

Chapter 4

The “Situated” Self

The Self, Now and Then

In the preceding chapter we saw that the Old Testament had some distinctive answers to its own question, “What is the human being that you pay attention to them?” These answers were inseparable from its particular language, concepts and theology. Its range of vocabulary, such as “heart,” soul,” and “spirit,” far from depicting discrete components of the human being, served to explore it in its complexity, both inward and embodied. The picture included a certain unity of mind, emotion and will, as well as a pervasive orientation of the individual towards others, both God and fellow humans. In our search for what makes the human, therefore, we have begun to find that the answer is bound into wider views of reality and meaning.

This is true as much for modern understandings of the self as for ancient ones. One cannot think in a detached way about “who I am.” Ideas of human identity and meaning vary according to cultural and intellectual environments. The heading of this section, “The Self, Now and Then,” is intended to convey this point about diverse conceptions of the person. Such diverse conceptions even co-exist within what we may think of as “our” time and culture, and it is important to carry an awareness of this into our examination of what it means to enquire of the Bible for an answer to our question.

The point has been pursued in an influential work by the philosopher Charles Taylor, who has given a penetrating analysis of the rise of the “secular age” in the modern west out of its roots in late medieval religious apprehension of reality.¹ The broad thrust of his thesis is that versions of modern thought, notably what he calls “exclusive humanism,”² have developed their character, not by simply shedding belief in God and the sacred, but in dialectical relationship with the medieval Christian construction of reality in which belief in God and the sacred was largely unquestioned. Modern secularism is thus itself a specific construction of reality, with recognizable religious and intellectual ancestry, rather than the self-evidently value-free position, finally rid of the hindrances of superstition, that it often purports to be. If the medieval synthesis was undergirded, in Taylor’s terms, by a certain “social imaginary,” so also are modern apprehensions of reality which have their own unexamined pre-conceptions about what is self-evident.³

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). For a full analysis of Taylor’s thesis, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “Spirituality in a Secular Age: From Charles Taylor to Study of the Bible and Spirituality,” in *The Spirit That Inspires: Perspectives on Biblical Spirituality* (ed. Pieter de Villiers and Lloyd K. Pietersen (eds.), Acta Theologica Supplementum 15; Bloemfontein: University of the Free State Press, 2011), 61-80.

² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 42.

³ Taylor’s idea of a “social imaginary” is his way of describing the complex range of unspoken, pre-cognitive assumptions that operate in any society; see the chapter entitled “Modern Social Imaginaries,” in *Secular Age*, 171-76.

The construal of the human person is a crucial aspect of the series of shifts that Taylor charts. People understood themselves differently then and now because they imagined themselves differently in relation to the external world. In the medieval “imaginary,” the meanings apprehended and accepted by people were givens, fixed by the nature of the external reality that was accepted by all. The world, so conceived, was “enchanted,” that is, governed by forces that were beyond observation but that powerfully influenced people and events. In this world, demons and angels were vividly present to the imagination. People believed that they might become demon-possessed, and hoped for protection from the “good magic” represented by the church.⁴ The individual in this imagined world is what Taylor calls “porous,”⁵ being unavoidably open to penetration by such influences.

By contrast, in what may still be the dominant modern “imaginary,” the human person is conceived more individualistically, in a way that separates him or her more definitely both from society and from the external world. No longer “porous,” this individual may be described as “buffered.” That is, they think of themselves as more or less independent of influences either from society or the external world. For them, meanings are no longer given and inescapable, but arise within the mind, and they can choose to protect themselves from unwanted external influences by the exercise of choice and will.⁶

“Social imaginaries” are not absolute in any time or place, however. If the Enlightenment appeared to set a new standard for understanding humanity in the supreme value of Reason, this was offset by an emerging awareness that the self and its relation to the universe had darker, mysterious aspects. The growing understanding of the vastness of the universe was one element in this, as was the advance of the belief in evolution, as well as a perception that the human consciousness itself had hidden depths. These elements were somewhat linked, in the sense that evolution gave to humans an unknown and impenetrable past, which left a legacy in the unconscious mind.⁷ One effect of this was, for some, to re-discover profound connections between themselves and the external world.⁸

My point in observing this is to present the conception of the human person as a question, a challenge both to the understanding and to the practice of living. The intention of the modern reader to engage with the Bible in order to understand the nature of humanity turns out to have dimensions that might not be grasped at first. This is because, first, I may carry with me, unawares, notions of selfhood that I have imbibed from the common culture, and which I have not yet sufficiently named and interrogated. And second, issues of the meaning of the self are in fact being openly contested in the wider cultural

⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, e.g. 32, 42.

⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 35, cf. 42 (“the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors”).

⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 37-38, 41-42.

⁷ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 322-51, especially 343-51.

⁸ Taylor cites Coleridge and Wordsworth, and the German Romantic Johann Gottfried von Herder, among others, and characterizes the kind of sentiment they represent thus: “As creatures who come to be who we are out of animal nature, which in turn rises from the non-animate, we cannot but feel a kinship with all living things, and beyond them with the whole of nature,” *Secular Age*, 344.

environment, in ways that bear directly on our modern attempt to allow the Bible to speak to us.

The chief areas of contention over the meaning of the person have already been encountered in our reading of Genesis 1-3. These include the nature of the human as both individual and relational, and the several aspects of the human's relationships, that is, between human persons, with God, and with the earth. They also include the matter of how human beings may be said to apprehend the truth about reality. In Genesis, this is at the heart of the humans' situation, as exposed in their desire to have their "eyes opened," to be "like God," and to "know good and evil." Knowledge of reality is thus entwined with the readiness to be accountable in God's world for the responsibilities bestowed upon them in virtue of their creation "in the image and likeness of God."

