

Self-Transcendence, the True Self, and Self-Love

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This essay presents a unified view of Bernard Lonergan's model of self-transcendence, Thomas Merton's notion of the true self, and Erich Fromm's meaning of self-love.

In recent essays in this journal I have presented a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary theory of the self as a duplex, dialectical, and first-person reality, constituted by consciousness and experienced as "I" and "me" (Conn, 1997a), and have related that meaning of the self to various post-Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of the self (Conn, 1997b). In this essay I will complete my view of the self by explaining the radical desire for self-transcendence that unifies it, the notion of true self that realizes this radical desire in religious experience, and the meaning of authentic self-love grounded in this view of the self.

DESIRE FOR SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

My basic understanding of the self is rooted in the premise that every person has a radical desire to reach out, to move beyond, to transcend the self. This drive is so basic and all encompassing that it includes in some way all the specific drives and more: Freud's pleasure drive, Adler's power drive, and especially Frankl's drive for meaning. This radical desire for self-transcendence is at the source of everything that is specifically human, and

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is realized in every genuine instance of creative understanding, critical judging, responsible deciding, and generous loving. Authentic human realization is a self-transcending realization achieved through these specifically human activities. From a theological perspective, the drive for self-transcendence is the divine life within the human person, and its realization culminates in a personal relationship with God who is Truth and Goodness and Love. Henri Nouwen (1975) expresses the various dimensions of self-transcendence through the image of "reaching out." For him, the Christian spiritual life consists of three constant movements of reaching out: to ourselves (from loneliness to solitude), to others (from hostility to hospitality), and to God (from illusion to prayer).

Self-transcendence as a criterion of personal authenticity stands in complete opposition to both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, as these are commonly understood. Self-transcendence stands over against self-sacrifice understood as a denial, renunciation, abnegation, or any other negation of the true self. Without a powerful, authentic self, there is little self-transcendence. At the same time, self-transcendence stands in firm opposition to any meaning of self-fulfillment which focuses on the self as a collection of wishes to be filled. In contrast, the experience of self-transcendence supports the gospel's paradoxical view that authentic self-realization results not from a self-centered effort to fulfill one's every wish, but from a movement beyond oneself in an attempt to realize the good of others. Victor Frankl (1963) makes this point clearly in *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it" (p. 175). One is actualized or fulfilled, he says, only to the extent that one is committed to life's meaning: "self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence" (p. 175).

Indeed, such realization of the self through transcendence is actually a form of self-fulfillment. However, it is a fulfillment of the fundamental desire for meaning, truth, value, and love characteristic of personal beings. While its fulfillment in self-transcendence brings a sense of peaceful happiness, the very nature of this basic human desire defies any self-centered striving for happiness through fulfillment. In fact, the fulfillment proper to the radical personal desire for self-transcendence can require that one "empty" oneself in the sense of sacrificing—not the self, but—the fulfillment of otherwise legitimate interests of the self (Conn, 1986).

Self-transcendence occurs in our effective response to the radical desire of the human spirit for meaning, truth, value, and love—a radical desire that is, at bottom, always a desire for God (Lonergan, 1972). The desire for understanding seeks meaning in our experience through questions for

intelligence. These can be the practical questions of the home or office, the theoretical questions of the study or laboratory, the artistic questions of the stage or studio, or the philosophical-religious questions of the classroom or chapel. We seek meaning, but not just any meaning. For, once attained, meaning is critically scrutinized by the desire for truth. We seek evidence to support the meaning. Is it really so? This demand for verification is driven by questions for reflection heading toward realistic judgment. When we affirm meaning as true, with varying degrees of probability, we claim to be moving from thinking about the world to actually knowing it. Realistic judging, of course, is neither rash nor obsessed with certitude.

When experiencing, understanding, and judging occur within a practical pattern of value oriented toward action, there follows the further moral question for deliberation: given my judgment of the situation and required action, what am I going to *do* about it? Will I meet the demand of conscience by deciding to act in accord with my best judgment? Following Freud, many authors contrast conscience and desire. For example, Robert Kegan speaks of "Freud's hapless infantile ego, appearing to be a player in personality but in reality swamped by the contending forces of conscience and desire" (1994, p. 9). My interpretation, by focusing on radical desire and mature conscience, identifies desire and conscience: conscience *is* the radical desire for self-transcendence. In other words, conscience, as I have argued elsewhere, is nothing other than the self-as-subject striving for value (Conn, 1981).

