

Worlds Within and Without: Thinking Otherwise About the Dialogical Self

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Given the site of this year's conference, it seemed only fitting to make some connection to the thinking of Pope John Paul II. Some of you may find this scary; to bring the Pope into a conference like this one might seem like a step too far. Some of you may also wonder a bit about me, coming from a place called "College of the Holy Cross." It could be he's a missionary or some kind of proselytizer for the Church. Well, let me just take a moment to ease whatever worries you might have by offering a very brief story from some years ago. It took the form of an email exchange I had with Jacob Belzen, a well-known scholar of psychology and religion, in which I told him I had some interest in moving beyond a purely naturalistic framework for understanding religious experience and was especially interested in the idea of transcendence. Simply put, I was interested in exploring the question of whether the sort of contact with the "Wholly Other" that had been discussed by thinkers like Rudolf Otto and, on some level, William James, was real. That is, I wanted to raise the possibility that the sorts of transcendent "ecstasies" these thinkers were exploring might actually point in the direction of some sphere of reality or being beyond the perimeter of the self.

Well, Jacob said (in a friendly way), you've crossed the line; you're out of bounds. And that's because when you start raising possibilities like these, you've stepped beyond the boundaries of psychology into theology. Okay, I said; good to know the rules. The other thing that was clear about Jacob's response, though, was that he seemed worried that I might be just the sort of proselytizer I referred to before—a missionary, an emissary of the College of the Holy Cross, eager to spread the good word. Not to worry, I told him: I'm a Jewish kid from New York, my wife is basically a Protestant-turned-Buddhist, and our kids, well, given their Jewish, Protestant, Buddhist, Unitarian background, they don't know *what* they are. Anyway, and to make a long story short, there's no need to be frightened by my making some reference to Pope John Paul. I'm not going to be smuggling any zealot-like ideas in through the back door.

Having said this, I'm quite interested, actually, in bringing some ideas in through the front door—and that's because they're very relevant to the questions and concerns I want to address here today and very relevant to our being here, at John

Paul II Catholic University. As some of you probably know, John Paul—Karol Wojtyla—was something of a phenomenologist, who drew on thinkers including Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and, especially Edmund Husserl. As it turns out, there were some other thinkers who were important to him too. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, for instance, he writes:

I must mention at least one name—*Emmanuel Levinas*, who represents a particular school of contemporary *personalism* and of the *philosophy of dialogue*. Like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, he takes up the personalistic tradition of the Old Testament, where the relationship between the human “I” and the divine, absolutely sovereign “THOU” is so heavily emphasized. God, who is the supreme Legislator, forcefully enjoined on Sinai the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” as an absolute moral imperative. Levinas, who, like his co-religionists, deeply experienced the tragedy of the Holocaust, offers a remarkable formulation of this fundamental commandment of the Decalogue: for him, the face reveals the person. . . . *The human face and the commandment “Do not kill” are ingeniously joined in Levinas, and thus become a testimony for our age.*

Having spent the day at Majdanek concentration camp on Tuesday, I was reminded of how much we *need* this testimony. I was also reminded, though, of the awful fact that this commandment all too frequently goes unheeded. Hannah Arendt (1963) puts the matter frighteningly well in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*:

And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody “Thou shalt not kill,” even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: “Thou shalt kill,” although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people. Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom . . . , and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation. (p. 150)

The “What is to be done?” question I raised yesterday is, of course, relevant here too, and every bit as urgent.

I'll return to these issues shortly. Now that I've brought God into the picture, though, I want to offer one more brief story, one that actually moves in the *opposite* direction from the Belzen story. When I completed the first draft of my book *The Priority of the Other* (2014), which will inform much of what I have to say here, I received one review that was about my discussion of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy—which, as many of you know, was an important influence on Bakhtin and others who turned to the idea of dialogue. Anyway, here's what the reviewer wrote:

The author's characterization of Buber's work is perhaps accurate overall, but there are several spots where its import could be read as essentially secular or nontheist. This is, of course, the usual depiction of Buber in secular psychology, but Buber himself denied any understanding of the I-Thou without God. God, as the "ground and meaning of our existence," makes all "spheres in which the world of relation arises" possible, including "our life with nature . . . our life with men [and] . . . our life with spiritual beings." Moreover, Buber's main translators and students made this abundantly clear in a host of essays and books. Maurice Friedman, for example, regularly quotes Buber to say: "If I myself should designate something as the 'central portion of my life work,' then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight. . . that the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one's fellow man are at bottom related to each other."