In what follows, we consider these topics in the context of modern understanding and debate.

Individuality and Relationship

We are deeply habituated, in modern western society, to the idea that as human beings we are individuals. There is a sense in which individuality is an irreducible aspect of the human experience. As Raymond Van Leeuwen puts it:

No matter how close humans come to knowing one another, even in the one flesh that is marriage, we remain individual persons, unique centers of consciousness and responsibility, each with his or her own hiddenness.⁹

Yet we recognize that the way in which individuality is conceived in relation to groups varies across societies. Arguably, there is always a concept of individuality even in societies which place strong emphasis on group identity. Biblical Israel had a strong sense of group identity. When individuals behaved badly in Israel their whole "house" might be held guilty, as in the case of Achan (Josh 7), or at least shamed. The latter possibility explains why families were involved in careful negotiations in matters of sexuality and marriage (as in Deuteronomy 22), or indeed in bringing their own rebellious children to public justice (Deut 21:18-21). As John Rogerson has shown, however, it is hard to prove that this strong solidarity derives from some kind of primitive mentality.¹⁰ And criminal responsibility in the biblical laws is generally borne by individuals, and this is even established as a principle in one of them (Deut 24:16; cf. Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18).

⁹ R. Van Leeuwen, "The Book of Proverbs" in *The New Interpreter's Bible V* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 19-264 (140). John Macquarrie employs the term "egoity" to refer to "the condition of being an ego or a self," and says: "...there could be no normal human experience, no freedom, responsibility, or transcendence, but for the *hegemenikon*, the leading edge which finds expression in the pronoun 'I': Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity: a Theological and Philosophical Approach* (London: SCM, 1982), 38, 39. See also ch. 3, at n. 30.

¹⁰ John Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 55-58.

Modern individualism has roots in ideas that pit individuals rather more radically against society and each other, and is usually traced to Thomas Hobbes.¹¹ In his thesis about the place of the individual in society he argued that the individual's interests were in principle at odds with the interests both of others and of society as a whole, in a "war of all against all."¹² The remedy against the chaos which must surely result from this natural way of things was in the relationship between the individual and the ruling power. The individual made certain sacrifices of personal freedom, by way of a "contract" in which they received in exchange the benefits that government could provide, in the form of security. His thesis had a specific context and purpose, namely to protest, in the context of seventeenth century wars of religion, against the shocking waste of life on the part of people who were being "conned by pious nonsense into fighting battles that didn't concern them and ending up dead."¹³ As a piece of writing, it had strong rhetorical and pragmatic features.

Routes from Hobbes to modern forms of individualism are charted by Mary Midgley. For her, the idea that the individual's interests might be at odds with those of others, or society at large, has modern echoes, for example, in the belief that we are fundamentally, indeed genetically, selfish. This understanding of individuality has gained iconic expression in Richard Dawkins' idea of the "selfish gene."¹⁴ Midgley shows that Dawkins, while claiming the intellectual inheritance of Darwin, is indebted rather to T. H. Huxley, who painted a picture of early human development as a story of the internecine struggle for survival.¹⁵ Darwin had a quite different understanding, actually rejecting "selfishness" as an explanation of conventional morality, and finding rather a tendency to sociability and co-operation in human, and animal, history.¹⁶ She goes on to draw attention to the tendency of modern research to find interdependence and co-operation at the genetic level, and indeed that natural selection, with its implication of perpetual struggle, cannot be the only mechanism of evolution.¹⁷

Midgley wages war against all forms of reductionism in the attempt to explain human nature. The notion of deep-seated selfishness is one such reduction, because it fails to account for actual complexity in human development and motivation. Other forms of reductionism are found in Nietzsche and Freud, with their fixation on overriding motives for behaviour in power and sex.¹⁸ These have value in drawing attention to characteristics of ourselves that we find it hard to confront, but they fail as totalizing explanations.

In general, those explanations of human nature that lay heavy stress on the individual's ultimate solitariness, or selfishness, fail to explain significant aspects of human

¹¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Dent, 1931, original 1651).

¹² Mary Midgley, *The Solitary Self* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 117.

¹³ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 117-19 (118).

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Granada, 1976).

¹⁵ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 41-41; citing T. H. Huxley, "The Struggle for Existence and Its Bearing upon Man," *Nineteenth Century* (February 1888), 165.

¹⁶ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 10-12, cf. 15-33, 83-86.

¹⁷ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 97-108 (102). She chronicles modern offshoots of such thinking in radical individualists such as Ayn Rand; 127-28.

¹⁸ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 119.

existence. Midgley's interest in factors of interdependence and co-operation at fundamental levels of human development and being has consequences for her understanding of society and culture. And in observable experience, people often act in ways that belie a doctrine of radical selfishness, as when they live sacrificially, or even die, for the benefit of others. She is well aware here of reductive deconstructions of such behaviour, for example in the extreme individualism of the political theorist Ayn Rand, who preached "the gospel of laissez-faire capitalism" in mid-twentieth-century America.¹⁹

Marilynne Robinson too, in her extensive critiques of modern forms of human reductionism, has shown how these ideas continue to exert a powerful hold on the popular western imagination, finding them in the dominant version of capitalism in America (and the UK could be included in the point). When economic well-being is judged in terms of the relative success and failure of "competitors" and "rivals", when our gain is secured only by their loss, the spirit of Darwin is at work.²⁰ "Austerity" has assumed the form of an ethical imperative that gives a veneer of rectitude to what is in reality an antipathy to the concept of a co-operative society:

