions between the individual and the person. Maritain did not focus on "relationships" for understanding the person. Rather, he emphasized the spiritual dimension of the person which allows one to transcend individuality--the secular self. By contrast, modern personality theorists look inward to the self to describe "individuality."

A Judeo-Christian theory is realistic because it is based on reality: that which exists outside the self. To become a person is to be respectful of external realities, especially of the other person. But by making the self or autonomous individual the center of personality, all modern theories of personality remove people from reality, from the external world created by God and filled with real others. (No wonder Sartre said: "Hell is other people.") In short, these theories of the individual are intrinsically subjectivistic. A good example of this tendency is Carl Rogers (1980) whose theory is based in a thorough-going subjectivism: "there are as many realities as there are persons"; we must prepare for a world of "no solid basis, a world of process and change... in which the mind... creates the new reality" (p. 352). Other evidence of the subjectivism of much personality theory has been its reliable tendency to merge with Eastern religion, with subjective drug states and many kinds of occult worldviews which claim that reality is the creation of each self.

Actually, the essential logic of becoming an individual--that is, of separating and distancing the self from others--eventually gets carried to its logical extreme. First, you break the "chains" that linked you to parents, then to others, and even to society and culture. Finally, you reject the self itself; that is, you separate consciousness from the illusion of the self. You end up by rejecting the self and all its desires--and thus the process of separation culminates in an experience or state of nothingness, of total alienation. Radical autonomy ultimately means separation from everything; it means that even the self is gone.

The development of a person being is in many respects the "anti-process" of the development of the autonomous individual and it often moves in a different direction. The person is created for union with God and others. It is love that brings this union, this enlargement.

To summarize:

A Person is created by God in the image of God.

An Individual is created by the self in the image of the self.

A Person loves and trusts God, and loves others as the self; persons forgive those who hurt them.

An Individual loves and trusts the self, mistrusts others, and rejects or ignores God; individuals forget or punish those who have hurt them.

A Person has the goal of committed relationships with others, and a state of union with God.

An Individual has the goal of separating from others, and eventually a state of separation from the self.

For a Person, true freedom is freely choosing complete dependence on God who is completely free.

For an Individual, true autonomy is freely choosing complete dependence on the self.

A Person accepts the reality of God, other people, and the physical world.

An Individual rejects everything outside of the self as subjective, a non-reality.

### In defense of the modern individual

The preceding set of comparisons is no doubt something of an oversimplification; it overstates things because no individual is apt to take these modern principles to such an extreme. Reality doesn't let us and most of us have a kind of psychological and moral commonsense that protects us from taking our theories too seriously. This is also a very idealized image of what a religious person is. In the everyday world, it is often hard to distinguish between religious and secular people who are presumably operating from these two, theoretically very different, models.

In addition, some positive things need to be said for the secular emphasis on independence and individuation. Freedom or independence from the unexamined views of

others is an important virtue, not just for the secular culture but in the Judeo-Christian world as well. One of the major concerns of theology is that of free will or free choice. God gives us the freedom to choose Him--or not. From Abraham to Moses to Jesus, this theme is central to Scripture. In a certain sense, the emphasis on freedom found in the secular world of the last few centuries can be understood as the immanentizing of a basic Jewish and Christian principle: that is, the theological concept of freedom was translated into the social and political world.

#### A trans-modern model of person (or self)

In order to develop a new model of personality, it will be useful to describe three different models of the self or person, models developed by de Rivera (1989). His first model of the self he called "collectivist." In a collectivist society (he gives examples from Japan and China and from pre-modern Europe), the self is derived from its place, or roles, in the social order, especially the family. In this environment, the self complies with others to secure its support. Obligation to family or to one's social role is the basis of morality, and the purpose of the self is to maintain group harmony. In many ways, this pre-modern self or person is a collection of roles. This kind of self is part of a whole, and it values connections with others and with the good of community. Its strategy is to use manners, social traditions and caring and feeling for others so as to get social support for maintaining social harmony. The political system of such a society aims to secure the collective good. In the present context, this kind of society is close to the natural society found in mother-child relationships, and in the child's relationships to its family during its early years. It is in this kind of developmental stage and in this kind of society that the 'we' precedes the "I." This is the pre-modern understanding of person.