Finally, this practical questioning is permeated by a matrix of affectivity which must be strong enough to support the required action over the obstacles of conflicting interests. What, in the last analysis, am I going to commit myself to in love? Thus, every achievement of creative understanding, realistic judgment, responsible choice, and generous love is an instance of self-transcendence. Among all the possible realizations of human potential, such cognitive, moral, affective, and religious self-transcendence is *the* criterion of authentic self-realization, of the true self.

This structure of the desire for self-transcendence (questions for intelligence, reflection, and deliberation embodying the desire, and their responding operations of understanding, judging, and deciding which realize it), because it is conscious, also delineates the self by specifying distinct levels of consciousness: empirical, intelligent, rational, and responsible or existential—all interrelated as successive phases in the unfolding of the single desire of the human spirit for self-transcendence. From bodily nerves and psychic images, through sensitivity and intelligence, to free choice and love, the radical desire for self-transcendence unifies the self in its heuristic dynamism and integrates it in its realization.

In addition to cognitive self-transcendence, then, there is also affective self-transcendence. According to Lonergan's (1972) view, one is affectively self-transcendent when the isolation of the individual is broken and one spontaneously acts not just for self but also for the good of others. Affective self-transcendence thus grounds the real possibility of achieving moral self-transcendence in decisions to act for value. And, finally, beyond cognitive, affective, and moral self-transcendence, there is the possibility of religious self-transcendence. Lonergan says that a person's capacity and desire for self-transcendence meets joyful fulfillment when "religious conversion transforms the existential subject into a subject in love, a subject held, grasped, possessed, owned through a total and so an other-worldly love" (1972, p. 242).

So radical and thoroughgoing, indeed, is the desire for self-transcendence that we can complement the earlier affirmation that this desire is God within us by identifying the radical desire with the self-as-subject (Conn 1997a). However, because the self-as-subject is never separate from the self-as-object, and because God is transcendent as well as immanent, this identification of the radical desire for self-transcendence, God within us, and the self-as-subject is not pure and simple but ambiguous and complex. We shall return to this point in our consideration of Merton's true self.

This analysis of the desire for self-transcendence constitutes my fundamental understanding of the dynamic human person. It is important to note that this single concept of self-transcendence includes what psychologists as diverse as Freud and Piaget recognize as the two great yearnings of the human person: the desire for separation, differentiation, and autonomy on the one hand, and the desire for attachment, integration, and relationship on the other; that is, the desire *to be a self*, a center of strength, and the desire to reach beyond, *to transcend the self* in relationship. These two elements of the fundamental desire, the drive to be a self and the dynamism to transcend the self, are inextricably linked: separation *and* attachment, differentiation *and* integration, autonomy *and* relationship.

Self-transcendence, in short, is a radically interpersonal, relational reality. Outside of relationship there is no self. And this relational understanding of self-transcendence specifies the goal of pastoral counseling and spiritual direction: relational autonomy. Pastoral counseling and spiritual direction are aimed at empowering persons to realize ever greater self-transcendence in their lives. To a great degree, this means helping people to liberate themselves from the countless defense mechanisms and other distortions of the personality that constitute a drag on the desire for self-transcendence. The concrete, historical person has a desire to transcend the self, but also has very real limitations. The task of pastoral counseling

and spiritual direction is to deal with those limitations in order to increase the probability of self-transcendence in individual lives.

Having made reference to religious self-transcendence just a page or two back, this is an appropriate point to complete our consideration of the self by examining Thomas Merton's notion of the true self of religious experience.

MERTON'S TRUE SELF

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)—Trappist monk, poet, and peace and justice advocate—placed the true self at the center of his teaching on the Christian life. I have considered key aspects of Merton's extraordinary life as illustrations of various dimensions of conversion elsewhere (Conn, 1986); here I will focus on his teaching in order to expand our interpretation of the self to the explicit dimension of Christian spirituality. In the previous essay (Conn, 1997b), we saw a psychological version of the true self in Guntrip's object-relations theory; here we will consider Merton's theological version (Carr, 1988), and then integrate it with Lonergan's self-as-subject within the framework of self-transcendence.