...whatever can be transformed from public wealth into private affluence is suddenly an insupportable public burden and should and must be put on the block...There is at present a dearth of humane imagination for the integrity and mystery of other lives.²¹

At stake in this relentless reduction of the human is, for Robinson, a hatred of civilization itself, that is, of the beneficial effects of institution and tradition that have nurtured countless lives over many generations, and been the cradle of "all the arts and sciences and philanthropies".²²

For both Midgley and Robinson, radical individualism has distorted social and political life. The valuable concept of the freedom of the individual can become self-defeating if it is absolutized into radical independence from claims upon us by others, or our own claims upon them.²³ The proper state of a human being is one in which the person is understood in their wholeness, "being aware of their various motives and being able to

¹⁹ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 127-28. She cites Rand: "The man who speaks to you of sacrifice is speaking of slaves and masters, and intends to be the master". The reference is not given, but she refers in the context to Rand's book *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957). There are echoes of both Hobbes and Nietzsche in this analysis.

²⁰ Robinson, "Austerity as Ideology," in Robinson, *When I was a Child I Read Books* (London: Virago, 2012): 35-58 (41-42).

²¹ Robinson, "Austerity as Ideology," 45.

²² Marilynne Robinson, "Darwinism," in Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998/2005): 28-75 (61-62).

²³ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 123-34. She refers in this context to the *topos* in Romantic literature of the young person who strains to be free from parental control, and other social conventions, 121-24. A celebrated example of the desperation of this Romantic urge was J. W. von Goethe's early novel, *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (1774; English: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), where the hero commits suicide, as the only escape from the pain of an impossible love affair. The publication of *Werther* reputedly triggered an epidemic of copycat suicides throughout Europe.

bring them all together,”²⁴ and in doing so to be open to influences from the surrounding world of which we form a part. This is wholly different from a view in which the individual retreats within himself or herself, into a self-preserving carapace. Such openness can only have benign consequences for civilized living, and worthwhile human endeavors, such as science and art. It also chimes with the biblical picture, in Genesis 1-3, more than with a model of the individual’s radical selfishness. Selfishness is of course, an inescapable fact of experience. In biblical perspective, however, it is not defined by biological determinism, but always lies under the prophetic call to repent.

Implications of a Relational View of Personhood

Health

This view of the person as both unified and relational has implications in various kinds of practice. The point is illustrated by certain strands of modern thinking about medicine, where is a recovery of the importance of understanding the whole person in the delivery of successful treatment. One influential advocate of this was the Swiss doctor, Paul Tournier, with his concept of *médecine de la personne*,²⁵ who recognized the importance of understanding the patient as an individual, with their various beliefs and commitments, including their religious ones, since such commitments were inalienably part of them and therefore inseparable from their sense of well-being. Tournier’s seminal work has been taken up by a number of scholars in academic medicine, notably in mental health.²⁶ For example, Thierry Collaud writes about the individual who is encountered in a medical context: “...every relationship with others is surrounded and conditioned by multiple third parties.”²⁷ Citing Emmanuel Levinas, he continues:

...we can never entirely take in the person we meet...There will always be something in him that opens out towards the infinite beyond, not least the world of other people...[The patient] is there before me with the life he has lived and with the life that opens up before him, with his beliefs, his values, his hopes and his fears.²⁸

He goes on to affirm a link between a person’s health and their will or decision, which may even involve “a fundamental reorientation of one’s way of life”; and he goes further, to put healthcare in the realm of the search for well-being, or the “good life,” “with and for

²⁴ Midgley, *The Solitary Self*, 143; see also 131-32. For the metaphor of life as a dance, in a Jewish context, see also M. Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: a Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum, 2009), 150-79.

²⁵ See his book of that name (Neuchâtel: Delachaud et Niestlé, 1940).

²⁶ See John Cox, Alastair V. Campbell and Bill (K.W.M.) Fulford, *Medicine of the Person: Faith, Science and Values* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2007).

²⁷ Thierry Collaud, ‘Beyond the Solitude for Two: Justice, Theology and General Practice’, in Cox, Campbell and Fulford (eds.), *Medicine of the Person*, 156-70 (157).

²⁸ Collaud, ‘Beyond the Solitude’, 158-59.

others,” that is, observing the sense in which the human person’s well-being cannot be abstracted from the various relationships within which they exist.²⁹

A similar argument has been advanced by the theologian John Swinton. In a work on spirituality, Swinton writes of the intersection of five aspects of personhood, namely the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual – where “spiritual” includes notions of transcendence, meaning, value, hope and purpose.³⁰ These five aspects are united by “the movement of the spirit” between them, so that they cannot be separated. Asserting the fundamentally spiritual nature of healing, he sets this against models of healthcare that see it chiefly on the technological plane. He cites N.N.Wig:

The dominance of techno-medicine has resulted in a redefinition of the issues which once preoccupied philosophers: What is human nature? How is happiness achieved? What is a good life? These questions have been restated as: What is normal? How can it be measured? What conclusions are generalizable?³¹

In Swinton’s special concern with mental health, the challenges to the well-being of a person appear sharply, as he documents cases of depression, in which the sufferers testify frequently to loss of meaning, abandonment, the disappointment of hopes and the failure of relationships.³² Healing was often associated with a renewed sense of connectedness with others, the relationships involved in the healing process themselves tending towards healing. And liturgy and worship could play a part in sustaining a sense of meaning in the face of intellectual difficulties and doubts. In his report of patients’ accounts of their experiences of depression, some cited the Old Testament’s Psalms of Lament as having enabled them to feel their problems were understood and identified with.³³

These approaches to health share a concern for the broader concept of what is often called well-being.” In their attempts to understand a person’s health, they draw attention to the question how the person relates to the world she or he lives in, and how these relationships bear upon their capacity to live a full and flourishing life. It is significant that they emanate from both theological and non-theological sources. The growing literature on “positive psychology,” or “positive philosophy,” further illustrates the modern recovery of

29 Collaud, ‘Beyond the Solitude’, 161, 163. On the latter point, he cites Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 169-202 (172).

