

*ON BEING HUMAN*¹

William Sweet

Introduction:

The classical definition of ‘metaphysics’ is that it is ‘the science of being *qua* being,’² and the study of metaphysics invites us to consider a wide range of approaches to ‘being’ and beings – from the Parmenidean concept of being, through Aristotle, the neo-Platonists and the mediaevals, to Spinoza, Hegel, Heidegger, Edith Stein, to the question of the “Dieu sans l’être” of Jean-Luc Marion.

One aspect of this study is human being, and it is on this narrower – though just as ancient – theme that I wish to focus. What it is to be a human being? At first glance, this question may seem almost banal because it is something that all of us are familiar with. But it is a question that leads us, I think, to the very core of metaphysics.

Questions about what human beings are, and what attributes they have, were not exactly ignored in philosophy during the past century, but they were far from central. There are few philosophers in the twentieth-century Anglo-American tradition who have not had to wrestle with the accounts of person or of mind presented by Russell (*The Problems of Philosophy*, 1912), Ryle (*The Concept of Mind*, 1949), Strawson (*Individuals*, 1959), Ayer (*The Concept of a Person and Other Essays*, 1963), Malcolm (*Memory and Mind*, 1977; *Consciousness*

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² I.e., “*peri tou ontos ê on*,” *Metaphysics* VI, 1026 a, 31.

and Causality)³, and many others.⁴ But the account of human being in many of these texts was not very ‘thick,’ and the focus almost always just on ‘mind.’

The discussion of ‘philosophical anthropology’⁵ was certainly important in continental European philosophy of the first half of the last century (e.g., Cassirer, Marcel, Becker, Rothacker, Strasser, and Schutz), though many of the issues raised were supplanted in the second half, particularly by those adopting the ‘deconstructive’ approach. Thus, while phenomenological views considered the question of what it is to be a human being – and, particularly, what it is to be a self – many who followed on it, and especially those now referred to as ‘post-modernists’ and influenced by philosophers such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, have challenged the possibility of even imagining a concept of the human self.

³ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, London; New York: Oxford University Press [Home University Library], 1912; Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson, 1949; P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Methuen, 1959; A.J. Ayer, *The Concept of a Person and Other Essays*, London: Macmillan, 1963; Norman Malcolm, *Memory and Mind*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977; D.M. Armstrong and Norman Malcolm, *Consciousness and Causality*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984; Norman Malcolm, *Problems of Mind: Descartes to Wittgenstein*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1971.

⁴ D. M. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968 [revised edn. 1993], Part One; K. Campbell, *Body and Mind*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980 [2nd ed. 1984]; P.M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984 [revised edn. 1988], ch. 1 and 2; S. Shoemaker, *Personal Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984; B. Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, chs.1 and 4.

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: an introduction to the philosophy of human culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944; Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society*, tr. G. S. Fraser, Chicago: Regnery, 1962; Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning: an interdisciplinary perspective on the problem of man*, New York: Free Press, 1971; Erich Rothacker, *Philosophische Anthropologie*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1970; Jan Patocka, *Gott, Mensch und Welt in der Metaphysik von Descartes bis zu Nietzsche*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967; Stephan Strasser, *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences [Fenomenologie en Empirische Menskunde]*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963; Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World [Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt, 1932]*, tr. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967, and *The Structures of the Life-World [Strukturen der Lebenswelt]* (with Thomas Luckmann), tr. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., 2 vols., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973-1989.

Such approaches in both Anglo-American and Continental thought have challenged the very notion of metaphysics itself. But the criticisms are not just of the metaphysics of human being; they bear as well on questions of ethics and social and political philosophy. In work published in the past few decades, authors like John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin have explicitly questioned the necessity of any ‘metaphysical’ account of the human person in elaborating a theory of rights or a theory of justice;⁶ when they discuss human beings at all, they provide what many have argued is just a ‘thin’ functional account of the human person – as a rational, self interested, maximizer of desire. The apparent refusal to go much farther than this is in keeping with a view frequently found among philosophers after Hume, if not after Hobbes – that what people *are* does not entail anything about how they *ought* (in the moral or social or legal or political sphere) to act. To use an old phrase, many philosophers still say that you can’t get an ‘ought’ from an ‘is.’

Recently, however, this marginalization of the question of ‘What it is to be a human being?’ has been challenged by political philosophers as far from one another as Tibor Machan, Michael Sandel, and Alasdair MacIntyre, and also by those like Charles Taylor who, in his recent book, *Sources of the Self*⁷, reminds us how different theories of the self have gone – and go – together with different theories of the good. These authors suggest that we need to rethink what ‘human being’ is and – though many of them may not explicitly say so – consider a new approach (or, perhaps, an old approach renewed) to what it is to be a human being.