As the reviewer goes on to say, "I understand why the author"—i.e., me—"wrote it this way. After all, he promises to discuss the Transcendent Other in the final chapter. Still, he should consider nuancing his description of Buber a bit in the early chapters, so that the reader knows that the I-Thou isn't possible without this particular Other"—namely God. As he then adds—rightly, I think—"some would say that there are similar issues with Levinas, i.e., that Levinas also appeals to or needs a Transcendent Other in a similar sense. Here, however, I think Levinas can be read in multiple ways and is read in all these ways, as the author is probably aware. Indeed, I think there are as many atheistic Levinasians as theistic Levinasians. Hence, I have no objections to the Levinas sections in this sense. Buber, however, is another matter entirely."

So basically, I was accused of "cleansing" Buber's dialogical philosophy of its theistic foundations in order to avoid alienating readers of a more secular bent—which, of course, includes most of academic psychology. While Belzen thought I had gone too far in my willingness to entertain the possibility of transcendence,

this reviewer suggested that I hadn't gone far enough. He was probably right about this; I'd been quite selective in what I took from Buber. If truth be told, I also wasn't all that comfortable with some of Buber's God talk and thought that most of what was important about his work could be imported to psychology without it. I'm pretty much in the same place still. So I'd adopted a classically modern stance: yearning and searching for the holy but not quite willing to subscribe to all the theistic stuff that surrounds it. In any case, I do have some questions to pose in light of these two brief stories, both for me and for the theory of the dialogical self:

- To what extent can the idea—and, on some level, the *ideal*—of dialogicality be completely severed from the kind of broadly religious moorings Buber's work relies upon?
- More generally, what is the relationship between dialogicality and the kinds of ethical concerns Buber and especially Levinas posit as primary? For Levinas, ethics is "first philosophy," as he puts it. Consequently, there is no understanding the dialogical dimension outside of the ethical dimension—which is to say, outside of what I've come to call the priority—the "firstness"—of the Other.
- Finally for now, what is the relationship—or how should we understand the relationship—between the kind of explicitly dialogical perspective put forth by Buber, Bakhtin, and much of dialogical self psychology (acknowledging their differences) and the more Other-centered approach advanced, most directly, by Levinas?

As a kind of sub-question here, we can also ask: How should we understand the relationship between what I've here called "worlds within" and "worlds without"? By and large, dialogical self theory addresses the former—without excluding the latter, to be sure, but focusing more on the internalities of the dialogical process. Buber and Levinas, on the other hand—as well as the work of thinkers like Jean Luc Marion—move more in the direction of the latter, focusing on the way in which those "objects" outside the self come to constitute experience. Marion is particularly interested in what he calls the "saturated phenomenon," manifested, for instance, in those forms of aesthetic experience in which the otherness of the work overwhelms us with its uncontainable abundance, its excess. "Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon," Marion (2008) writes,

the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it. It is constituted and no longer constituting because it no longer has at its disposal any dominant point of

view over the intuition that overwhelms it. . . . The I [thus] loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted: it becomes a *me* rather than an *I*. . . . The constituting subject is succeeded by the constituted witness. (p. 44)

Now, one could argue here that, when considering phenomena like aesthetic experience or religious experience, we're considering extreme cases, limit cases, ones that exceed the more basic dialogical modes we find in ordinary experience. If Marion is right, though—and I quote him once again—

The saturated phenomenon must not be understood as a limit case, an exceptional, vaguely irrational, in short, a 'mystical' case of phenomenality. On the contrary, it indicates the coherence and conceptual fulfillment of the most operative definition of the phenomenon: it alone truly appears as itself, and starting from itself, since it alone appears without the limits of a horizon and without reduction to an I. (p. 45)

As Marion goes on to state, "I will therefore call this appearance that is purely of itself and starting from itself, this phenomenon that does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination, a 'revelation.' And I insist that here it is purely and simply a matter of the phenomenon taken in its fullest meaning" (pp. 45-46).