30 John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Recovering a ‘Forgotten’ Dimension* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica King Publishers, 2001), 36-37. The five dimensions of personhood are based on H. E. Peplau, *Interpersonal Relations in Nursing* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1952).

31 N. N. Wig, Mary Hemingway Rees Memorial Lecture, World Federation of Mental Health, Trinity College, Dublin, 1995), 291; Swinton, *Spirituality*, 51. He also cites, in similar vein, Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 206; Swinton, 50.

32 Swinton, *Spirituality*, 112-22.

33 Swinton, *Spirituality*, 125-28. On the Psalms and the human person, see below, ch.10.

perspectives on the person that are recognizably biblical, even where the psychology in question is not expressly religious.³⁴

Ecology

The healing sciences have furnished one example of ways in which the existence of human persons is deeply involved with the world external to them, chiefly in regard to God and other people. Another vital human connection is with the non-human world in which we live. Human beings are inevitably “placed,” that is, their possibilities for life take shape in places.³⁵ The land as gift, and life-giving, is a central topic of Old Testament thought, developed at length in Deuteronomy. The Psalmist spoke of blessing in terms of being brought out of distress into “a broad place” (18:19 [20]; cf. Ps 16:6).

The topic of human “placedness,” on its broadest canvas, leads to the generally acknowledged threats that are currently posed to the earth’s biosystem, evident in what appear to be the increasing frequency and severity of catastrophic events. It is by now commonplace to recognize that the many parts that make up our world, including ourselves, are closely interconnected. Rachel Carson sounded the alarm on our failure to understand the extent to which human behaviour could dramatically alter the planet, with serious implications for all of life. She exposed the damage inflicted by the extensive use of pesticides up to the 1960s, with shocking examples of their power to cause illness and death. But quite apart from individual tragedies, she showed how chemical interventions in agricultural processes intended for specific purposes could interfere drastically with nature’s finely balanced interdependencies, with far-reaching and unpredictable effects.³⁶

The way in which we think of our relationship with the biosystem has been affected, like other areas of human life, by our cultural and philosophical heritage. Pierre Hadot has written of two sharply contrasting approaches to scientific knowledge, which he labels Promethean and Orphic. In the former, with its echo of the myth of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods for the benefit of humanity, the role of science is to wrench knowledge from a reluctant Nature. This concept may be associated with the early modern scientist Francis Bacon, who spoke of “torturing” Nature to force her to yield up her secrets.³⁷ Hadot

34 C. Robert Cloninger, a practicing psychiatrist, interestingly refers to his enterprise as “positive philosophy,” a category applied somewhat schematically from the biblical prophets and Plato through to Hegel, Gandhi, and the American Transcendentalists, such as Henry David Thoreau, for their transcendence of dualism, and their awareness of what Freud called “oceanic feelings”; Cloninger, *Feeling Good*, 68-69, cf. 106. Negative philosophy,” in contrast, is represented by, among others, William James, David Hume and Macchiavelli; *Feeling Good*, 9-19. Martin Seligman is aware that religion may have a reinforcing effect on a person’s sense of well-being, but thinks it is only one potentially positive influence among many; Martin Seligman, *Flourish* (London and Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2011), 90-92; also 259-62, where he chooses to avoid the term “spirituality”, preferring “transcendence,” to designate a “cluster of strengths” that are important, but in his view not necessarily religious.

³⁵ The land as theological topic was brought to prominence by Brueggemann, *The Land*; and on “place,” see Craig Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: a Christian View of Place Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

³⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin, 1962; London: Penguin, 1965).

³⁷ Pierre Hadot, *Veil of Isis: an Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 121.

repeatedly assigns the inspiration of such thinking to Genesis, because of its alleged subjection of the created world to human control. He was not alone in thinking that Genesis, with its demythologization of ancient Near Eastern myths, had robbed the created world of its mystery.³⁸ And in a celebrated essay Lynn White argued that the divine command to humans in Genesis to “subdue the earth” (KJV, NRSV, NIV) and “have dominion” over its creatures (Genesis 1:28) had contributed to a mindset in which the earth’s natural resources were simply available for exploitation in the interests of commercial development and growth.³⁹