"For me," writes Merton in his 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation*, "to be a saint means to be myself" (1960, p. 20). Sanctity consists of "finding out who I am and of discovering my true self" (p. 20). Unfortunately, "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self...who wants to exist outside the radius of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life" (p. 22). Though an illusion, the false self is, for most of us, *the* subjective reality. And this, for Merton, is the root sin, that the false self, "the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered" (p. 22). Thus the truth of life is paradoxical: "In order to become myself I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be, and in order to find myself I must go out of myself, and in order to live I must die" (p. 32). And the paradox of life is the paradox of love. Because God is love, a person "cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and thus pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love" (p. 41). For Merton, then, the spiritual "bottom line" is the true self: "If I find Him, I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him" (p. 23). But to reach the true self we must escape the prison of the false self.

A dozen years later, in his 1961 *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton characterizes the false self as the superficial consciousness of the external

self, irreducibly opposed to the “deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation” (1972, p. 7). Merton also designates the superficial “I” of the external self as our empirical self, our individuality, our ego. He continues his explicitly theological interpretation by asserting that this external, empirical self is not “the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God” (p. 7). In contemplation occurs “the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and reflection” (p. 7), and thus the discovery that the “I” of the external self is really “not I.” Christian meanings of sin and grace are intrinsic to this interpretation. Because of the “fall,” we are alienated from our inner self, the image of God in which we are created. To be “born in sin” means that we come into the world with a false self from which our true inner self must be saved by God’s grace (p. 38).

Given this description of the true and false selves in terms of the spatial images of inner and outer, we still need a more precise explanation of their nature and relationship. Sometimes, for example, Merton speaks of the true self as existing, but hidden, in need of discovery. At other times he says we must, together with God, create our true self. An important clue to an explanatory understanding is contained in Merton’s 1959 study on contemplation, “The Inner Experience.”

Merton highlights the wholeness of the inner self by affirming that it is “not a part of our being, like a motor in a car.” It is, rather, “our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level.” The inner self, Merton explains, is “like life, and it is life: it is our spiritual life when it is most alive.” Because it is a fundamental form of life, it “evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession,” but “every deeply spiritual experience, whether religious or moral, or even artistic, tends to have in it something of the presence of the interior self.” Indeed, the life of the inner self can communicate “a new life to the intelligence in which it lives, so that it becomes a living awareness of itself” (Merton, 1959, pp. 6-7).

This characterization of the inner, true self suggests a direct relationship to Lonergan’s self-as-subject and radical desire for self-transcendence, and thus the possibility of an explanatory understanding of Merton’s true self beyond descriptive spatial images. We can take the above points in reverse order. First, “a living awareness of itself” present in “every deeply spiritual experience” clearly points to the self-as-subject, the conscious, experienced presence of the self to itself which is “beyond observation and reflection,” and “evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it.” Second, “our spiritual life when it is most alive,” our entire being “on its highest and most personal and most existential level” points directly to the self as structured by its radical desire for self-transcendence, unfolding on successive levels of consciousness,

with the highest level of responsible or existential consciousness subsuming the empirical, intelligent, and rational levels. This linking of the true self with both the desire for self-transcendence and the self-as-subject reflects our earlier identification of the radical desire for self-transcendence with the self-as-subject. Further, Merton's linking of the true self with the discovery of God reflects our earlier suggestion connecting the desire for self-transcendence with God's presence within us. Now, at the subject-pole, or, as Merton would say, the self's deepest center, we can integrate the true self, the self-as-subject, the radical desire for self-transcendence, and God within us. This interior complex can be *experienced*, but only hinted at, never fully captured, in observation, conceptualization, or verbalization.

Identification of the true self with the desire for self-transcendence allows us to understand how Merton can sometimes speak of the true self as existing, though hidden, and sometimes as needing to be created. We can affirm that the true self exists as the desire for self-transcendence, but is still to be fully created in the sense of an actually self-transcending person. In contrast, the false self is the person insofar as he or she is failing to respond to the self's most radical desire. In explanatory terms, then, Merton's true self as actualized is the self fully alive on the highest level of responsible existential consciousness, reaching out beyond itself. Of course, self-transcendence in its fullest sense, and thus the true self in its fullest sense, is the result of radical conversion, in its cognitive, affective, moral, and religious dimensions (Conn, 1986). Finally, the discovery of God in the true self is, as Anne Carr puts it, the "paradox of desire that ceases to be desire" (1988, p. 143).