Let me give you a fairly simple example of what Marion is talking about from outside the sphere of aesthetic or religious experience. It's one that relates to Buber and Levinas as well. The example—and I must say, it's difficult to call it that—is that of my mother, and my relationship to her, over the ten or so years of her dementia. She passed away this past February at age 93. Let me share just a few words about her as we begin to move further into the issues at hand.

She was an extraordinary woman. And I never saw this more clearly than during the last ten years. I've written about her in the past, and in some recent musings I've referred to the story I might tell as a "tragicomedy." There's no getting around the fact that aspects of her situation were tragic: a vital, vibrant, smart woman got taken down by a dreaded disease. But there were also aspects of her situation, and our situation, together, that were quite beautiful. I'm not recommending the disease, mind you; all things considered, it would have been better for her to have remained healthy. But even amid the devastation that came her way, and our way, we had some amazing opportunities to connect and to love—opportunities that, ironically enough, wouldn't have arisen without her very

affliction. We are immensely grateful for them. We were gifted, truly. And I'd like to think that she was too.

The other thing I'm grateful for is the opportunity to have learned more, firsthand, about *care* for the Other. During those years, my mother—her presence, her being, her *face*, as Levinas (e.g., 1985, 1999) had put it—was the primary source of my care, my desire to be there, with her and for her. She drew me out of myself in a way that was quite profound. This doesn't mean that I was completely self-less about it; I have no interest in portraying myself as some sort of caregiver-hero. As I've "confessed" before, there were times when I thought about going over to her place and I didn't do it. Should I go to see mom? Or should I take a nap? Or go outside and have a margarita? She didn't always win! But she generally did. Why? There are lots of reasons. I went to see her because that's what you're supposed to do. Or so she knew what a good son I was. Or to assuage some of my own guilt. And so forth and so on. Lots of voices at work here, clamoring for attention. Some basic ideas from dialogical self theory apply well.

But I also went to see her for *her*—because she was alone and in need and because my presence brought her some of the few moments of pleasure in her life. *Care, therefore, was awakened in me, through her*, through her infirmity and vulnerability, in an unprecedented way. Those ten years were filled with saturated phenomena, with revelations, both large and small, which very much "put me in my place." Or, put in Levinasian terms, I was something of a "hostage" during those years—not in any bad sense but rather than in the sense of held by a kind of necessity, even a kind of *obedience*. As Levinas (1999) writes, "It is precisely in that recalling of me to my responsibility by the face that summons me, that demands me, that requires me—it is in that calling into question—that the other is my neighbor" (p. 25)—a rather close neighbor in this case.

Here, as elsewhere, Levinas seeks to take us beyond dialogue—more specifically, beyond the condition of "reciprocity" that Buber often spoke of. As Levinas (1999) explains, Buber's concept of reciprocity had especially bothered him "because the moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior. In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility" (p. 101). Levinas thus insists on the "gratuitousness" of the "for-the-other," the idea again being that I am responsible to and for the other *before* any commitment has been established, before there has come to be a pact of "exchange" between me and the other person: "In the alterity of the face," he writes, "the for-the-other commands the *I*" (p. 103).

In short, the I-Thou relation, Levinas suggests, does not create an adequate space for the *priority* of the Other, with priority in this case referring not so much to the “before” as, again, to firstness, as I put it before, primacy. “How,” he asks, “can we maintain the specificity of the interhuman *I-Thou* without bringing out the strictly ethical meaning of responsibility, and how can we bring out the ethical meaning without questioning the reciprocity on which Buber always insists? Doesn’t the ethical begin when the *I* perceives the *Thou* as higher than itself?” (p. 32) Levinas, contra Buber, thus wants to speak not of reciprocity or symmetry but rather of “the dissymmetry of intersubjective space” (p. 45).