Fifty years after Rachel Carson, there is widespread recognition that we face massive environmental challenges. There is also a realization that these cannot be disentangled from a sense of who we are as human beings. It is not just that we must be more careful with a world conceived as a living space with limited resources; it is that we have an unalterable relationship with the planet that belongs to our nature as humans. We have already noticed James Lovelock’s “Gaia theory”, a kind of re-mythologization, or “re-enchantment” of the earth, in which it is seen as a living organism, with the capacity to preserve its necessary balances by regulating itself.⁴⁰ This is one way of re-imagining the world in response to the destructive imaginings that have been implicated in the current crisis. The Gaia hypothesis may overstate the earth’s self-regulating capacity. Yet the dangers of interfering with the delicate balances and profound interdependencies in the “Goldilocks zone” that is our world are all too clear.⁴¹ If Prometheus provided an icon for masterful exploitation, Hadot’s alternative icon is Orpheus, whose music was so beautiful that it could charm nature. By invoking it, he advocates an approach based on an understanding of the limits of the human capacity to know and control. At the same time, he expresses a perception that the world, or Nature, resists being subjected to instrumental use. Hadot grounds his thought in philosophical sources, yet the theme of the dangers of knowledge is clearly also biblical, the story of the Garden in Genesis 2-3 standing like a sentinel against Promethean readings of Genesis 1.⁴²

The earth crisis now exerts an enormous influence on human consciousness, affecting every sphere of life, and may rightly be regarded as a spiritual issue. Ursula King has addressed the relationship between spirituality and global issues in several places.⁴³ For her the crisis facing humanity is not a matter of ecology in the narrow sense, but rather, “a deep spiritual crisis” that calls for “a new vision, a new global order.”⁴⁴ In this crisis many

³⁸ The point was lamented by the poet Friedrich Schiller in his poem *Die Götter Griechenlands (The Gods of Greece)*.

³⁹ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155:3767 (1967): 1203-07.

⁴⁰ James Lovelock, *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

⁴¹ The term “Goldilocks zone, where it is “not too hot, not too cold, but just right,” is sometimes used for a star’s “circumstellar habitable zone,” meaning the space in which conditions are right for supporting life.

⁴² See above, ch. 2, on Genesis 2-3.

⁴³ Ursula King, “Can Spirituality Transform our World,” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1(2011), 17-34; also *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for Meaning and Fulfilment* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ I am quoting here from a paper given by Ursula King in a Bible and Spirituality seminar at the University of Gloucestershire, which was based on the works cited above.

areas that pose challenges to us in the twenty-first century are inter-related, including matters of justice, economics, gender, racialism, religion, war and violence, health, population, poverty and hunger. Human beings are being forced, perhaps for the first time, to face up to the oneness of humanity, with the moral and spiritual challenges that that entails. The spiritual nature of the crisis is being recognized within a range of academic disciplines, such as health and education, in a re-discovery that spirituality is not just something pursued inwardly by individuals. She cites the *Earth Charter*, published in 2000, following at length on the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, accommodating voices from across cultural and religious perspectives, expressing the awareness that earth is home to a great diversity of peoples. And she speaks of a new “earth-consciousness,” manifest in a sense of wonder in the planet engendered in media such as television, with its power to observe the living planet in unprecedented ways. Such consciousness has also made its mark in new academic methodologies, such as “ecocriticism.”⁴⁵

In King’s advocacy of a new vision for a humanity that takes seriously its inalienable commonality and its integral relationship with the planet, she invokes Christian thinkers across a wide spectrum. She cites, for example, Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel:

Limitless exploitation of the natural foundations of life, ruthless destruction of the biosphere, and militarization of the cosmos are all outrages. As human beings we have a special responsibility - especially with a view to future generations - for Earth and the cosmos, for the air, water, and soil. We are *all intertwined together* in this cosmos and we are all dependent on each other. Each one of us depends on the welfare of all. Therefore the dominance of humanity over nature and the cosmos must not be encouraged. Instead we must cultivate living in harmony with nature and the cosmos.⁴⁶

Christian responses to the need to alter the way we live have come from scientists and theologians. In science, Sir John Houghton has had a leading role in international thinking about climate change.⁴⁷ Ellen Davis has made the human relationship with the environment a key term for biblical exegesis and theology, in a move that has become influential and irrevocable.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ For example, Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxford; Routledge, 2012). I am grateful to my colleague Shelley Saguro for introducing me to Garrard’s work.

⁴⁶ Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds, *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 26. She also endorses Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of a deep connectedness between humans and planet, encoded in their long history together, such that biological, social, cultural, and spiritual evolution are closely interrelated.

⁴⁷ Sir John Houghton was Director General (later Chief Executive) of the UK Meteorological Office (1983-91), and co-chaired the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (1988-2002). His writings for non-scientific audiences include: *Does God Play Dice* (Leicester: IVP, 1988); *Global Warming: the Complete Briefing* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1994; second and third editions, Cambridge; CUP, 1997, 2004). He has also chaired the John Ray Initiative, a Christian organization dedicated to furthering Christian and scientific thinking about the environment.

⁴⁸ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009). Her observation that the final phrase of Genesis 2:5 could carry the connotation of the human *serving* the needs of the soil (29), was taken up, for example, by Terry Fretheim in his own *God and World in the Old Testament: a Relational Theology of*

One of the interesting factors in Davis's work is the influence on her of Wendell Berry, farmer, poet and novelist. Berry writes of the responsibility of poets to work with their communities in order to re-imagine, or "re-member," their own membership "in the wholeness and the Holiness of creation'."⁴⁹ Here, as in other contexts that we have noticed, the category of the imagination comes strongly into play. Berry attributes to the biblical prophets a "tragic imagination." The idea of the imagination is similar to the Old Testament's concept of the "heart" (*lēb*), variously taken as "heart" and "mind" in translations. Jeremiah described the human "heart" as "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9), and for Berry the prophets "seek to restore the heart to its proper function, which is often to assess the depth, scope, and causes of the tragedies that grip our world," or to put it differently, to restore the "tragic imagination," by which we have a capacity to reckon with loss, so that it can be survived.⁵⁰

The account the environmental crisis and responses to it has shown, again, how the human being is interrogated with existential questions that place him or her inevitably within a nexus of relationships, both with other people and with the external world. These questions are not just theoretical. While specific problems may have specific solutions, as when a physical disease may be cured by a suitable medical treatment, the totality of the human condition raises unavoidable questions about humanity itself. These have a ring about them that may be called "prophetic," and therefore are such as to call for a response. And the nature of the response has several strands, which include the intellectual, the moral and the spiritual. This takes us to our next question, how we apprehend the reality of which we are a part.

