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The Collapse of Self-Transcendence: COVID-19 and the Reshaping of Meaning-Making in Everyday Life

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Abstract

The human capacity to self-transcend – generally meaning a conscious or unconscious experience of going beyond oneself. We are constantly being sold something bigger than ourselves. The author suggests that the pandemic reaching the world population in March 2020 – and that a year later is still in full stride – has further restricted our access to "transcendental experiences." The article is a brief analysis of transcendence to deepen our understanding of its role in human becoming and human flourishing. It looks briefly at a contributing voice from psychology (Victor Frankl), from the poetry community (Rumi), and from theology (Karl Rahner) to grasp how these three writers, from within their discipline, appreciate the human person as a self-transcending being.

Keywords: Self-transcendence, Logotherapy, Emplotment

Introduction

The human capacity to self-transcend – generally meaning a conscious or unconscious experience of going beyond oneself to embrace what one perceives as something of value beyond one's immediacy – is one of the primary characteristics of being human (Perrin, 2007; Schneiders, 1989). Every human being has the drive to some form

of self-transcendence, that is, we innately strive to push beyond the boundaries, real or perceived, within which our lives take shape. It is impossible to understand the complexity of self-transcendence without engaging different fields of study which consider this substantive quality of the human.

For example, psychology, sociology, the fine arts, as well as philosophy, and theology all have something to contribute to our understanding of self-transcendence. And, as it turns out, even the world of business and economics has a highly developed understanding of self-transcendence, as unlikely as that may seem. All of these, in their way, frame self-transcendence as integral to human becoming and meaning-making in our lives. Not one of them has a fully developed understanding of self-transcendence, but together they can provide insight into who we are as transcendental beings and how that quality provides the foundation for meaning-making and understanding who we are before a world that is both transcendent and immanent, mysterious and known, all at the same time.

Whether each of these points of view understands self-transcendence, in the same way, does not matter. What does matter is that each of them recognizes this integral characteristic of the human and leverages it in some way. The concept of transcendence can be seen in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three major monotheistic faiths. "Likewise, the transcendent Buddha goes beyond this phenomenal world … Also the Tao, which is unknowable and cannot be named, seems to transcend the myriad of things of this world for Taoism" (Encyclopedia, n. d.).As intimated above, the element of self-transcendence as integral to human nature is not lost on marketing and advertising: it is not sex that sells as much as the insatiable hunger for and promise of transcendence and self-transcendence leveraged in consumerism.[1]Simply put, using

[1] Here are a few advertising slogans I have observed recently with their associated product for sale (without reference to the companies employing them): "Be all that you can be" (shaving products); "Have it all" (lottery tickets); "Upgrade your life" (home sales); "Life's waiting. Get to it in …" (car sales); "Alone just a car. Together so much more" (car sales); "Ambitions made real" (major bank); "Drive beyond measure" (car sales); "It's about making memories that last forever" (renovation projects); "Good starts here" (breakfast cereal); "Grab every moment" (tissues); "Power to outlast your day" (exercise program); "Be the man you want to be" (testosterone supplement); "The joy of movement" (muscle pain relief); "Join the wave" (telecommunications); "When you shift your perspective, your world can change" (car sales); "Restore to virgin-like condition" (hair shampoo); "It's time for investing to feel individual" (financial management); "Moments that define you and

a phrase coined by Harvey Cox, the American Baptist minister, and Harvard University professor,in The Market – capital T and capital M – there is never enough, and what you are promised is far more than the thing in itself; you are sold transcendence and spirituality.[2]

You don't just buy a car, you buy a better lifestyle and upgrade your life; you don't just purchase a home, you buy the perfect setting where your dreams can come true and lifelong memories are made – happiness, joy, and deep, rewarding relationships; you don't just buy life insurance, you are promised security from any life mishap that could derail your goals. We are constantly being sold something bigger than ourselves; we are sold "belonging" – whether to a sports team or a not-for-profit organization: we are all "part of the family" – when it suits, of course, and then we are not! In short, to quote Harvey Cox, "The Market" has become God. Cox calls it "the liturgy of The Market" (Cox, 2016).[3]

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drive you, … never stop arriving" (car sales); "When you feel good who knows what kind of good you can do" (soup); "The essence of a woman" (perfume"; "live life to the flavourest" (coffee additive).