In what follows, however, I do not want to sketch out these different views of what it is to be a human being nor, directly, to challenge them. Instead, I want

⁶ For Dworkin, see *Taking Rights Seriously*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. xi-xii: “Liberals are suspicious of ontological luxury. They believe that it is a cardinal weakness in various forms of collectivism that rely on ghostly entities like collective wills or national spirits... [My theory] does not suppose that rights have some special metaphysical character, and the theory defended in these essays therefore departs from older theories of rights that do rely on that supposition.” Rawls argues for a “free-standing view” that is not based on any comprehensive or metaphysical doctrine. (See Rawls, *Justice As Fairness: A Restatement*, Erin Kelly (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2001, p. 190; “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” in *Collected Papers*, Samuel Freeman (ed.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 388-414, at p. 388.) On the relation of Rawls’ account to those that have a metaphysical conception of the person, see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, especially Lecture I.

⁷ *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

to outline an alternative account of what it is to be a human being – a view that reflects insights found in Jacques Maritain, but also in a number of other philosophical ‘schools.’ I start from what has been called a position of ‘refined interpretation of observation.’⁸ Next, I move to metaphysics – outlining where we might be led to from such ‘refined observation’ of human being. Finally, I suggest that this will, in turn, lead us to a metaphysical principle that is a principle of individuality and value.

1. Refined Observation and Individuality

I wish to start with what we can observe and what we can reasonably say about or infer from that observation.

First, human beings are – and are probably paradigmatically – individuals. And so, we might say that a human individual is a whole and a unity that is complete, self-sufficient, and independent – something unique and fundamentally distinct from all other human beings. If one human being were not really distinct from another, we likely wouldn’t think of either as individuals.

But such a focus on what is distinctive about an individual, does not provide a *complete* view of what an individual – what an individual *human being* – is.

For example, it seems to be at least generally true that, to be an individual, a thing has to be a member of a class. So there must be properties that individuals have in common with other individuals so far as they are all members of that class.

And so, when it comes to individual *human* beings, it is not surprising that we see that there are a number of characteristics, essential to them being human beings, and which they share with other human beings *as* human beings. As Jacques Maritain writes: “As an individual, each of us is a fragment of a species, a part of the universe, a [...] point in the immense web of cosmic, ethnical, historical forces and influences – and bound by their laws.”⁹

To begin with, then, to be an *individual* human being requires a presence in, and a belonging to, a community. But the nature of this relationship to the community is complex. Not only is there a physical dependence of the individual on goods which can be found only in a society where one’s material needs are provided for by other human beings (for example, through a division of labour),

⁸ Cf Jose Maria Lopez Sevillano, “Dimensions of Metaphysical Dialogue: Science, Culture, and Mystical Experience,” unpublished 2003.

⁹ *The Person and the Common Good*, tr. John J. Fitzgerald, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1947, p. 38.

but there are also intellectual and spiritual supports. Indeed, “[a]ll individuals are continually reinforced and carried on... by... the social order.”¹⁰ This order also contains those institutions and practices which help human individuals to attain that which they wish to and can become. It is through this order that we learn a language, acquire knowledge of moral principles, come to think and to judge – not to mention learn more of the nature and content of the world in which we live. A genuinely human life is possible, then, only in and through a community. So *personal identity* implies some relation to a community, and in this sense, to be a human being is to be a social being.

Paradoxically, perhaps, ‘refined observation’ does not see the individual just as an ‘atom’ – that is, as a being fundamentally distinct from every other being – and only incidentally related to others. Instead, it suggests that, if we focus *only* on what is absolutely unique about us, this actually tells us little about who we are as *human* beings.

Second, ‘refined observation’ indicates to us that to be a human being is to be something that is capable of a conception of a good. Now it is fair to say that one’s good is not simply (and not usually) the object of one’s desire just at one particular moment. To find out someone’s good, what that being desires at any one moment must be compared and brought into coherence with what he or she desires at other moments – perhaps *all* other moments. But an attempt to formulate this requires, then, not only an elimination of the conflicts among one’s particular desires and in one’s own life, but an elimination of conflict and contradiction with matters of fact (e.g., the kind of being one is) as well. All these factors, in some way, affect the formulation of a statement of a human being’s good. Moreover, this good has to be realistic. As a result, the good of a human being is not so much what he or she *wants* at a particular moment but, rather, what he or she *needs*, in accord with his or her nature as a human being. Since human beings are (as we have seen) social beings, and given this conception of what a person’s good is, this means that each individual’s interests are necessarily tied to the concerns and interests of others.