At this point we may conclude our consideration of Merton's true self by referring back to this section's opening remarks about Guntrip, Merton, and Lonergan. It should be clear now that in contrast to the *structural* character of Guntrip's psychological understanding of the true self, Merton's theological version is heavily *moral-religious* in character. Lonergan's methodological interpretation of the self is *both structural and moral-religious*, and can thus integrate a psychological view like Guntrip's with a theological view like Merton's. This is precisely the orientation Charles Taylor (1989) advocates in his insistence on the necessity of connecting the self and the good.

Now that we have considered the desire for self-transcendence and the true self, we are in a good position to examine the notoriously difficult issue of self-love.

SELF-LOVE

Few notions about the Christian life can contend with "self-love" for the designation of "most puzzling." We are told that we should love our

neighbors as ourselves (Lk 10:27). Jesus also said that if we are to follow him, we must renounce ourselves (Mt 16:24). The point, surely, is not that we should renounce our neighbors, but what is it? How should we understand these lessons? How can we both love and renounce ourselves? Most basically, what exactly does it mean to love oneself? Before attempting an answer to these puzzling questions, we should consult with another post-Freudian psychoanalytical theorist who has dealt with self-love explicitly, Erich Fromm.

Fromm (1963) starts with the fact that in much of Western thought—he refers to thinkers as different as Calvin and Freud—while it is considered virtuous to love others, it is sinful to love oneself. Love and self-love are seen as mutually exclusive; the more there is of one the less of the other. In this view self-love is the same as selfishness.

In contrast, Fromm's approach is to make a radical distinction between self-love and selfishness, to regard them as opposites. Genuine love, says Fromm, "implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge" (1963, p. 50). It is an "active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's capacity to love" (p. 50). Love of others and love of self go together. In Fromm's view, "*the affirmation of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one's capacity to love, i.e., in care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge*" (p. 50).

This genuine self-love is exactly the opposite of selfishness. Interested only in themselves, selfish people see others and the world for what they can get out of them, want everything for themselves, and have no respect for the dignity of others or interest in their needs. Selfish people are basically unable to love anyone, including themselves. Though they appear to love themselves, says Fromm, they actually hate themselves. Again, though selfish people seem to care too much for themselves, in reality they are unsuccessfully attempting to compensate for failing to care for their *real* selves, as Fromm puts it (1963, p. 51).

In sum, for Fromm, love is a basic affirmation of persons as incarnations of "essentially human qualities." Love of individual persons implies love of humanity, but only in and through individuals. Therefore, concludes Fromm, "my own self must be as much an object of my love as another person" (1963, p. 50).

We can take some clues from Fromm as we attempt to understand self-love in terms of self-transcendence. First, Fromm notes that selfish people fail to care for their *real* selves. This suggests that we should look to the self-as-subject in its dynamism for transcendence as a key to understanding self-love. At the same time, if the affirmation of one's own growth and happiness is rooted in one's capacity to love, to actively strive for the

growth and happiness of others, it may be misleading to speak of one's self as an *object* of one's own love.

The distinction between healthy self-love and destructive selfishness lies precisely in self-transcendence, in the distinction between self-as-subject and self-as-object. We love ourselves in an authentic way by loving others. Loving others *is* loving ourselves because acting for the true good of others (their growth, happiness) is acting for our own true good (realization of our capacity for self-transcendence). This is loving ourselves-as-subjects in the act of loving others. To love ourselves as we love our neighbors is, as the gospel puts it, to love our neighbors as ourselves. In contrast, selfishness is the attempt to love ourselves-as-objects, to fulfill our every want and wish. The self the gospel calls us to renounce is the false self—the ego-centric self-interests that obstruct the self-transcending love of others and ourselves that we are called to. We renounce the false self in order to love the true self-as-subject in and through its very reaching out to love others. Like consciousness, in which the self is known as subject in the same act that knows objects, authentic self-love is not a reflexive, second act of loving the self as object, but an interior dimension (subject) of the one act of loving another (object). Attempting to love the self in any other way (as object) is certain to fail, is doomed to selfishness. Like happiness, self-love is elusive: the more we seek it, the more it escapes us. Both happiness and self-love are realized only in self-transcending love of others.

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