[2] "It used to be thought—mistakenly, as it turns out—that at least the innermost, or 'spiritual,' dimension of life was resistant to The Market. It seemed unlikely that the interior castle would ever be listed by Century 21. But as the markets for material goods become increasingly glutted, such previously unmarketable states of grace as serenity and tranquillity are now appearing in the catalogues. Your personal vision quest can take place in unspoiled wildernesses that are pictured as virtually unreachable—except, presumably, by the other people who read the same catalogue. Furthermore, ecstasy and spirituality are now offered in a convenient generic form. Thus The Market makes available the religious benefits that once required prayer and fasting, without the awkwardness of denominational commitment or the tedious ascetic discipline that once limited their accessibility. All can now handily be bought without an unrealistic demand on one's time, in a weekend workshop at a Caribbean resort with a sensitive psychological consultant replacing the crotchety retreat master." Harvey Cox. "The Market as God: Living in the New Dispensation," *The Atlantic Online*, March 1999, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/03/the-market-as-god/306397(accessed January 28, 2021).

[3] Harvey Cox, after studying business manuals, policies, marketing strategies, and so on, reaches the conclusion that, in fact, the market has developed an in-depth "theology":"Soon I began to marvel at just how comprehensive the business theology is. There were even sacraments to convey salvific power to the lost, a calendar of entrepreneurial saints, and what theologians call an 'eschatology'—a teaching about the 'end of history.' My curiosity was piqued. I began cataloguing these strangely familiar doctrines, and I saw that in fact there lies embedded in the business pages an entire theology, which is comparable in scope if not in profundity to that of Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth. It needed only to be systematized for a whole new Summa to

Given the centrality of self-transcendence in human life, whether one is a believer or not, understanding better the nature of self-transcendence and its purpose in human flourishing opens up the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has potentially diminished or even cut off access to self-transcending experiences that are knit into our everyday activities. For example, our participation in social activities, visits to galleries to enjoy art, participation in rowdy sports activities, and nature walks are all potentially self-transcending experiences. But we have been cut off from them.

Live-performance theatres have been darkened, museums shuttered, and music, dance, and venues of all kinds no longer schedule activities; sports arenas are silenced – the common worship of their crowds muted. Travel to the unknown, exotic, or "just different" is seriously curbed. For some people, those activities shape deep personal spiritualities, and now access to them has collapsed. We are suddenly closed in on ourselves, without the opportunity to "push out" in ways we have not experienced for a hundred years. It should be noted, however, that this cleavage from both self-transcending experiences and our self-understanding as transcendent beings did not begin with the pandemic.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes the drifting of Western society over the past 400 years or so into a sense that life is devoid of a higher transcendental purpose as the "great malaise," the lack of a "higher goal which transcends or gives sense to all the lower ones," "resulting in an overwhelming sense of fragility and futility in post-modern life" (Taylor, 2007, 1991). Taylor identifies three forms which the malaise typically takes: "1. The sense of the fragility of meaning, and the search for over-arching significance; 2. The felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives, and 3. The utter flatness, the emptiness of the ordinary" (Taylor, 2007).

Similar to the way I described the term "self-transcendence" above, Taylor believes there is a characteristic of human-being called "fullness" which, if not provided by God or a belief in some transcendent Other, must be provided elsewhere (Taylor, 2007). Following the displacement of God from the public realm in a gradual but progressive process these past 400 years, we replaced that sense of fullness with other self-transcending experiences that have become

take shape." See Cox, "The Market as God." These ideas are developed more recently in his book *The Market as God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

commonplace in our lives, as I mentioned above. Sadly, we have been largely stripped of this "elsewhere" or these "elsewheres" in the wake of the ravages of COVID-19.

Why these developments are of concern with respect to the meaning-making activity of self-transcendence is the subject of this conference because it is these canceled or diminished activities that have replaced, to some degree at least, the higher goals referred to by Taylor which give meaning to our lives.

Given the exorcizing of religion from the public square over the past four centuries, again according to Taylor, we have entered the current pandemic as wounded beings. With the loss of "higher goals" often associated with belief in God or some transcendent Other, we were already suffering a palpable loss of the sense of meaning in our lives and ultimately a sense of the loss of selfhood that is not grounded in anything solid. This "emptiness of the ordinary" made us extremely vulnerable to the lack of meaning-making in our everyday lives, but the storm before us has exacerbated the situation a hundred-fold.

From this perspective,I would like to suggest that the pandemic reaching the world population in March 2020 – and that a year later is still in full stride –has further restricted our access to "transcendental experiences."In turn, there has been an even greater collapse of self-transcendence and, as a result, a diminishment of meaning-making in our lives. This leads to a loss of hope and arises in despair. There is an unrelenting feeling of uncertainty: we don't know quite what to do with it or where to go to resolve it. Our coping mechanisms have collapsed; our usual sense of routine and our ability to depend on solutions to that which ails – whether sacred or secular – have all but vanished. Our spiritual energy appears to be depleted, and we feel even more disconnected from the "fullness" which we strive to achieve in our lives.