There is a *third* feature of human being that we note *via* observation; human beings can be – and often are – described in terms of the places or roles or functions they have in the community. By this I mean simply that, if we look at

¹⁰ Bernard Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, 4th ed., London: Macmillan, 1923 [Vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Bernard Bosanquet*, William Sweet (ed.), Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999], p. 142; corrected and reprinted in *The Philosophical Theory of the State and Related Essays*, William Sweet and Gerald F. Gaus (eds.), South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2001, p. 158; cf. Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, p. 48.

any particular human being, we see that there are many ways in which she or he relates to others in the community, and in which he or she *contributes to* that community as a whole. So an individual human being may be (some or all of) a teacher, a scholar, a citizen, a member of a political party, an adherent of a religious faith, a parent, a neighbour, a wife, a good daughter, and so on. And even though many of our roles or functions may change over our lifetime, we generally never lose them altogether. I am my father's son, even after his death; I am an 'old boy' of my prep school; I am a lapsed Jew; I am an alumnus of my university, and so on.

To a degree that we may not even recognise at first, the individual is inseparable from the community. So far as one is related to others, one is more 'complete' and, in that sense, more of an 'individual.' Indeed, it is because of this relation of human beings to others that they have the basis from which to distinguish themselves from others¹¹, and by which they become aware of their distinctive places in the community.

Given that human beings have a conception of a good, we see as well that they are beings that plan – that work towards the realisation of that good. Such plans may involve cooperating with others, and the good they pursue is, again, plausibly a shared good. But the point I wish to underscore right now is that human beings *seek ends*. A *fourth* feature of human beings, then, is that they are teleological. This feature may not be quite as obvious as the preceding features, but we can see it in two respects.

To begin with, when philosophers like Jacques Maritain speak of what is 'natural' – as in what is natural to a human being – they have in mind a conception of nature originally articulated in classical Greek philosophy – one that is linked to the notion of *physis* or "growth."¹² Here, when we refer to the nature of a thing, we do not mean to refer simply to what that thing happens *to be* at one particular moment, but what it has in itself *to become*. Strictly speaking, then, the description of the nature of a thing must include mention of "what a thing is when its growth is completed"¹³ – its 'end.' So teleology is

¹¹ See Bernard Bosanquet, *Psychology of the Moral Self*, London: Macmillan, 1897, p. 51: "Self-consciousness... is for the most part social."

¹² See Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value*, London: Macmillan, 1912. Bosanquet says that, on Aristotle's view, the 'end' is both "the completion of a positive whole which is developing through a process, and the cessation of the process itself" (p. 124), though it is the former sense which is fundamental (p. 129; see p. 135).

¹³ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 142 / 4th ed., p. 122; see *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 129.

involved in the description of the very nature of a thing. (Now Maritain – and others – would hold that there is reason to believe that there is a tendency intrinsic in natural objects to ‘realize’ themselves. Perhaps this is true, but whether we can in fact observe such tendencies is hard to say. Nevertheless, when we look at the example of *human beings*, there is evidence of a teleology.)

Moreover, there seems to be a natural tendency in human beings to act in a way that aims at their fullest development – to be the most that they can become. This ‘end,’ some would argue, is “a demand implied in every volition and from which we could never escape.”¹⁴ What we do seem to see, as Maritain would say, is that “man [seeks to] become what he is.”¹⁵ In moving toward this ‘end’ of ‘full development,’ human beings become ‘more human.’

All this might seem quite straightforward and even commonsensical. But ‘refined interpretation of observation’ provides even more, for it recognises the essential place of the mental or of consciousness in any account of (individual) human beings – that they are beings with consciousnesses or minds.

Of course, human beings are corporeal beings, but this characteristic – one’s corporeal nature and one’s material needs and desires – is not (as we usually acknowledge) of ultimate importance, and the extent to which ‘the material’ *is* significant is generally in relation to the ‘mental’ or, if you wish, the spiritual. When Saint Paul speaks of the “flesh” or the “body,” these “bodily” needs and appetites are, of course, more precisely “an element of mind.”¹⁶ Again, when we consider the relation of human individuals to one another, this relation is ultimately, and fundamentally, at this ‘psychical’ or mental level. Thus, any society or community is not just a group of individual bodies, but (to use an expression from Maritain) “a community of minds”¹⁷ or a “structure of intelligences”¹⁸ which reflects “corresponding mental systems in individual minds.”¹⁹

What does it mean for human beings to be related to others in this way? To see how the individual human being is importantly – but of course not exclusively – a mind or a ‘mental system’ in relation to other ‘mental systems,’ we need to start by looking at the content of human consciousness. Each human being’s mental constitution – “ideas or groups of ideas” – are “connected in

¹⁴ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 182 / 4th ed., p. 174.