De Rivera contrasted the collectivist self with the modern individualist self. This is the self that has been primarily criticized here (e.g., the modern secular self). In this kind of

society, which de Rivera equated with the contemporary West--especially the US--the strategy is to look out for the individual self. Its society is ego-centric and contractual, not socio-centric and organic. Morality is based on abstract principles and the goal is self-integrity. The modern self values autonomy and individual rights which are secured by justice, reason, and law. And the goal of the modern political system is above all to protect individual rights. This is the modern self.

Both of these models are gravely flawed, according to de Rivera, and he has argued for what he calls a mutualist self, based on care for the other, love of others, the transformation of fear into love, an emphasis on freedom in community, and a deep concern for justice.

De Rivera's concerns are those of a social psychologist who is, moreover, implicitly but not explicitly religious. To summarize: the first society presents a self which has relationships but no genuine freedom; the second, a self with freedom, but no true relationships. The religious self, or "person" as it is called here, must combine both: relationship and freedom.

#### The actual process of becoming a person: "Personagenesis"

What is the process of becoming a person--or as Connor (1992), p. 47) calls it, "personagenesis"? First, this theory does not reject the person as substance but gives equal or greater emphasis to the person as relation. In the language of Karol Wojtyla (now of course Pope John Paul II), a person is constructed on the "metaphysical site" of substance, but the process of construction involves the dynamics of relationships.

The first step in personagenesis "seems to be passivity, receptivity of love from another" (Connor, p. 45). In the natural world, this is normally the love a newborn receives from its mother. In the spiritual realms, which is at the core of person, it is listening to the call and love of God. Once initiated, the process of becoming a person continues. Wojtyla (1969/1979) described the heart of this process as a "vertical transcendence" in which the per-

son gives "the self to another" (Connor, p. 47). The process of lovingly giving the self to another both transcends the self and determines the self in the act of performing service. The giving of the self to another is how the self is transcended; it is also how one comes to know both the other and, from the perspective of the other, to know oneself much more "objectively" than one ever can from inside an autonomous self. This process is how one becomes a person. Wojtyla (1981) noted that free will is at the center of a person's self gift to another, for while man freely determines his action, he is "at the same time fully aware" that his actions "in turn determine him; moreover they continue to determine him even when they have passed." (Connor, p. 48)

When the other person receives one's gift of love and gives his or her self in return, the highest form of intimacy results. In this context, intimacy has been lucidly described by the philosopher Kenneth Schmitz (1986):

Metaphysically speaking, intimacy is not grounded in the recognition of this or that characteristic a person has, but rather in the simple unqualified presence the person is... Indeed, it seems to me that the presence in which intimacy is rooted is nothing short of the unique act of existing of each person. Presence is but another name for the being of something insofar as it is actual, and in intimacy we come upon and are received into the very act of existing of another. We are, then, at the heart, not only of another person, but at the very heart of the texture of being itself. No doubt it is true that the person is incommunicable in objective terms insofar as he or she is existentially unique. But in intimacy, as we approach the very act of self-disclosure, we approach the center of all communicability. It is this "secret" that we share with the other person. It is the sense of being with another at the foundation not only of our personal existence, but of being with each other in the most fundamental texture of being itself. Put in the most general terms--though we must not forget that each intimacy is through and through singular--the "secret" that we discover through intimacy is this: "that reality is not indifferent to the presence of persons" (p. 45; emphasis in original).