When I mention "spiritual energy" or access to "transcendental experiences," I'm not speaking merely to the cancellation of prayer services or masses, the closure of churches entirely, or the reduction of volunteer services, whereby members of faith-filled communities contribute to the common good through self-giving sacrificial love. I am speaking to these, but the range of transcendental experiences whereby we engage reality beyond our personal and conscious sphere is much greater than these, and we have been all but deprived of them on a massive level.

Let us continue with a brief analysis of transcendence to deepen our understanding of its role in human becoming and human flourishing. We'll then look briefly at a contributing voice from psychology (Victor Frankl), from the poetry community (Rumi), and from theology (Karl Rahner*)* to grasp how these three writers, from within their discipline, appreciate the human person as a self-transcending being.A critical examination of all of this from the perspective of meaning-making and self-becoming, viewed through the lens of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, follows before some concluding remarks.

What Is Transcendence?

The noun "transcendence" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the ability to go beyond the usual limits; existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level" (Oxford Learners Dictionary, n.d.). Although frequently identified as a religious expression or experience, transcendence or self-transcendence is not merely for the religious or pietistic – it is a phenomenon integral to what it means to be human before reaching its religious expression.

Contemporary research in the humanities and social sciences shows that people who see themselves as being related to something greater than themselves often feel happier and have a deeper sense of purpose in their lives. Generally speaking, we can say that the human spirit is the underlying dynamism of human self-transcendence, which intentionally directs itself naturally to what can be known and loved even though we cannot yet clearly know or identify it. The human spirit is not designed to be enclosed in itself, but to go out into the world and to reach out to other persons, noble quests, and, at times, even to self-giving sacrificial love to the extreme (Helminiak, 1987, 2008, 1986).

In this way, self-transcendence reflects the spiritual nature of being human. The quest of superseding the self is a spiritual quest; it is an expression of spirituality (Perrin, 2007).

Human beings, by their very nature, strive "to go beyond the usual limits" and "beyond the normal or physical level."We see this phenomenon displayed in a wide range of ways:

- in sports of all kinds – the Olympic Games readily come to mind;
- in music– symphonies, for example, take us into the depths of the human spirit and carry us to sublime worlds of peace and harmony, mindfulness and self-reflection;

- in serial television shows such as *The Amazing Race* – a globe-trotting adventure that took the contestants to the extreme limits of the humanly possible;
- in poetry – think of the great epic poem *The Odyssey*, which delves into the most transcendental of human quests: love, forgiveness, loyalty, and retribution, to name but a few.

All these experiences are beyond the physical dimension of human existence. Yet they are all real. They envelop us every day of our lives. They are the pursuits through which we will engage with heroic virtue and for which we will sacrifice our lives. Indeed, these types of human experiences lead us into the most profound expressions of what it means to be human and make sense of our lives.

Exercising our capacity for self-transcendence – that is, to move toward a greater reality –has been defined by Bernard Lonergan as authentic existence (Braman, 2008). Lonergan was a Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian. For him, living an authentic existence is the basis for growth toward full spiritual development. He outlines four dimensions of the human that are each engaged to nurture human development on all levels: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. For Lonergan, these four dimensions of human life constitute the transcendental principles of development involved in the structure of our existence and, as such, can lead to self-transcendence becoming an integral part of our lives (Lonergan, 1992). They may seem obvious at first, but exercising them in their depth will challenge us to the core.

Through his analysis of the human subject, Lonergan points to a tension between the faith-based and secular dimensions of human life in contemporary society. He tries to resolve this tension by understanding better the human capacity for self-transcendence common to both. Lonergan deeply believed that to achieve our authentic existence, we have to develop our ability of self-transcendence on all levels: for example, spiritual engagement, ethical behavior, and intellectual knowing. In short, for Lonergan, movements to self-transcendence precede the desire to find meaning; it is fuelled by the kind of restlessness of the heart described by Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine (1961) writes about his own heart's restlessness to describe for us how every human heart remains restless until it rests in God. Another way of saying this is that every heart longs for self-transcendence – it longs for something more; for the Christian,

this "more" is resting in the heart of God. Ironically, the closer one gets to rest in the heart of God, the more restless one becomes! John of the Cross, a 16th-century Spanish mystic, knew this well (St. John of the Cross, 1991). He explains that the closer one gets to God, the more intense the hunger, since closeness to God produces a surplus of desire: one becomes aware of what one, in the end, cannot attain because of the infinite gap between the human and the Divine. For the Christian, there are many temporary stopovers, but in the end, self-transcendence has as its goal a discovery of the embrace of God's love deeply felt, as much as it is possible in this life.