¹⁵ *Person and the Common Good*, p. 44.

¹⁶ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 66 / 4th ed., p. 27.

¹⁷ *Person and the Common Good*, p. 63, n. 29.

¹⁸ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 199 / 4th ed., p. 195.

¹⁹ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.) p. 170 / 4th ed., p. 161.

various degrees, and more or less subordinated to some dominant ideas which, as a rule, dictate the place and importance of the others.”²⁰ For relations with others to be possible, we must share or be able to share these dominant ideas with them. Thus, these ideas are dominant not just in one’s own consciousness, but in others with whom one is related.

We might go even further. To begin with, because of the existence of this ‘mental’ relation to others, we have an additional reason for the earlier claim that the ‘good’ that human persons pursue is not simply some private good, but a common or general good. The conclusion that there is an identity of one’s ‘real good’ with another’s is not just the result of a comparison of what is in each individual’s private interest (which might just be a contingent result). Since one’s identity as an individual human being is necessarily bound up with others, whatever (good) is necessary to the full development of a particular human individual as an *individual* human being is also (directly or indirectly) the end of *every* individual self – that is, of all members of a community. In other words, it is a common good that is the end of community as a whole.

It is here, perhaps, that we can start to talk about human beings and the moral virtues. Given this relation of human beings to one another, we can speak of the virtues that are characteristic of sociability. And, again, given this relation of the individual to a common good, we can understand the possibility of heroism – of commitments to the common good where one’s life is at risk.

There is clearly much more that can be said here – for the emphasis on the essential interrelatedness of human beings can lead one to develop the notion of the individual human being in different ways. Some would have it that the “differences between different persons [is not]... ultimate and irreducible,”²¹ and would also have it that human beings can ‘overlap’ in their contributions to the community. And yet, at the same time, refined observation sees human beings, *qua* individuals, as also wholes. There is, perhaps, a tension between ‘individuality’ and the uniqueness that seems to be characteristic of personhood – but I cannot (and need not) address this here.²²

In short, then, a comprehensive account of human being would describe it as a being that is an individual and yet fundamentally social, and that has a mental or spiritual character that makes possible and even defines this social character

²⁰ “The Reality of the General Will,” in *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. IV (1893/4), pp. 308-21, at p. 311.

²¹ Bosanquet, *The Value and Destiny of the Individual*, London: Macmillan, 1913, p. xx, referring to lecture 2.

²² See *Person and the Common Good*.

and its pursuit of the good. But now we begin moving beyond ‘refined observation’ – and it is to this that I now wish to turn.

2. The Move to Metaphysics

Starting with what we can observe, an analysis of human being leads us beyond observation – ‘refined’ or otherwise. Human being requires a relation to something greater than itself – and this is ultimately a metaphysical principle. There are at least four features that lead us to this conclusion.

First, we have seen that to be a human individual requires a relation to other individuals – i.e., to a community. Now, for there to be activity and life in common and for common goals to be attained, there must be something more than that community at work here. There must be something – though not necessarily some *thing* – which provides unity to the (social) community and that makes it possible for it to be more or less a system. Perhaps it is this that Hobbes recognised when he saw the necessity of a sovereign who stood above the social pact and provided unity to the commonwealth. Perhaps it is this, as well, that we find in Rousseau’s reference to a ‘general will’ within a community. Clearly, the set of dominant ideas of the members of the community is involved, since they both express and make possible a unified and common life. For an “assemblage of individual minds” to function “as a working system,”²³ the community must be pervaded by something that expresses “itself consistently though differently in the life and action of every member of the community.”²⁴

Second, as we saw above, a particular human being’s ‘good’ has a relation to a ‘common good’; an individual’s good must be in unity with and ordered to the ‘common good’ as a part is to a whole. Yet this relation is *not as a means to an end*. There is a way in which it is possible to retain both the distinctiveness of the individual human being and the relatedness of the individual to other human beings. And so, what *makes* a particular being’s good, ‘good,’ is that it reflects a ‘common good,’ and this common good is a good that is already implicit in that being. In other words, while the character of the ‘end’ is marked by an intersection of interests and facts where “each is touched by all and all by each,”²⁵ it does not follow that the individual is a means to the community, or

²³ “The Reality of the General Will,” p. 314.

²⁴ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 50 / 4th ed., p. 6.