Although Schmitz was describing the metaphysical nature of intimacy, the same understanding is at the core of psychological intimacy. Intimacy--with God and with others--thus becomes a major characteristic of a person. This intimacy is not cognitive knowledge based on abstraction, but knowledge based on experience, on union with the other. I call this approach trans-modern because it transforms and transcends the modern autonomous self. It

can also be viewed as a synthesis of the pre-modern and the modern understandings of the self.

The emphasis on mature love--that is, love which is both freely chosen and involves a serious commitment to the other--a commitment shown in self-giving means that friendship is a central reality for the transmodern or religious person. Modern psychology has shown little interest in friendship; it remains to be explored in the context of this new "personalist" psychology.

In addition, this religious understanding of the self or person brings in a concern with the development of the moral life and of the character or virtues which can maintain an integrated moral life. All of these emphases are quite different from and often contrast with the secular self's concern with autonomy, moral relativism, etc.

### The post-modern self

Finally, we will look at some new interpretations of the self which are postmodernist. Like most writers today, I interpret post-modern as a form of late modernism: it is modernism using its own inconsistencies to destroy itself. It is a kind of "morbid modernism": the "death wish" that was inherent in modernism (e.g., de Sade, Nietzsche) is now leaking out and expressing itself. Recent post-modern theorists of the self have argued that the very notion of the autonomous self is incoherent in important respects. These theorists are deconstructing the self, and their critiques signal the beginning of the end of modern psychology.

Kenneth Gergen (1991) has provided an influential description of the crisis of the contemporary self by interpreting today's self as "saturated." That is, the variety and complexity of today's styles of living makes for a self that is complex, overburdened, and saturated to the point of incoherence. The contemporary American self often lives in two or three different places each year, relates to people in different cities, jobs and cultures on a regular basis. Meanwhile the media flood each person with ever more lifestyles, historical periods, different

values, philosophies and religions, hobbies, types of travel and places to go. Many of these late-modern selves have had two or three marriages, and have extraordinarily complex and unstable family situations. Many of these selves have had two, three, or four different careers. Just keeping up with all this leaves no time for reflection or integration, no time to develop a coherent core to the self. The result is an individual that is so busy responding to immediate, dramatically different situations that no strong, independent self develops. This is what Gergen means by "saturated."

Philip Cushman (1990) has gone even further than Gergen: he claims that the modern self or individual is basically empty. Cushman is especially interested in showing that the concept of self is always a reflection of the historical and cultural context--something most psychological theories of the self ignore. In his critique, Cushman expresses a clear post-modernist logic, arguing that the modern, so-called autonomous self has always been a kind of illusion. He understands the modern individual, as do most theorists, as a "bounded masterful self that has specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its personal ends" (1990, p. 600).

His critique develops along the following lines: Cushman accepts the notion of the traditional self--what is often called the pre-modern self: one that is rooted in family, religious faith, tradition, and community. He accepts these relationships as legitimate, and as central to the traditional self. However, with the rise of modern industrial and technological society, the individual was torn away from these relationships.

Cushman, in stimulating and convincing ways, has proposed that the empty self created by the loss of the traditional structures has been filled by two major modern social forces. The first and perhaps most important force is the consumer society, especially its advertising. Thus, today's individual is constructed from the meaning of its purchased products, and from the commercial meaning of our lifestyles. The self is now defined by its automobiles and vacations, by its button-down shirts and barn jackets, even by its brands of beer and perfume.

Since we now define the self increasingly through consumption rather than traditional relationships, it is not surprising that the pathologies of our time are narcissism and borderline personality disorder, and the inability to maintain long-term commitments to others. Additional media-influenced problems of our day include low self-esteem, values confusion, eating disorders, drug abuse and chronic consumerism.