A Voice from Psychology: Victor Frankl

Some current philosophers and theologians, as well as psychologists, are turning to the concept of self-transcendence to explain the growth in happiness, hope, and the meaning of life in the general population. Secular psychologists are beginning to identify self-transcendence, a newer word in their vocabulary, as the foundation for an increase in contentment and life meaning. Indirectly, these psychologists are entering into the field of spirituality broadly defined (Perrin, 2007). However, this is not an entirely new phenomenon, even though it is increasingly being investigated by secular psychologists today (Frey &Vogler, 2019).[4]

According to Frankl (2006, 1988), the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor, we actualize our capacity for self-transcendence simply by creating something new or contributing something positive to this world. Frankl developed a treatment called *logotherapy*. It is based on the premise that the primary motivational force of an individual is to find meaning in life. Frankl believed that the most powerful force driving all human action and decision-making was the will-to-meaning, not will-to-power or even will-to-pleasure. Logotherapy is thus grounded in the spiritual dimension of human nature, as is self-transcendence (Jastrzebski, 2020).

He explains that self-transcendence can be achieved by experiencing the good of another person, the truth about some important idea, the beauty viewed in nature, cultural events and activities, or by offering

[4] I am grateful for this perspective and reference provided to me by Dr. Andrzej Jastrzebski, OMI, a professor at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada. See Jennifer Frey and Candace Vogler, eds., *Self-Transcendence and Virtue* (New York: Routledge, 2019). Used with permission.

someone *our*care.[5] All these experiences are the grist of ordinary life. We don't require grand gestures to do or experience all these things. Frankl believed it was in the ordinary and every day of human life where self-transcendence took shape; thus, the meaning-making which forms around self-transcendence is similarly in the ordinary and mundane. Frankl knew this not only as a professional psychiatrist and therapist but as someone who had gone through the atrocities of Nazi oppression while living in four concentration camps (1942–45), including Auschwitz. What Frankl discovered in the camps was that when we cannot change a situation, we are forced to change ourselves. His entire approach to psychiatry was grounded in this simple premise.

Wallace Stevens, the Harvard-educated lawyer, and poet – he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1955 –captures this entry into the deeper dimensions of reality and human life in his poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (verse 32):

> Throw away the lights, the definitions,
> And say of what you see in the dark
>
> That it is this or that it is that,
> But do not use the rotted names.
>
> How should you walk in that space and know
> Nothing of the madness of space,
>
> Nothing of its jocular procreations?
> Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand
>
> Between you and the shapes, you take
> When the crust of shape has been destroyed (Stevens, n.d.).

Stevens warns us to "throw away the definitions," to not "use the rotted names" – not to get caught deep in the tangled web of our rigid conceptualization of the world, as if all there is to life is what we can identify and name, and in doing so manipulate and control.

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[5] Martin Heidegger analyzes the human relationship to time as that within which human action (human existential living) takes place. His philosophical anthropology is organized around the concept of Care (*Sorge*). The temporality of human action is organized around this concept of Care. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 456–88. Paul Ricoeur, picking up on this idea from Heidegger, describes human within-time-ness as a "basic characteristic of Care, our being thrown among things, which tends to make our description of temporality dependent on the description of the things about which we care." Ricoeur, *Time and NarrativeI* [*TN I*] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 60.

Stevens, along with Lonergan, Augustine, John of the Cross, and Frankl, understands that transcendence, expressed in its many forms, provides a more fruitful avenue for engaged participation in the world that is beyond our immediate capacities or possibilities.Self-transcendence fills the void of what is-not-yet; it beckons us in-the-now in a direction whereby meaningful engagement in life is realized.

Self-transcendence assists us in the construction of a self accomplished by "trying on" expressions of the self nascent in the depths of our being but not yet fully realized. Engagement in transcendence allows us to enter the flux-and-flow of reality – a world always emerging – and appropriate the deeper dimensions of life which we desire, whether these be religious ideals or not. This is what Frankl discovered – he knew that meaningful engagement in the world was possible no matter how harsh the actual situation of oppression, deprivation, or exploitation. Frankl knew the secret was to be open to change to continuously make the better choice for the sake of preserving one's humanity for oneself and others.

A Voice from the Poetry Community: Jalaluddin Rumi

Artists of all kinds have known this truth since the beginning of time: poets, painters, sculptors, songwriters and singers, dancers, and playwrights, to name but a few. Through the act of play and other creative outlets, we dip into the cauldron of transcendence, drink deeply from its waters, and emerge to refresh our humanity anew. Playful behavior is not only paradigmatic to our childhood years but continues for the same purpose throughout our lifetime, albeit in different forms. We continue, or ought to continue, living in a world of wonder, imagination, and creativity throughout our lives. It is in engaging in transcendental activities, like the ones mentioned above, that we do this. Self-transcendence is a lifelong process.