It is not clear to me whether Levinas has been fair to Buber. Buber does use the language of reciprocity and, in the very positing of the I-Thou relation, implies a certain “equidistance,” we might say, between myself and the other person. At the same time, there is no question but that Buber too wants to confer a certain priority on the Thou. In considering our relationship with others, he writes:

This person is other, essentially other than myself, and this otherness of his is what I mean, because I mean him; I confirm it; I wish his otherness to exist, because I wish his particular being to exist. . . . That the men with whom I am bound up in the body politic and with whom I have directly or indirectly to do, are essentially other than myself, that this one or that one does not have merely a different mind, or way of thinking or feeling, or a different conviction or attitude, but has also a different perception of the world, a different recognition and order of meaning, a different touch from the regions of existence, a different faith, a different soil: to affirm all this, to affirm it in the way of a creature, in the midst of the hard situations of conflict, without relaxing their real seriousness, is the way by which we may officiate as helpers in this wide realm entrusted to us as well, and from which alone we are from time to time permitted to touch in our doubts, in humility and upright investigation, on the other’s “truth” or “untruth,” “justice” or “injustice.” (1965, pp. 61-62)

On this account, we must somehow deepen our attention to and regard for the other in his or her otherness, his or her differentness. We must in fact “affirm all this,” take it to heart. Notice in this passage that Buber seems to have moved beyond the discourse of reciprocity and dialogue. There is talk instead of what is “essentially other than myself,” of what is inexorably “different.” Following Levinas, this apparent shift in language may be extremely important. For, it may be that reciprocity and dialogue, important though they are, do not suffice to convey the essentially ethical nature of our relationship to others. Moreover, it may be that

they do not suffice to convey the nature of selfhood. For Levinas, there is a very real sense in which “I” am secondary. The priority here, again, is the priority of the Other, the “I” and the “I think”—Descartes’ *ego cogito*—having been unseated through this very priority. I have come to think of this in terms of what might be called an “ex-centric” view of selfhood (Freeman, 2004, 2014), wherein we are drawn outward, beyond ourselves, by what is Other. I should note here that, in speaking of what is Other, I, along with Marion and others, refer not only to other people but to nature, art, God—whatever it is that draws us beyond our own borders.

So, how does all this relate to thinking Otherwise about the dialogical self. . . . More specifically, what sort of “model” might be crafted to contain the various dimensions of selfhood we’ve been considering?

In some recent work, focused on the idea of narrative identity (e.g., Freeman, 2013a, 2013b), I’ve suggested that the self might be conceptualized in terms of two interrelated triads, the first of which is largely concerned with time, the second with relatedness to the Other, by which I refer to those sources of ‘inspiration’, outside the perimeter of the ego, integral to the fashioning of identity. In addressing the first triad, *spheres of temporality*, I suggest that narrative identity emerges in and through the interplay of past, present and future in the form of remembering, acting, and imagining. In addressing the second triad, *spheres of otherness*, I suggest that this temporal interplay is itself interwoven with our relation to other people, to the non-human world and to those moral and ethical “goods” that serve to orient and direct the course of human lives. By thinking these two triadic spheres together, my aim is to arrive at a picture of selfhood appropriate to the complexities entailed in its formation.

Let me try to sketch out the ways in which this particular view of selfhood might push us toward “thinking Otherwise” about the dialogical self, beginning with the aforementioned spheres of temporality. I’m not going to go into too much detail in this first context, mainly because many of you are familiar with the kind of narrative thinking it’s based on.

At the heart of my own work on narrative—and I acknowledge my special debt here to Paul Ricoeur, who I had the great good fortune of studying with many years ago—is the importance of hindsight and narrative reflection. In this work, I suggest that there are profound limits to what can be seen and known in the present moment. The fact is, we often get “caught up” in the moment, and as a result may

be rendered blind to its meaning and significance. Along these lines, I've suggested in some work (e.g., Freeman, 2003, 2010) that there is a kind of "lateness" that characterizes the human condition, a delay or deferral in seeing and understanding, such that it can only occur *after the fact*, after the passage of the time, when the air of the present moment has cleared—that is, in hindsight. This is particularly so, I've argued, in the moral domain, where there's a marked tendency to act first and think later. This of course happens routinely in the context of everyday life, when we revisit an incident or event and find ourselves seeing things in it that we either could not or would not see before. But it also happens in the context of much larger events—the Holocaust, for instance, events that once seemed to have to some sort of rationale to people, some sort of justification (amazingly enough), but that now, in hindsight, may appear bizarre, horrific, and shameful. "What were we *thinking*?" many have surely asked. . .