How do we know?

If we as persons are deeply connected with both society and the external world, how does this bear upon that other contentious modern question concerning how we have knowledge of ourselves and our world? In the pre-modern Christian world, knowledge was inseparable from the revelation of God. But the story of our changing view of ourselves since Christendom is closely bound up with knowledge. Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am" posed a challenge to the belief that humans know themselves by means of the word of God. In the thought of Kant, the limits of human knowledge were determined by the limits of Reason, so that what lay beyond such limits was a matter of speculation. These moves provided a context for all subsequent discussion of the possibilities of knowledge. Such debate is not uniform, of course. Some of it is expressly theological, and some more generally philosophical.

Creation (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). See also Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); Arthur Walker-Jones, *The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 16; citing Wendell Berry, "Writer and Religion," in Berry, *What Are people For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 78.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 16.

Faced with the widespread modern belief that we cannot have true knowledge of anything that lies beyond our natural powers of observation, we are seeking instead a distinctively theological response, that situates true knowledge of self, God and the external world in the realms of worship and practice, in which knowledge is inseparable from wisdom, and the “knower” is personally committed and open to transformation. This kind of answer avoids engaging modern epistemology on its own cerebral terms, but embraces the capacity to know within a distinctive version of the human person.

Such a view of knowledge confronts modern thinking on a broad front. One boundary dispute concerns the nature of scientific knowledge.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, there are modern scientists who are influenced by that philosophical strand in post-Enlightenment thought that is sceptical about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. What is interesting is the contentious way in which this is sometimes expressed. Peter Atkins, for example, is convinced that science has the exclusive capacity to unlock the secrets of the universe. He contends:

Scientists, with their implicit trust in reductionism, are privileged to be at the summit of knowledge, and to see further into truth than any of their contemporaries...While poetry titillates and theology obfuscates, science liberates.⁵²

This huge claim proposes a model of knowledge and truth in which only a kind of processing of information has any validity. The disqualification of theology on principle is characteristic of a certain branch of modern science,⁵³ because it regards theology as a rival claimant in the area of understanding. It is noteworthy, even in the short passage from Atkins cited above, how exclusive rights are asserted for science in areas in which theology also makes claims, namely in access to “truth,” and in the capacity to “liberate.” Remarkable too, and perhaps less expected, is the dismissive aside on poetry. But this also is telling, for poetry makes its own claim, by virtue of its powerful presence in human history and culture, to express truth about reality. Such ideas, for Atkins, must be refuted in the name of the “one way” of science.

Claims for the power of science, then, can take on a metaphysical quality, where it is seen as the key to the unlocking of everything worth knowing. For Terry Eagleton, this kind of faith in reason as the supreme arbiter of truth fails to understand the way in which reason functions as part of a person’s whole being. Reason is indispensable, but “...it is only

⁵¹ The term is almost tautologous, since “science” (Latin *scientia*) originally meant simply “knowledge.”

⁵² Peter Atkins, “The Limitless Power of Science,” in John Cornwell, ed., *The Frontiers of Scientific Vision* (Oxford: OUP, 1995, 122-33 [123]); cited Midgley, *Solitary Self*, 91. See there, 91-92, for further examples; also Midgley, *Myths*, 18-29. See also Northrop Frye on the capacity of poetry to keep alive a connection with “the primitive and archaic,” understood, not as something that civilization outgrows, but rather as a witness to fundamental perceptions about reality; *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc.: 1982), 22-23, 37.

⁵³ Classic examples are Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), where he says, for example: “The existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other”; cf. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Atlantic, 2008).

if reason can draw on energies and resources deeper, more tenacious, and less fragile than itself, that it is capable of prevailing...".⁵⁴ Believing in God is not the same as believing in some object within creation, nor in a theory or a proposition. Rather, "...faith is for the most part performative rather than propositional."⁵⁵ This is not intended to undermine creedal statements. Rather it points to the centrality of practice in the knowing of God, rather as Coakley also does. And it does so on the basis of a conception of the human being as a complex mix of capacities, all of which operate in their apprehension of the world to which they belong.

The realization that knowing God is of a different order from knowing other things lies behind the testimonies of believing scientists. John Polkinghorne, with an allusion to Anselm's dictum *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"), makes the point that scientific thinking depends on some initial view about the nature of reality.⁵⁶ Polkinghorne also reflects on the nature of language. For him, metaphor and poetry are necessary modes of discourse for speaking about certain kinds of reality: "Metaphor is the poet's indispensable way of expressing what is on the edge of inexpressibility...".⁵⁷ Here he is thinking about biblical language, and language about God, with reference to Ricoeur and others.⁵⁸ The point is telling in view of the remark of Atkins about poetry, cited above, and crucial to a biblical understanding of the human situation and experience.⁵⁹ Francis Collins too, one of those who deciphered the human genome, argues, citing Aquinas, that faith can have rational foundations, and deplores attacks on faith that caricature it as essentially irrational. For Collins, the study of genomes, animal as well as human, furnished "elegant evidence of the relatedness of all living things," and led him to embrace a belief in theistic evolution.⁶⁰ What these and others recognize is that there is more to knowing than the processing of information, and that there is more than one way to know. Furthermore, this is a function of the nature of the human being.