Jalaluddin Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, scholar, Maturidic theologian, and Sufi mystic puts it this way: "Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment; Cleverness is mere opinion, bewilderment is intuition" (Barnhart, 2007, as cited in Morris, 2020).[6]Rumi wants to put all of our clever rationalizations in their proper place:concepts and

[6] I was introduced to Bruno Barnhart by Dr. Morris while he was a doctoral student at the University of Divinity, Australia. The citation following it, from Mark Burrows and Rumi, is also from Dr. Morris's dissertation. Used with permission. The writings of Bruno Barnhart remain a golden opportunity for future studies of self-transcendence both at the academic and personal level.

heady ideas ought not to be at the forefront of the pursuit of happiness and meaningful living. Rather, he says, pursues bewilderment, awe, and mystery to gain understanding into who you are, what you are about, and thereby gain personal knowledge about how to pursue a meaningful life.

Burrows (2005,pp. 350), in his article "Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable," also refers to Rumi and quotes him thus:

> Happy are those who know:
> Behind all words, the unsayable stands;
> And from that source alone, the infinite
> Crosses over to gladness, and to us –
>
> Free of our bridges,
> Built with the stone of distinctions;
> So that always, within each delight,
> We gaze at what is purely single and joined.

Artists of all kinds point to that which cannot be worded, seen, conceptualized, or pinned down in any way. With their craft, they point toward transcendence and engage it not outside of human reality but within it, and in so doing drag us along – even sometimes when we least suspect that we have entered into another level of living, another level of being.

Conceptual frameworks or rational ideas, as our artistic authors above, testify, labor to achieve this kind of access to the deeper dimensions of existence, its meanings, and its ultimate *telos*. Artisticengagement in transcendence allows us to live "in that space" opened up by the transcendental artistic activity and to appropriate some of its energy, vision, and values. It points *us* in the direction *it* is pointing.

Engagement in artistic transcendence, whatever the modality, provides insight into our world and our self. It provides the avenue for growth in self-understanding concerning the multiple and many relationships which carry us throughout not only our daily activities but those which extend over an entire lifetime. Self-transcendence, ultimately, bathes us in the source of our lives – whatever that source is named. When we are cut off from this "source" of spirituality,our human spirit withers; we begin to sense a lack of well-being; we find ourselves adrift in a world without meaning or direction. In a metaphorical sense, the human capacity for self-transcendence can be seen as a kind of

continuous protest against reality,beating back the existential dread of the mundane and living a life without consequence or meaning.

A Voice from Theology: Karl Rahner

Many well-known theologians contribute to our understanding of self-transcendence from a theological point of view. Rahner, a German Catholic theologian, is an excellent example for our reflection.

Rahner proposes an active version of self-transcendence, which he defines as a dynamism present in the fundamental constitution of the human being (Hogan, 1998). This dynamism enables us to shape our own identity and improve our own lives. In theological terms, this process is activated by the power of the absolute fullness of being (God), where the finite being is empowered to actively self-transcend. Therefore, for Rahner, the power of self-transcendence does not originate in the human being; its roots are Divine. Active self-transcendence also has its historical and relational dimensions. According to Rahner, self-transcendence must be understood as the result of continuous efforts of humanity to"push out" and pursue cherished goals and values in "the now." The same dynamism of human being at the basis of religious self-transcendence is at the basis of the effort to achieve the goals, for example, of the musician, athlete, or dancer (Perrin, 1997).[7]

For Rahner, however, both the religious and the non-religious person achieve self-transcendence through a community of persons:

> The only way human beings achieve self-realization is through encounters with their fellow human beings, persons who are rendered present to their experience in knowledge and love and the course of their personal lives, persons, therefore, who are not things or matter, but human beings (Hogan, 1998).

Rahner emphasized that the unquenchable desire for human beings to know and thus to be human is to constantly question, probe, explore, and ask questions with others. Ultimately, this quest for knowing settles into the questions of the meaning of one's existence against the horizon of the intuition of something beyond the immediate,before which he/she exists in a relationship. For the Christian, this "beyond

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[7] This article analyzes three fundamental human desires: the desire to "have," the desire to "power," and the desire to "esteem" (self-worth). The theological anthropology of John of the Cross and the philosophical anthropology of Paul Ricoeur support these three as *the* fundamental desires to self-transcendence.

the immediate" is called God – the ground of human life and in whose image human beings have been created.

Therefore, the theological concept of self-transcendence can also be related to a core topic in theological anthropology: the doctrine of the *imago Dei.* With its roots in Genesis 1:26-27, it states that the human being has been created in the image and likeness of God.[8] The key to this concept, in the frame of Rahner's relational theological anthropology, is that the *imago Dei* is not a theoretical self, emerging completely at the time of birth;it is a gradual and progressive reflection of the *imago Dei*, inherent in each human being that is polished and brought to fruition throughout a lifetime.[9]The *imago Dei* is a self who more closely reflects God's image in the navigation of the choices made in mundane and everyday life. Thus emerges the ethical responsibility tied to the *imago Dei*: it is a communal reality since the self-in-community reflects God's ways of Divine-Being in history.