In much of my work, I have tended to focus on the past more than the present or the future. But through the work of Michael Bamberg, Jens Brockmeier, Rom Harré, and others I have come around to seeing both the *performative* aspect of identity-making—what is being *done* in the act of narrating—and also the more "local" aspect of identity-making—that is, what it is that transpires, in the present, in the context of everyday *acting* in the world. From a more classically hermeneutical approach, rooted in the interpretation of "big stories" such as autobiographies and the like, there's been greater attention to "small stories" and a practice-based approach, rooted more the quotidian conditions of the conversational present than the more distant concerns of the storied past.

One important question that's yet to really be taken on, though, is how the future enters into the equation (though I know some people here are in the process of doing exactly this). That *remembering* and *acting* are key aspects of the formation of narrative identity seems self-evident. But there's also *imagining*, projecting oneself into the future, or possible future. Let me see if I can begin to bring some of these ideas together by saying just a bit more about the three spheres of temporality and how they might enter into the fashioning of identity. What I want to say, first, is that *acting*, in the *present*, is indeed an important, and somewhat neglected, aspect of the fashioning of narrative identity. Here, I am thinking especially of what Ricoeur (1991) has referred to as those "heterogeneous elements," found in the movement of life itself, that are in some sense "pre-narrative." "Without leaving the sphere of everyday experience," Ricoeur (1991) writes, "are we not inclined to see in a given chain of episodes in our own life something like *stories that have not yet been told*, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer points of anchorage for the narrative?" (p. 30). In an important

sense, this first sphere of temporality is indeed *primary*. But this pre-narrative doing is of a different order than that which takes place in the retrospective, reflective work of narrative. In the course of everyday life, we are “entangled” in stories, as Ricoeur puts it, many of which are unspoken; narrating is a “secondary process” “grafted” onto this entanglement. . . . Recounting, following, understanding stories is then simply the continuation of these unspoken stories” (p. 30). In addressing this *secondary* process of narrating, therefore, what we are considering, again, is more of a synoptic and indeed *dialogical* taking-stock; and insofar as it is oriented to the question of who I am, “through it all,” it is that much more explicitly tied to identity.

In keeping with the aforementioned idea of lateness that I mentioned just before, narrative reflection, the process of looking backward over the terrain of the personal past, frequently takes the form of “correcting,” one might say, the “shortsightedness” of the immediate moment, thereby allowing us to see what we either could not, or would not, see earlier on. It is right here, I suggest, that the third sphere of temporality, oriented toward the future, comes into play, in the *tertiary* process of imagining: in seeing my own shortsightedness from the distant perch of the present moment, looking backward, I have already begun to move beyond it. And even though I may not yet know with any certainty where exactly this movement will take me, I have already begun to face the difficult ethical and moral challenge of moving forward, to a better place. In reconstructing the past I thus reconstruct the future as well, re-imagining the developmental *teloi* or ends of my life. In the process of doing so I also re-imagine my very identity.

Now, in considering this process of redressing the shortsightedness of the past present and opening up the possibility of a better way in the future, we have already entered what I am here calling “spheres of otherness.” So, let me turn to them.

In speaking of spheres of otherness, I am speaking of those particular aspects of relation that Buber, in particular, underscores in considering the I/Thou relationship (1965, 1970). For Buber, there are three such fundamental spheres. “Man’s threefold living relation,” he writes, “is, first, his relation to the world and to things, second, his relation to men [and women]—both to individuals and to the many—third, his relation to the mystery of being—which is dimly apparent through all this but infinitely transcends it—which the philosopher calls the Absolute and the believer calls God, and which cannot in fact be eliminated from the situation even by a man who rejects both designations” (1965, p. 177). This

basic framework isn't unrelated to James's conception of the "empirical ego" and his own tripartite division between the material, social, and spiritual me. For Buber, though, the focus is more on one's relation to the *other*-than-self. Indeed, he insists, "the genuineness and adequacy of the self cannot stand the test in self-commerce, but only in communication with the whole of otherness" (p. 178),