According to Cushman, the other force which has filled the void at the center of the modern self has been psychology. Psychotherapy, with its search for the origins of personality, with its emphasis on past traumas, on the inner child, on expressing archetypes, and on self-actualization, has constructed the other half of modern identity. (Vitz (1977/1994) has made similar criticisms and has pointed out, for example, that the Jungian theory of the self with its array of unconscious archetypes such as the persona, animus/anima, wise old man, earth mother, shadow, etc., has provided a new structure for the self--a new set of characters. Once the relationships provided by traditional family and community are removed, psychology fills the void by introducing a new internal "psychological village" made up of new characters to take their place. The basically narcissistic character of the psychological "solution" is obvious. A person's relationship with his anima or her animus is not the same as a relationship with another person of the opposite sex. Nor is a relationship with one's "inner child" a genuine relationship.

In the late 20th c., developing this kind of psychological identity--whether Jungian or Rogerian or whatever--has become commonplace. And of course most individuals have turned to popularized forms of psychology to get advice on how to become actualized or fulfilled, and to achieve peace of mind. Advertising strategies have capitalized on this need to glamorize the personality by identifying a particular product with an ideal state of being, the product's "image." Successful ads give the impression that buying the product will free the consumer of personal fears and feelings of inadequacy. The person will introject the product's "image." Thus both psychotherapy and advertising are attempting to relieve the individual's sense of emptiness and to create an individual's identity.

Ultimately, of course, Cushman thinks that these modern forces are fundamentally phony, and the self they create is an illusion. He believes that they profoundly fail to satisfy the needs of the self or person in the way that the older relationships once did. As a consequence, Cushman has concluded that the modern self or individual is like a package covered with beautiful wrapping paper--but empty inside.

Perhaps the most extreme position on the contemporary self is proposed by Robert Landy (1993) who has argued that there is no autonomous self at all. Landy writes out of background in theatre and has claimed that the contemporary self consists only of roles, as in theatrical roles, which the person chooses. Just as an actor chooses roles, Landy has proposed that the individual consists only of these roles, and since they have no coherent center, there is in fact no integrated autonomous self at all. There are, rather, many selves--a kind of polyvalent or multicentered self. Thus, we must let go of what has been thought of as the modern self. Landy admits that letting go of this self goes against scores of philosophers, poets and theologians who have advocated a core entity that contains the essence of one's being and can be known (1993, p. 19). The concept of a core self implies that certain behaviors are authentic (the true self) and other behaviors are not (social masks). Inherent in this view is a moral framework wherein rages a battle "between the authentic and god-given forces of light and the inauthentic, demonic forces of darkness" (1993, p. 19). But this notion of self, however familiar, is--Landy argues--mistaken and must be abandoned. For Landy, the very notion of an authentic self is inauthentic. His emphasis on the self as roles has certain similarities to the previously described pre-modern self. As our culture becomes more "neo-pagan" it should not be surprising that it returns to earlier notions of self or person.

### Conclusion

The post-modern critique of the modern secular self has made some especially important points. By identifying the cultural and historical relativity of the modern secular per-

son, and by underlining the moral relativity of the self's choices, they have clearly identified the absence of any acceptable secular moral rationale for self-actualization. In the process, the secularists are now rejecting their own invention--the modern individual.

But a transmodern or Judeo-Christian person has an absolute reference point--a kind of moral coordinate system created by the two great commandments: love God and love others. These two invariants--the one "vertical," the other "horizontal"--provide a framework not only for the moral life but for the development of the self or person. It is a reference system which is independent of historical time or cultural location. Hence it provides a clear answer to the post-modern nihilistic and anarchic dilemma.

Christians and Jews and others who accept these commandments will of course work out their responses to loving God and others in personal and culturally specific ways. But these differences in the concrete expression of different persons should not obscure the basic system from which each person is working.

With its emphasis on love, self-giving, and relationship, this religiously based model of the person or self also provides a satisfactory response to the modern isolated, alienated self. It is in committed loving relationships that the highest form of self--or person--comes into existence. It remains for such an understanding to become a cultural goal.

<sup>1</sup> Early expressions of parts of this paper are in Vitz (1996; 1997).

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