Rahner's contribution to our reflection on self-transcendence links it to God's abiding presence in the human soul through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that is the driving force of meaning-making for the Christian, the driving force "pushing us out" beyond the boundaries of our skin to be with and for one another in meaningful and loving relationships.

A Critical Analysis: Paul Ricoeur

What does the philosophical tradition have to say about these realities? How does philosophy account for the potential for life to be meaningfully lived – with purpose, joy, and happiness? What does philosophy have to say about self-transcendence?

Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher who died in 2005, suggests that the events of life can be dynamically organized into a plot – a process he calls "emplotment" (Ricoeur, 1984).This representation, or"mimesis,"

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[8] There are other passages to consider which are important to the biblical development of the belief that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God: 2 Corinthians 4:4-4; Colossians 1:15-20; John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3-4; and Romans 8:29 all contribute to our understanding of this important Christian concept.

[9] See the in-depth analysis of the *imago Dei* done by Stanley J. Grenz in "The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Theology of the *Imago Dei* in the Postmodern Context," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 1 (June 2002), 33–57. This article is a synopsis of his book-length work *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

refers to "the active process of imitating or representing something" (Ricoeur, 1984). Mimesis is a fecund production that results in the production of works of all kinds, not only at the level of one's life but in the production of art.For Ricoeur,the process of mimesis is at the foundation of human productions, from plays to paintings, from buildings to bridges.

Following Emmanuel Kant and his concept of the productive imagination, Ricoeur acknowledges that human beings alone can intervene in the flow and flux of reality. They can find spaces in reality that can be entered to bring about a metamorphosis of reality through human productions and artistic creations and in so doing transform their own lives and the world around them (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 45).[10] Through emplotment, the "maker of the plot" can reconfigure and make transparent "our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience" (Ricoeur, 1984).

According to Ricoeur, poets, painters, sculptors, songwriters and singers, dancers, playwrights, and so on who engage in mimetic activity dynamically interpret the world in the present, such that the subject is carried into a meaningful future (Perrin, 2018). Within Ricoeur's philosophical framework, human-being (*Dasein*) (Langan, 1959)[11] engages in the representation of human actions and being through the activity of emplotment, that is, the engagement of the world of transcendence. According to Ricoeur, human beings are human-becomings through the creative activity of the creation of artistic works(Ricoeur, 1984; Ricoeur, 1970).

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[10] As Ricoeur states: "If we translate mimesis by 'representation' (as do Dupont-Roc and Lallot), we must not understand by this word some redoubling of presence, as we could still do for Platonic mimesis, but rather the break that opens the space for fiction. Artisans who work with words produce not things but quasi-things; they invent the as-if. And in this sense, the Aristotelian mimesis is the emblem of the shift [*décrochage*] that, to use our vocabulary today, produces the 'literariness' of the work of literature."

[11] Martin Heidegger suggests that *Dasein* (human being) discovers itself, and in this propensity the uniqueness of being human is laid bare. Martin Heidegger's ground-breaking work *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), published in 1927, works out the framework for this conclusion. Thomas Langan succinctly captures Heidegger's position in this way: "Because he knows that he will die, Dasein takes possession, like no other thing does, of the course of his personal destiny, even before it is in fact realized. Consequently, when Heidegger speaks of Dasein as Being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) he signals the finite self-possession which characterized the free being who in projecting himself unfolds the reality of his own destiny."

What is being *re*presented through the activity of emplotment? From Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ricoeur answers this question: mimesis is the imitation or *re*-presentation of meaningful human action. Mimesis or representation captures active meaningful engagement in life.

What is important in this approach to self-transcendence is to understand that emplotment is an imitation of the fundamental structures of human acting, not an imitation of human beings acting or doing in particular historical instances. Works, the *complete range* of human productions, are not mere reflections of an individual life but engage the structures of life itself. Ricoeur suggests that human action has a universal structure (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 41). Artistic productions cannot help but confront this deeper understanding of the dynamics of human beings striving for self-understanding and self-discovery through the productions, the works, of human living and activity (Ricoeur, 1981).

Through poetic works, through metaphors, we "think" beyond the conceptual limits of human existence (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 80; Ricoeur, 1977a).[12]Metaphors create "models" of what the deepest structures of reality "are like." Ricoeursuggests that "seeing-as" (accomplished by the work of artistic expression) be given full ontological meaning. "Seeing-as" is thus correlated with "being-as." This is the referential work of poetic discourse. We thus"become" – to a degree at least –that which we participate in. This appropriation is akin to the disclosure of"Being" – and for the Christian, this is the Christian God: the Being who endows life with all-purpose and meaning.