²⁵ G. Watts Cunningham, “Bosanquet on Teleology as a Metaphysical Category,” *Philosophical Review*, XXXII (1923), pp. 612-624, at p. 618.

vice versa. While this end is ‘greater’ than us, and while we are oriented to it, it does not annihilate our individuality, but preserves it.

Third, as noted earlier, there is a teleological character to human being. But when we speak of this teleological character, we also recognise that there are different degrees to which a human being approximates that end – i.e., different degrees to which one is realised (or realises him or herself). F.H. Bradley, for example, wrote that the *reality* of human beings is dependent on the degree to which they are ‘transmuted’²⁶ or ‘self-consistent’²⁷ – in other words, as such a being’s (understanding of its) nature and its good becomes less and less opposed, separate, and distinct from those of other individual persons. Such a view does not suggest that any human being is less than human, but simply recognises that our ideal of what it is to be human is of human beings at their best – not at their worst – moments.

There is a fourth feature of human beings that leads us to something more than themselves. This concerns what we might call the ‘higher experiences’ of life. We find that, in a human being’s drive or “conation towards unity and self-completeness,” there are moments when this teleological character is especially evident.²⁸ One illustration of this is to be found in ethical experience. We have already seen above how the good of an individual is related to a more general good. In a common good, ‘inconsistencies’ present in an individual’s ‘good’ are worked out and, thus, point in the direction of a more comprehensive and complete and approximates the ‘universal good’ or end.²⁹ But there are times when human beings explicitly recognise this good *as* the good, move towards this good, and explicitly attempt to make it their own. Such moments of recognition occur when we see acts of nobility or heroism or sacrifice – where our response is one of awe or respect, for it is not just the act itself, but what it means, or suggests, or implies, that allows us to see something of this end.

Now the ethical experience of human beings is just one of those ‘highest experiences’ we have; such ‘higher experiences’ can be found in many activities.

²⁶ F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 2nd edition, ninth impression, corrected, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930, p. 152.

²⁷ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 487.

²⁸ *Some Suggestions in Ethics*, London: Macmillan, 1918; 2nd ed. 1919, p. 57; see *Principle of Individuality and Value*, pp. 129-131.

²⁹ For a similar view of the “evolution” of the common or “social good,” see T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation, and Other Writings*, Paul Harris and John Morrow (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, sec. 142.

If we look at the *work* of the human spirit – e.g., social life, art, and religion³⁰ – we see that there is a constant move beyond the limitations of the finite. What the ethical hero, the artist, or the prophet (among others) finds or discovers is something both more stable and universal than he or she is him or herself. And yet, such experience would not be possible without the finite: “the finite is inherently... an instrument of the [...]completion of the infinite.”

But there is, perhaps, a fifth respect in which an analysis of the phenomenon of human being suggests a relation to something greater than itself. This is its relation to what some call “the Absolute.” (What exactly might be meant by this term is something that I will come to in a moment in Section 3.) Given the previously-mentioned feature of the presence of higher experience, it has been argued that we have an openness to this Absolute. Perhaps this openness is intrinsic in human being; certainly it is to be found there. The character of the source of this openness need not be given, however, in order to remark on the fact of this openness.

To be a human being, then, requires a reference to something greater than any one or any group of human individuals. Maritain writes that “the person is directly related to the absolute. For only in the absolute is it able to enjoy its full sufficiency.”³¹ But it is a mistake to think that this account of what it is to be an individual human being means that individual human beings are in some sense secondary or are unimportant (in relation to these higher experiences or this Absolute). We need not fall into the trap, signalled by Karl Popper, that such moves to totality are inherently opposed to particularity – for none of the above precludes human autonomy and value.

We should *first* recognize, however, that to speak of our lives in the context of talking about an Absolute means that we focus not on the separateness, but on the *content*, of our lives. The value of the *content* of our lives – what we have in common with one another – is at least as important as our formal distinctness. And this suggests that our personal identity – i.e., what it is to be the particular human being that we are – is not just a matter of who we are over time (our continuous identity), but also of who we are in relation to the community or environment in which we live (our co-existent identity). And it is in the *content* of our lives that we find the principles on which we base our lives and our identities, and that we hope will be our legacy; and this is something more than just the continuation of our finite selves.

³⁰ Cf. *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, pp. 90-91; 378; *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 270.

³¹ *Person and the Common Good*, p. 42.

We should also recognise, *second*, that our social being – our relation to others or to the community – is not enough of a basis for our individuality, for even our community needs a support (in something implied by all consciousness); and so ‘the Absolute’ is not something that can be identified with any particular institution, set of institutions, or state.