Mary Midgley has also protested against the "tyranny" and "imperialism" of exclusive science.⁶¹ She uses the illustration of the different maps that answer to different

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 110. See also Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (Oxford: Lion, 2008). Ward's title takes a cue from a chapter heading in Dawkins' [*The God Delusion*]. Ward shows, among other things, that Dawkins' idea that he is propounding an alternative to the "God hypothesis" fails to distinguish among a wide range of philosophical options concerning the nature of reality; Ward, 11-14.

⁵⁵ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, 111.

⁵⁶ John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: the Relationship Between Science and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), 6. On the back cover of his *Reason and Reality*, he is said to be "the only ordained member of the Royal Society." The citation is from the *New Scientist*.

⁵⁷ Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality*, 31.

⁵⁸ He refers to Ricoeur's concept of "surplus of meaning," and symbolism; Paul Ricoeur, *Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). He also cites Janet Martin Soskice: *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1985); and Northrop Frye, *Great Code*, on the same topic.

⁵⁹ We return to the topic of language at several points in the present study, especially in chs. 5, 9.

⁶⁰ Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (London: Pocket Books, 2007), *Language of God*, 198-99. He finds that Darwin's own sense of wonder about the harmony of things led him, on one occasion, to pronounce himself a Theist; Collins, 99.

⁶¹ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 18-29, 178-80.

kinds of questions: a road map will help you get from London to Cheltenham, but a walker will need a physical map to show the nature of a terrain. The deeper point is that the way we know is complex. “Thought has many forms.” “Mind, heart and will unite in a person. Intellect, emotion, desire, imagination – these do not threaten each other; rather, you can’t say where one ends and other begins.”⁶² And in her work on understanding John’s Gospel, Sandra Schneiders speaks of understanding as “the object of *ontological* inquiry” (emphasis original): “For humans as humans, to be is to be-in-the-world participatively, which is what we call understanding.”⁶³

The topic of knowledge can be put within a more expressly theological context. The work of Karl Barth marked one kind of response to radical scepticism about the possibility of knowing God. His reassertion of such a possibility through God’s own act of self-disclosure in his Word came at the expense of “natural theology,” and remains a reference point for much modern theological discourse. After Barth theology is divided. Sarah Coakley has attributed forms of liberal theology to what she calls “Kantian nescience,” where claims to have direct knowledge of God are held to be philosophically impossible. Theology here becomes “‘imaginative construction’, God-in-Godself being radically shrouded in ‘mystery’.”⁶⁴ Coakley’s account of the self in relation to the knowledge of God is instructive.

For Coakley, lines to recovery cannot simply be a matter of turning the clock back to a pre-modern era, nor can they ignore contemporary claims to knowledge in the areas of the social sciences and moral philosophy. Theology, pursuing its vocation to know and speak about God, must listen to modern voices that enter caveats about the validity of knowledge, because these necessarily chasten and sharpen the theological endeavour.⁶⁵ Coakley identifies three specific modern challenges to theological knowledge, or in her terms “systematic theology.” These are the claims, first, that systematic theology makes God the object of human knowledge and is therefore idolatrous, second, that it entails a hegemonic, totalizing bid for power, that necessarily excludes marginalized voices, and third, from a certain brand of feminism, that it is “phallogentric,” that is, that it is shaped by male modes of thought, which aim at mastery and suppress the imagination.⁶⁶ These challenges go beyond the empiricism of a critic such as Peter Atkins (noted above), to challenge the ways in which theology conceives its own task.

The relevance of such challenges to any attempt to think biblically about what it is to be human is clear, however. The danger of idolatry attends the theological enterprise by

⁶² Midgley *Myths*, 30-41. Note also her admiration of the Gaia hypothesis: *Science and Poetry*, 237-49, 285-88. Jürgen Moltmann has also written positively about Gaia, in *Ethics of Hope* (translated by Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012; original 2010), 109-11.

⁶³ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 18.

⁶⁴ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: an Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 63, 77-78. She cites as an example of such a reading of Kant two works by Gordon D. Kaufman: *God the Problem* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) and *In Face of Mystery: a Constructive Theology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁶⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 17-18, 66-99.

⁶⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 42-43.

definition; and modern versions of what it means to be human (as in Freud) readily draw attention to the barely apprehended seductions of various forms of power. Coakley's response to such reductionist moves involves a conception of theology as inseparable from the practice of seeking God. The biblical idea of "seeking God's face" is a key expression of this, with its aspiration towards close and intimate encounter, yet its recognition that such encounter is by its nature profoundly disturbing.⁶⁷ Old Testament writers and characters are troubled by the belief that one cannot "see God's face and live" (Exod 33:20). The vision of God is of the essence of worship, and even an imperative, offering life (Ps 42:2; Amos 5:6). The trope is regularly undermined by the narratives in which it is set (as in Exod 33:11; Isa 6:5-8; Jdg 13:22-23). Yet the vision retains its capacity to disturb. There is no human power or mastery in this depiction.