Ricoeur thus correlates *seeing-as* through the metaphor saturated in poetic works with *being-as* in reality (Ricoeur, 1975).[13] What is at stake in the engagement of artistic expressionis the interpretation and construction of existence (Ricoeur, 1973).[14]

[12] Ricoeur, *TN I*, 80. "When the poet says that 'nature is a temple where living columns…' the verb *to be* does not just connect the predicate *temple* to the subject *nature* … The copula is not only relational. It implies besides, by means of the predicative relationship, that *what is*isredescribed; it says that things really are this way."

[13] "Poetic language does not say literally what things are, but what they are like. It is in this oblique fashion that it says what they are."

[14] Ricoeur takes this "ontological turn" in response to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*,mentioned above. The shift in hermeneutical methodology which occurred with Heidegger is essentially one that previously was preoccupied with epistemology (textual meaning or what can be known from texts) to one focused on the questions of fundamental ontology (the meaning of human existence, that is, of *Dasein* or the meaning of being).

Poetic making engages the world of transcendence – that world to which we primordially belong but do not yet know in its fullness. Artistic engagement strives to break open and name this world such that we are ever more securely inserted into it. Poetic works speak of both objects *and* transcendence, but even when they speak of objects, they do so in ways that cause us to reflect on those objects in new ways.

This is why Ricoeur's analysis of artistic doing is relevant for our reflection on the collapse of transcendence amid the pandemic we are currently facing. Artistic engagement is all about probing, exploring, and embodying anew the transcendent nature of life (Ricoeur, 1977b). This is to say that poetic productions make possible, in a particular way, access to the transcendental nature of life.

The prejudice that scientific discourse alone discovers and describes reality is therefore challenged (Ricoeur, 1977, pp. 254-55).For us as subjects of the Cartesian cogito and wholly awash in Enlightenment rationalism, the truth has been too heavily solidified within the conceptual rather than the poetic. We need to take this insight seriously. When we cut off the poetic, or are cut off from it, our humanity is diminished because our quest for self-transcendence is stifled.

The disclosure of this world through the non-ostensive references of poetic works "allows the world of ouroriginary rootedness to appear" (Ricoeur, 1977b, pp. 26).For Christians, this originaryrootedness is a life in God: created by God, sustained by God, and brought to the fullness of happiness (*eudemonia*) by God.

This approach to artistic works opens up the potential of the transformative event that *is* the work being taken up anew in a life when being viewed, listened to, felt, or otherwise engaged in a myriad of ways. It is here that we encounter the ontological moment of mimesis: a *new being* is given as a result of the encounter with the transcendental work. One's life is enlarged, insight is possible, and the human subject experiences his or her subjectivity in new dimensions (Ricoeur, 1991).[15]

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[15] "Narration preserves the meaning that is behind us so that we can have meaning before us. There is always more order in what we narrate than in what we have actually lived; and this narrative excess (*surcroît*) or order, coherence and unity, is a prime example of the creative power of narration [of a work]" pp. 468.

Conclusion

What are the consequences for understanding self-transcendence as presented above? Our reflection tells us that we as human beings, prior to any faith commitment, strive to engage in something larger than ourselves. We strive to be in communion with the wholeness of reality from within whatever perspective we understand that reality to be. For the Christian, participation in this "larger than ourselves" reality leads to a profound sense of personal freedom. This freedom is the foundation for proper Christian living, which includes self-transcendence in the forms of prayer and worship (Perrin, 2019). Not to have some sense of this freedom to which self-transcendence pulls us is to remain at the level of ritual blindness and rule-driven decision-making, but that is a topic for another reflection.

As we have seen, self-transcendence gives access to a world in the process of becoming. Through our engagement in transcendence, we participate in that very becoming; we become co-creators with the One who first created and continues to do so through us.If we reflect on our own experience, we will easily identify that feelings and human emotions are particularly important in this dynamic (Perrin, 1996). Through feelings, we "participate" in the transcendent and become intertwined with it to the point that we take on that which we "feel."We feel "goodness" and we become "good"; we feel "hope" and we become "hopeful"; we feel there is some meaning to our lives and we become meaningfully engaged with the world.

Is it not through artistic productions and human engagements of all kinds that we "feel" the truth of the world in its depth?The sad song makes us sad; the lyrical poem brings us joy; the rousing musical makes us feel good about ourselves; the witnessingof the destruction of the villain by the good guys makes us feel safe; the conquest of the impossible in the play gives us hope; the triumph of our beloved football team makes usfeel proud;the success of our son or daughter causes great pride and so on.Human participation in these transcendent activities is at the foundation of the meaning of one's daily activities and, in the end, contributes to the meaning of one's life, as we have seen through the witness of psychology, poetry, theology, and philosophy – brief as each analysis may have been.