And *third*, it is clear that attempts to avoid introducing metaphysics must fail – that any thorough analysis of the facts or of phenomena (even concerning ethics or political philosophy) lead us beyond phenomena – and that we will eventually be led to metaphysics.

In short, I would insist that the importance and value of human beings is not minimized but supported by principles that refer to something greater than human beings – that make their individual identity, and social world in which they live and grow, possible.

Now, I should note that the ‘move to metaphysics’ in this, the second part of this paper, is an *epistemological* move and not a metaphysical move. (The starting point I have taken in examining human being is primarily an epistemological one, not a metaphysical one.) Yet, if we are to be thorough in our observations and analysis of human being, the discussion naturally leads from an epistemological to a metaphysical one.

3. Metaphysical Principle

Starting with the ‘refined interpretation of observation,’ we are led to an account of human being that has, underlying it, a metaphysical principle. This principle has been referred to by many names: ‘Being,’ ‘Y☪ [Being] in Lao Tse, the divine, God, and so on. Just above I have called it ‘the Absolute.’

The notion of the Absolute has been a stumbling block for some. It is frequently regarded as something obscure, ill-defined, ‘metaphysical,’ and ‘mystical’ in the most pejorative senses of the term. Many philosophers – including metaphysicians – have attempted to steer clear of such a notion altogether.

It is, moreover, not an easy matter to say much, if anything, about the source of the openness to the Absolute that we find in human beings (referred to above) – or, at least, to say much without knowledge that has its origin outside of philosophy. (Indeed, showing that there *is* a source, and that this openness or tendency to the Absolute is an effect of it, are far from simple matters. But this may not be necessary for present purposes.)

Whatever this Absolute or ‘background’ principle is, it is not any *thing* or experience, and it is certainly not one thing among other things. It is the sum total of what is real. It is not related to anything, because then it would not be a

principle (or ‘absolute’). And because it is the sum total of what there is, there can only be one of it.

Philosophers have described this ultimate principle as spiritual, comprehensive, rational, a ‘concrete universal,’ as “a world of worlds,”³² and as “the principle of individuality and value.”

It is spiritual because it exists on the level of mind – though note that ‘spiritual’ here need not have any distinctively religious connotation. And it is ‘comprehensive’ in the sense that this principle is what we have when all things are fully understood in relation to everything else – i.e., it is the set of all that is, and all that relates each item to every other. Thus we can, at least in theory, start with any part of the universe and – by seeking consistency and coherence with all other parts – ‘build up’ to this principle.

Clues to the nature or the character of this ultimate principle are to be found in tracing the complexity of the relations within and among finite things; this presupposes that it is something intelligible or knowable – but such a presupposition is not unwarranted.

It is knowable or intelligible because it is rational. By ‘rational’ here, all I mean is that it is the kind of thing that allows for being grasped and understood, even if it cannot be understood in its entirety. But it is also because it is ‘continuous’ with what we *do* know through reason that the Absolute is something that we *can* know. Moreover, it is precisely in the most complete (and rational?) of activities – the “highest of our experiences,” such as morality, art, and religion, that we have access to it.³³ Thus, no matter how wide the gap between this principle and finite individuals, there is always a connection between them.

This principle is both immanent and transcendent – something similar to what some have called a concrete universal, i.e., a ‘universal’ existing in and through its particulars. It is concrete so far as it is particular and present in our experience; it is universal so far as it is complete, comprehensive, wholly determinate, and self-sufficient.³⁴ ‘Human,’ ‘justice,’ ‘number,’ ‘triangle,’ are not concrete universals but abstract. A work of art, on the other hand, is something that is particular and ‘individual’ and yet also universal (e.g., complete, comprehensive, etc.), and so may serve as an illustration of what I have in mind by the notion of concrete universal.

³² *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 158, n. 27; cf. p. 37.

³³ *Principle of Individuality and Value*, pp. 80; 250; *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, p. 312.

³⁴ See *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 69.

Some have described this principle as a “world of worlds,” in the sense that it encompasses, but does not obliterate, individual human being. This relation to finite individuals is important; indeed, this principle is also called a teleological principle of individuality and value. But what this means has to be explained.