Now, if Levinas is right, the primary and most fundamental sphere of otherness is that of other people, the basic idea being that one's identity—both as *a* human being and as *this* human being—has as its main source of inspiration the "face" of the other person, to whom and for whom we are responsible. In this, again, he is underscoring the *ethical* dimension of identity. Identity here is "ex-centric," as I put it before, outward-moving, drawn forth by the Other. As Levinas puts the matter in an important essay entitled "Substitution" (1996b), "The ego is not merely a being endowed with certain so-called moral qualities, qualities which it would bear as attributes." Rather, it is always in the process "of being emptied of its being, of being turned inside out" (p. 91). There is much more that might be said about Levinas's claims in this context. For present purposes, I shall simply reiterate the idea that our relatedness to others—particularly those with whom we share a history and a story—is, for him, the sphere of spheres, and is in this sense the primordial source of selfhood. He does, however, make one additional move, which brings us all the way back to one of the issues raised at the beginning of this talk. As he writes in *Alterity and transcendence* (1999), The face of the Other "demands me, requires me, summons me. Should we not call this demand or this interpellation or this summons to responsibility the word of God?" (p. 27)

This brings us back to some of the scary stuff that I introduced earlier. Levinas does offer an important "qualification" of sorts in this context, though. As he explains in an important article called "Transcendence and height" (1996c),

I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse. The notion of God—God knows, I'm not opposed to it! But when I have to say something about God, it is always beginning from human relations. . . . I do not start from the existence of a very great and all-powerful being. Everything I wish to say comes from this situation of responsibility which is religious insofar as the I cannot elude it. (p. 29)

This passage is an especially strong statement of Levinas's convictions regarding the priority of the Other and the presence of God within this very priority.

As for where Buber is on this set of issues, he actually seems to be in a similar place. “Extended,” he (1970) writes, “the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You” (p. 123). As Buber emphasizes, not unlike Levinas, this glimpse of the eternal You does not emerge apart from the stuff of human relations but *through* them. On one level, he clarifies, God is “the wholly other.” On another level, however, God is “the wholly same: the wholly present. Of course he is the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I” (p. 127). This mystery is not to be considered an “inference,” in the sense of something extrapolated from life, from the ongoing reality of things. “It’s not as if something else were ‘given’ and this were then deduced from it” (p. 129). The mystery is rather present in what is there, immanent in the ordinary course of events. For now, in any case, I’ll just reiterate that, for Levinas and Buber alike, the power of the dialogical is inseparable from (how shall I put it?) “larger sources.” I leave it to you what to make of these quite strong claims.

In regard to the second sphere of otherness, which Buber referred to as our relation to the world and to things, we might turn briefly to some of Iris Murdoch’s work (e.g., 1970, 1993). For Murdoch, it is not only other people who inspire us and give form and meaning to identity but also the vast variety of non-human “objects”—works of art, especially—that both “take us out of ourselves” (she uses the word “unselfing” to describe this process) and, at the same time, return us *to* ourselves, on a deeper plane. “In enjoying great art,” she writes, “we experience a clarification and concentration and perfection of our own consciousness. Emotion and intellect are unified into a limited whole. In this sense art also *creates* its client.” “It is important too,” Murdoch adds, “that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (1970, p. 65). Indeed, she suggests, our encounter with art can serve as a kind of training ground for encountering other people in their “separateness and difference,” as she puts it. And it’s a short step from here to the moral plane: For, “The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another [person] has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing” (p. 66). This in turn feeds back to our own moral identity and sense of self.

Now Murdoch, some of you may be relieved to know, wasn’t a believer, so you won’t find much in the way of explicit God talk in her work. But—she is in fact still very much interested in the kind of transcendent claims great works of art, in

particular, can make on us. On her account, “There is . . . something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things,” she writes, “which automatically suggests that ‘there is more than this.’ The ‘there is more than this,’ if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. But it seems to me that the spark is real” (1970, p. 73). The kind of experience she’s referring to

is not like an arbitrary and assertive resort to our own will; it is a discovery of something independent of us, where that independence is essential. If we read these images aright they are not only enlightening and profound but amount to a statement of a belief which most people unreflectively hold. Non-philosophical people do not think that they invent good. They may invent their own activities, but good is somewhere else as an independent judge of these. Good is also something clearly seen and indubitably discovered in our ordinary unmysterious experience of transcendence, the progressive illuminating and inspiring discovery of *other*, the positive *experience* of truth, which comes to us all the time in a weak form and comes to most of us sometimes in a strong form (in art or love or work or looking at nature) and which remains with us as a standard or vision, an *orientation*, a *proof*, of what is possible and a vista of what might be. (1993, p. 508).