For the Christian, the development of the transcendent self becomes ever more closely a reflection of God's nature primordially inscribed

into the human being through the indwelling of God in the human soul. In the Christian tradition, this concept has been linked with the idea of the human person being the *imago Dei*, the image of God.Christian ethics describe the transcendent values toward which the movement of self-transcendenceis directed. These arevirtues such as justice, love, reconciliation, and peace. For the Christian, the foundation of the self-transcending spirit in the human being is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Self-transcendence is the fundamental human desire which takes us out of ourselves, our egocentric tendencies into the world, toward the others, and, finally, for the Christian, directs us toward God (Ross, 2012). But our wings have been clipped, as Charles Taylor reminded us at the beginning of this conference. Engagement in self-transcendence has been stymied by the drift of the Western world away from a preoccupation with "ultimate value" over the past 400 years. The pandemic has pushed us even further away from a self that is already decentred and further away from self-transcending and transcendental activities.

The pandemic poses a major threat to self-transcendence because it dehumanizes on so many levels.Especially vulnerable are the racialized, the economically poor, and others who are disenfranchised in so many ways – but again, the reason forthis is a topic for another reflection.

For now, what we can say is that the pandemic has emptied us of many of our routines and our daily meaning-making activities.As a result, we feel empty, perhaps even adrift, exiled in our own home. As a response, we need to remember what brings us life, meaning, and joy. We need to recollect who – authentically – we are.

So, we need to find ways, at least in this next while, to engage self-transcendence asan antidote to the disheartened self that is emerging in the current context. We will need to find our way again; ironically,we need to get back to the *mundane* world of self-transcendence.

Living during this time of pandemic means we need to be more intentional and mindful about our activity, our choices during the day, the routines that carry us from sunrise to sunset and beyond. Allowing the day to simply "carry us through" is risky during these times. Deep intentionality and mindfulness in how we live each day are more important than ever. We can't afford to simply drift through each day without some "check-in" moments: establishing the minimum of a

routine or schedule that keeps us grounded and intentionally focused on what's happening beneath the surface of our skin. Being in touch with those we care about is crucial. Self-care is needed now more than ever. Perhaps a new meaning-making activity is needed: cooking, at-home exercise (such as yoga), or picking up a musical instrument for the first time.

Early monastic communities, intentionally isolated or cloistered in their monasteries and abbeys, were fully aware of the dangers of the lack of meaning-making activities. For example, the *Rule of Benedict*, written by the monk Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century, outlines a healthy and balanced schedule of work, prayer, and community time (Chittister, 2017). Benedict knew it wasn't just in the monastery chapel that God was encountered, but in the active-relational from sunrise to sunset and in between.

What are the little things that provide meaningful engagement in your day; with others; for yourself? What are those things that punctuate the day and provide a moment of meaningful engagement? Being attentive to these things keeps us in touch with our humanity and the truth of who we are: before ourselves, before others, and, for the Christian, before God. Even entertainment, limited as it may be during these times, ought to be chosen with some intentionality as to its meaning-making engagement.

Entertainment is never a "mere" diversion – something we do when we want to fill empty time. Entertainment is not passive participation but active engagement in that which shapes us – consciously or not. Entertainment is alluring because it takes us deep into ourselves, into our deepest desires and passions. Entertainment dredges these to the surface, even if only briefly. But there is a trace left behind. And because these desires are insatiable, we will go back and drink again. Entertainment is human-being becoming-human, and surely each of us could use a little bit of this in these trying times.

A conscious and intentional reflection on how we engage transcendence given the shuttering of churches and entertainment venues alike is due.Perhaps this ought to be our prayer: to know the grace of how God invites us to self-transcendence in everyday, in the moment of the "simple-now,"rather than the grand, big, and dramatic. We need to know from whence we drink of transcendence in the good days and the bad; in the moments of tragic loss and the moments of

new birth and new life.This is the human quest to which we are all destined.

Self-transcendence does not lie in an other-worldly preoccupation that advocates escape from the world; rather, self-transcendence lies in our freedom to act from a center of self-giving love that draws life from beyond the narrow boundaries of the narcissistic ego.The transcendent quality of the self lies in our capacity to overcome the inhibitions of self-centered activity to reach out toward one's brothers and sisters in gratuitous and graced love.For the Christian, the transcendent character of the self is shaped by the emergence of God's life in the finite world of human activity, whereby the mundane world of human activity becomes the place of God's saving divine presence.

It is not lost on mystics and spiritual practitioners of all kinds, such as Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu, that the pandemic is inviting us – each of us – to consider these insights for ourselves and our loved ones. Cut off from routine transcendental activity, in whatever form that takes, we are cut off from the vine that nurtures the ever-replenishing Spring of life in which new hope, new meaning, and new love take root and bloom in our everyday activities. We need to remedy this situation in whatever way best suits us, knowing we can because God has gone there before us and shown us the Way.

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