To begin with, this principle is teleological in that it is an ‘end.’ If it is true that the finite self has an “impulse towards unity”³⁵ – towards completion – in a system that is ‘spiritual,’ this principle is that unity “in which the finite being finds to some extent completeness and satisfaction.”³⁶ As noted above, by this principle I do not mean simply “the social whole,” or “the general will,”³⁷ or “the social spirit,”³⁸ though this principle is in some sense an extension or implication of the principles that lead to society and the general will. At a lower level, Maritain might call it “the order of civilization.”³⁹ At the very least, it is that in which the individual “finds some clue to the reality which is the truth of himself.”⁴⁰ It is this “realisation of our self which we instinctively demand and desire” that the idealist Bernard Bosanquet calls, in his Gifford Lectures, “the eternal reality of the Absolute.”⁴¹

Second, this principle is a principle of individuality. Because of its self-sufficiency and completeness, and its lack of relation or dependence to anything outside of it, this Absolute is an ‘individual.’ And since finite beings are individuals in part because they approximate these characteristics (or so far as they reflect them to some degree), and since they tend to this ‘end,’ this principle is the ‘principle of individuality.’ Thus, as they are generally understood, finite beings are always in relation to a larger whole and not necessarily – or, by themselves – necessary, eternal, or everlasting entities.

Third, this principle is a principle of value. As a metaphysical principle and a *telos*, it is that in terms of which beings and things have a place and a function and, therefore, have a value. Again, because it is the principle of individuality, it is the condition or standard of the value of individuals. And finally, it is a principle of value because, in moral action, human beings act to approximate it.

³⁵ *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 340.

³⁶ *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, p. 208.

³⁷ *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, p. 208.

³⁸ *Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 285.

³⁹ See note 17 above; “the order of civilization, and even more to the order of what, farther on, we call the community of minds.” *Person and the Common Good*, p. 63, n. 29.

⁴⁰ *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, p. 208.

⁴¹ *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, p. 288.

Human beings, then, are subordinate to this principle – but not, however, necessarily subordinate to any temporal representation of the principle (e.g., the community or the state). And this relation between human being and this principle allows us to make sense of self sacrifice. On such a model, our value as finite human beings is not lessened but increased when we are willing to risk a finite good – even the good that is one’s life – for a greater good.

What is the place of ‘time’ in all of this? Does this Absolute exist at present? One may say that it is both ‘in the here and now’ and ‘not yet.’ It is in the ‘here and now’ so far as it is present in the consciousness of “the society of human beings who have a common life and are working for a common social good.”⁴² But it is, as well, something that is ‘not yet,’ for the ‘end’ is something ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ and there is no perfection in historical time.⁴³ Nevertheless, it can and does serve as an imperative to ‘progress.’

Such a view of metaphysical principle is admittedly not *directly* deducible from those metaphysical features discussed earlier, but it is broadly consistent with it. Besides, to challenge this description of metaphysical principle may well be to challenge that which has led us to it. And therefore this account of this principle is worth our consideration.

How much more we can say about this principle – about its nature, character, and so on – will depend on what else we can infer from the characteristics of human beings as individuals, as persons, and having the particular kinds of aptitudes, capacities, mental structure, and ideas that human beings have. But in the meantime, we can say at least that which has been outlined above – that, starting with fairly ordinary observation of human beings, not only can we refine our observations, but we are led to metaphysical principles.

Many questions may, of course, be raised here. For example, what might we conclude from this concerning the value of human being in relation to the Absolute? Are there ‘bad’ Absolutes? Can we be mistaken about what the Absolute is or what its characteristics are? It would be beyond the purview of this paper to address all of these questions, but it would be useful to make some comments on the first one.

Some may argue that there is a tension between the preceding account of the Absolute and the value of finite beings – but I would say that this ‘problem’ is more apparent than real. Since the Absolute is a concrete universal, it must be

⁴² “The Kingdom of God on Earth,” in *Essays and Addresses*, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1889, pp. 108-130, at p. 121. See Bradley’s similar account of the “kingdom of God” in *Ethical Studies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd ed, 1927, p. 331.

⁴³ *Some Suggestions in Ethics*, p. 175.

manifested, and it is so through nature and especially through finite individuals. Thus, the role of human being (particularly in the creation of art and philosophy, and in religious experience, and so on) is to ‘bridge’ nature and the Absolute⁴⁴ – to convert externality into full reality, as it were.⁴⁵ In this sense, the individual may be conceived of as a “copula” between nature and the Absolute.⁴⁶

Another way of seeing the relation of the individual to the Absolute is through an analogy to scientific theory.⁴⁷ The individual human being is like a particular observation. Outside of a context, a single observation has little, if any, significance. To understand what it means, it must be clarified and developed and its implications examined. One must, then, add the conditions and circumstances in which it appears – and return to one’s initial observation in light of this – in order to see what it is. To know what a particular observation is and means also requires seeing its relation to our knowledge in general. This process of ‘adjustment’ or ‘criticism,’ applied to all particular observations, produces the theory or the system, and it is in *this* way that a theory ‘contains’ all particular observations. Similarly, one can see the Absolute as containing all the content of the consciousnesses of particular human beings, and yet as also expressing, in a more complete way, each one of them.