For Murdoch, “The ordinary way is the way. It is not in that sense theology,” she insists, “and the ‘mysticism’ involved is an accessible experience” (pp. 508-509). Here too, then, the transcendent—the sacred or the holy—is seen as woven into the very fabric of experience.

The main point to be emphasized here, in any case, is that the particular Other to which we are related is in no way limited to the human realm. Pragmatically speaking, in fact, the Other might be said to consist of any and all phenomena that “inspire” us and, as I put it earlier, draw us beyond our own borders.

This brings us, finally, to Buber’s third sphere of otherness, which he referred to as our relation to the mystery of being. Just in case this sounds a bit too ethereal (or theological), let me turn to Charles Taylor, who is somewhat more earthbound about these matters and whose work may also help provide a bridge of sorts between the three spheres of temporality and the three spheres of otherness. For Taylor, as for Murdoch, the moment I pause to reflect on my life, I do so against

the backdrop of the question of goodness. His discussion of “frameworks” in *Sources of the Self* (1989) is particularly useful in this context. “To articulate a framework,” he writes, “is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses” (p. 26). It is a structure of hierarchically-ordered commitments, an identification of one’s priorities, and doing without them, he insists, ‘is utterly impossible for us’ (p. 27). More to the point still, Taylor writes, “we cannot do without some orientation to the good” (p. 33). Indeed, ‘we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good’ (p. 34). This is precisely where narrative enters the picture: ‘(T)his sense of the good’, Taylor argues, ‘has to be woven into my life as an unfolding story.’ What’s more, ‘as I project my life forward and endorse the existing direction or give it a new one, I project a future story, not just a state of the momentary future but a bent for my whole life to come’ (p. 48).

As Taylor goes on to suggest in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), there is a tendency within modernity to emphasize “being true to oneself” in thinking about personal identity. What Taylor wants to show, however, is that thinking about authenticity in this self-enclosed way, without regard to the demands of our ties to others or to demands ‘emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations’ (p. 35). is self-defeating and, ultimately, meaningless. Things take on importance against a background, a horizon, of intelligibility. ‘Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen...depends on the understanding that *independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life.’ Authenticity, therefore, he insists, ‘is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands’ (p. 41). That is to say, it supposes that these demands issue from what is *other-than-self*, from regions of influence and inspiration that draw the self forward and fuel the ongoing process of fashioning and refashioning one’s identity.

For Buber, as well as for Murdoch and Taylor, the otherness or “independence” of these regions of influence and inspiration is key. In this context, it seems important to point out that, in speaking about his three spheres of relation, Buber does *not* speak about the relation to oneself. “Besides man’s threefold living relation,” he acknowledges, “there is one other, that to one’s own self. This relation, however, unlike the others, cannot be regarded as one that is real as such, since the necessary presupposition of a real duality is lacking. Hence it cannot in reality be raised to the level of an essential living relation” (1965, p. 180). I am not sure whether to follow Buber in this exclusion. Here, I am thinking of the very real

consequences of the I/me relationship—including, especially, the fact that I can effect very real changes in myself as a function of how I relate to my past. At the same time, strictly speaking, “I” cannot inspire myself, precisely because inspiration must derive from without, from something *other* than me. The “dialogue” that transpires between “I” and “me” can thus never be quite as substantial as that which takes place with objects outside of me. Hence Buber’s assertion that “The question of what man is”—and the question of who *I* am, as this particular person—“cannot be answered by a consideration of existence or of self-being as such, but only by a consideration of the essential connection of the human person and his relations with all being” (p. 180)—as it unfolds, we can add, through narrative. More directly still: “Only when we try to understand the human person in his whole situation, in the possibilities of his relation to all that is not himself, do we understand man” (p. 181). Along these lines, I (Freeman, 2007) have suggested that while the *proximal* source of one’s story is the self, the *distal* source is the Other. Taking this idea one step farther, it might also be said that the Other—manifested in Buber’s three spheres—is the distal source of selfhood itself.