The answer, therefore, to reductive readings of human aspiration to knowledge of God, is in terms of an orientation of the self to God in contemplation, prayer and practice, in readiness for personal transformation in ways that are not foreseen, or subject to one's own control. This theology is woven into the fabric of life, or in Coakley's terms, "on the way" (*in via*), a *théologie totale*. It is a road of discovery that is thoroughly engaged with the world, but which is forearmed against temptations to idolatrous certainties. The way to truthful knowledge of God and self is through what she calls "un-mastery." It is allied with the apophatic strain in Christian theology, a "knowing in unknowing."⁶⁸

The latter formulation needs to be distinguished from the "Kantian nescience" that she opposes. The notion of "unknowing" is by no means alien to biblical theology. For the Psalmists, the felt absence, or hiddenness, of God is a recurrent theme, especially in the Psalms of Lament, as in the book of Lamentations.⁶⁹ The Wisdom literature too steers a course between the invitation to explore the creation in the personified voice of Wisdom (Prov 8:1-21), and a strong sense of human limitations (Job 28; 38-41).⁷⁰ The limits and dangers of "knowing" are heralded on the threshold of the biblical canon in the story of Eden, with its guarding of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," and its portrayal of the desire for knowledge as potentially idolatrous (Gen 2-3). Coakley's concept of "unknowing" is in line with this. Her formula, "knowing in unknowing," aims precisely to guard against idolatry, even as the possibility of knowing is affirmed.

She appeals here also to the category of "imagination." This is a vital element, both in her re-casting of systematic theology and for our attempt to understand a biblical view of the human. The faculty of imagination can be called in aid of that sceptical version of theology typified by Kaufman's "imaginative construction."⁷¹ In Coakley's treatment,

⁶⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 21. She cites Exodus 24:10-11; Psalm 27:8; Matthew 5:8, among other texts.

⁶⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 44-46. For theology *in via*, see 15-20; for *théologie totale*, see 34-35 and n., 66-69.

⁶⁹ See S. Balentine, *The Hidden God: the Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford; OUP, 1983)

⁷⁰ See further below on this, in ch. 9.

⁷¹ See above, n. 61.

however, the imagination has the dual power either to carry forward the project of the person's transformation, or to subvert it into idolatry.⁷² The training of the imagination, therefore, is involved in that seeking of the divine face that characterizes the theological enterprise. This is to recognize the aesthetic dimension in the human experience of God's world, a dimension that is not peripheral, but enmeshed with the life of worship and practice.⁷³

The imaginative aspect of human being, moreover, is not a function of the mind only, but is allied with the theological purpose of reframing human desire. Central to Coakley's thesis is the belief that all human desire, including the "erotic," has its origin in the desire for God, a perception that is shared by some modern biblical interpreters.⁷⁴ Her attention to this topic is part of her concern to pursue theology, not as a cerebral, intellectual exercise, but to set her account of the historic doctrine of the Trinity "within a constellation of considerations – spiritual, ascetic, sexual, social..."⁷⁵ Her point, therefore, is to resist the particular Platonic development in which sexuality is relegated to the world that must be left behind in the spiritual ascent, a development that had one deposit in the church's glorification of celibacy, and the denigration of particularly feminine forms of human experience such as childbirth.⁷⁶ Desire, far from being simply a synonym for sex, is a sign of humanity's condition in relation to God. Indeed, "*desire is more fundamental than 'sex'*" (emphasis original). This idea involves turning Freud on his head:

It is not that physical 'sex' is basic and 'God' is ephemeral; rather it is God who is basic, and 'desire' the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source.⁷⁷

The aim of theology, viewed in this way, is "to examine, and chasten, its own desires, and to draw all dimensions of the self transformatively into that quest."⁷⁸ In accordance with her declared intention to explore God as Trinity, the Holy Spirit plays an indispensable role in this.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In the foregoing, there have been two pervasive guiding themes. The first is that there is no universal concept of the human person, or in modern parlance, the self. All notions of personhood are culturally conditioned, and any attempt to understand it needs to be aware of the potency of such conditioning. We saw that certain modern versions of the human

⁷² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 20.

⁷³ We return to this topic also in ch. 9.

⁷⁴ See below, ch. 8, on sexuality, and especially Ellen Davis's reading of the Song of Songs.

⁷⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 5.

⁷⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 8-9.

⁷⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 10.

⁷⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 66.

⁷⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 13-15, 21-22. Coakley's project, as her title suggests, is essentially "trinitarian."

condition, that are widely held to be value-free and unassailable, stand in fact on deep-lying theoretical foundations. There is, moreover, a strong tendency in modern constructions, whether scientific, economic or more broadly cultural, towards reductionist view of the human person.⁸⁰

Second, there are modern recoveries of notions of the self that are akin to biblical ones. These recognize especially the themes of relatedness, to others and the environment, the role of personal engagement in the process of understanding anything, and the deep connection between human self-understanding and various forms of policy and practice. There are self-consciously theological forms of expressing such connections.

Our guiding question, “What is the human being that you should pay attention to them?”, is now seen to have a context in our attempt to understand concepts of the self both in the biblical world and in our own. Because such understandings are always located in history and experience, they are always subject to change. We turn now to see how the biblical writers themselves came to terms with the need constantly to re-think who they, and “Israel,” were.

⁸⁰ The concept of reductionism was variously employed by Midgley, Robinson and Coakley. See also the perceptive essay by Dee Carter, “Unholy Alliances: Religion, Science, and Environment,” *Zygon* 36.2 (2011): 357-72. She writes: “Perhaps the single most important move in raging against the dying of the light is to rage against the reductionist account of what it means to be human in this world; “Unholy Alliances,” 369. Against such views she places the biblical concept of the human created in the “image of God.” She has in mind in particular the ways in which the operation of grace and redemption in the created order establish a “commonality of focus within which the goods of the human and the nonhuman might be considered together” (*ibid.*).