Conclusion

What kind of metaphysical view is this? Even though it reflects, in many respects, Jacques Maritain’s account, it is a view that might plausibly be called an idealist one.

In one of the classic studies of idealism, *The Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy*⁴⁸, while acknowledging that “idealism shows itself to be a very complicated doctrine,”⁴⁹ G. Watts Cunningham states that

Idealism is that philosophical doctrine which undertakes to show that, in order to think matter or the spatio-temporal order of events in its ultimate

⁴⁴ *Principle of Individuality and Value*, pp. 321, see also pp. 193-194, 325-326, 337, 382.

⁴⁵ Bosanquet writes that “[e]xternality is joined to the absolute through conscious centres” (*Principle of Individuality and Value*, p. 218).

⁴⁶ *Principle of Individuality and Value*, pp. 371, 382; see also pp. 288, 321-2, 326, 218; *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, pp. 280ff.

⁴⁷ *Philosophical Theory of the State*, Sweet and Gaus (ed.), p. 154 / 4th ed., pp. 136-137.

⁴⁸ New York and London: The Century Company, 1933.

⁴⁹ *Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy*, p. 337.

nature, we are logically compelled to think mind or spirit along with it as in some sense foundational to it.⁵⁰

On such a view we can say that mind in some way constitutes nature – that it is foundational to reality – though this does not mean that reality is *simply* a product of *human* minds or perceptions, that reality is structured by (or is simply the sum of the perceptions of) human consciousness, or that we cannot know things *as* independent of consciousness. (The two latter views should, rather, be attributed to ‘subjective idealists’ such as Berkeley and, perhaps, Kant.)

But, more prosaically, idealism can mean (as Bosanquet writes in his 1898 essay “Idealism in Social Work”) that which “is the spirit of the faith in real reality, and its way of escape from facts as they *seem* is to go deeper and deeper into the heart of facts as they *are*.”⁵¹ An idealist philosophy seeks to go beneath the surface of phenomena, to thereby discern and provide a statement of what animates existing phenomena and, perhaps, to note certain guiding principles.

If one thinks of this as a rather broad definition of idealism, and that one could be a realist and hold to many of these views as well (e.g., as Samuel Alexander did), we should remember that several idealists came to abandon the term ‘idealism’ (since it was so often confused with Berkeleyan subjective idealism) and to use, in its place, the term ‘speculative philosophy.’ And as I have suggested, the view presented here is one that, in many respects, is consistent with some of the reflections on human being and on individuality that a realist like Jacques Maritain held.

What it is to be a human being is *not* what many philosophers of the modern and contemporary periods have taken human being to be – e.g., primarily that of the autonomous, rational, self-conscious and self-interested subject. But neither is it something without a nature, an essence, shared attributes, and a common conception of the good – as some existentialist and post-modern philosophers would maintain.

To be a human being, on the account sketched out here, is to be a being whose physical, but also whose intellectual, moral, and spiritual, character is fundamentally related to others and, thereby, to all of reality. The nature of this relation is not primarily material, but mental or psychical. But this is because all relation – and all description of what exists – must take into account the fundamental role of mind.

⁵⁰ *Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy*, p. 339.

⁵¹ In *Collected Works of Bernard Bosanquet*, Vol. 14, pp. 149-60 at p. 151 (Originally published in *The Charity Organisation Review*, n.s. III (1898): 122-33.).

I have also argued that, if we wish to provide a complete account of what it is to be a human being, it is not enough to give a ‘thin’ theory. We are driven to a metaphysical theory. And this allows us to acknowledge the legitimacy of both our continuous and our coextensive identities.

Admittedly, I have provided little extensive argument for this account – though I would insist that it is an account which is consistent with the full range of features that are characteristic of our human experience, and which attempts to bring these features into a unified theory. And it is an account that is, in the end, metaphysical.

The kind of metaphysics described here is not deduced from observation – nor *could* a metaphysics be. But I have suggested that we can be led to metaphysical principle – and specifically an account of the Absolute – by drawing on our recognition of the social, intellectual, and spiritual character of human being, as well as our recognition of the freedom and dignity of the human individual.

And so, starting with the ‘narrow’ question of what it is to be a human being, we are led back to the question of being itself. This approach to being is not a standard one – and certainly not one widely held in contemporary philosophy. Nevertheless, it is, perhaps, an old view made new, and one which we philosophers may wish to explore more thoroughly in the future.

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