I think Buber and Levinas are of a piece on this. That, of course, doesn’t make them right. Here, then, we might pose a few additional large questions, ones that seem especially important in thinking about dialogical self theory: First, and most basically, to what extent is the basic perspective being advanced here, via Buber, Levinas, Murdoch, Taylor, and others consistent with dialogical self theory? We might also ask: To what extent are the kinds of inner dialogues often considered in dialogical self theory and elsewhere truly *dialogical*—or, as Buber might put it, truly *real*? In the I/me relationship, one is in dialogue not with something outside the self but with an “object,” so to speak, one has constructed. This is true more generally of one’s relationship to the past. “The past,” Merleau-Ponty (1962) has written, “exists only when a subjectivity is there to disrupt the plenitude of being in itself, to adumbrate a perspective” (p. 421). What kind of dialogue can there really be with “objects”—which, of course, aren’t really objects at all—like these? It’s no wonder that narrative understanding and writing are cast into question by many. Strictly speaking, there is no “text”; there is only that which one has fashioned and refashioned in memory. What else can the resultant narratives be but fictions—believed-in imaginings, as Ted Sarbin might have called them—spun out of the narrative imagination?

In the few minutes that remain, I’ll do what I can to answer these questions. What I’ll suggest first is that “thinking Otherwise” about the dialogical self, as I’ve tried to do here today, ought to be seen as a natural extension of dialogical self theory.

In some ways, I suppose, the emphasis on the Other as source and inspiration could be construed as less dialogical. Following Buber especially, though, it may actually be more so insofar as it focuses more on “real dualities,” as he puts it—that is, relationships to what is *outside* the perimeter of the self. As for the related question of whether narrative understanding and writing can be considered truly dialogical, I would want to suggest that there can in fact be true dialogicality involved—albeit of a different sort than what one finds in the encounter with objects outside the self.

Earlier, you’ll recall, I discussed the idea that narrative reflection can allow us to see, from a distance, what’s been going on, the main idea being that there exists a certain advantage in looking backward, at the movement of events, from afar—that is, from the distant perch of the present. So it is that Ricoeur (e.g., 1981a) speaks of *productive* distanciation. The idea is an important one. There’s no question but that narratives can and do sometimes distort and falsify the past. This is common knowledge—so common, in fact, that some have argued that they cannot *help* but do so. There is some truth to this idea, if only for the fact that I cannot possibly discern the reality of my past without bringing certain “prejudices” to it: I can only see and hear what I am prepared to see and hear, by my language, my culture, by the *world* I am already inhabiting.

But none of this entails the necessity of imposing meaning onto the past and thereby distorting and falsifying it. The degree to which I do so is, in part, a function of the state of my ego and of what I need to see in the story of my life. Like Ivan Ilych, in Tolstoy’s great novella, I may need to see it as being just “as it should be,” pleasant and carefree, if only to defend against my own superficiality. But how I relate to my past is also a function of the quality of attention I bring to it, whether it allows me to “pierce the veil” of my own needful imaginings. This implies that the problem isn’t with narratives *per se*; it’s with those specific narratives that entrap us and blind us and thereby prevent us from seeing what is really there. Narrative understanding, I have suggested, thus requires a kind of mindfulness, a kind of respectful attention to my own otherness—or, as Paul Ricoeur (1992) has put it, the capacity to behold “oneself as another.”

Let me try to bring all of this together by saying the following:

In referring to what I have here been calling “spheres of temporality, the focus is predominantly internal, directed toward *poiesis*, meaning-making processes, of the sort we find in narrative reflection. It’s here that we encounter ideas like “construction” and see the importance of personal agency. This dimension of the

basic perspective I'm advancing is perhaps closest to dialogical self theory, as it's often understood. Worlds within. . .

In referring to what I have here been called “spheres of otherness,” the focus is more external, *outside* the self, and is directed toward the way in which the self is “moved,” we might say, *given* meaning and form by what is *other*. So, the emphasis here is on the *unconstructed*, on that which can't be contained by my constructions or that exceeds them. And rather than emphasizing agency, the emphasis instead is on receptivity and vulnerability—even a kind of passivity. Worlds without. . .

I don't want to overstate the difference between these perspectives. On the contrary, in keeping with Hubert Hermans' “field of tensions” idea spelled out yesterday, I see these two as interlacing spheres, both of which are integral facets of the human condition. Stated another way, these two spheres are themselves in something of a dialogical relationship with one another, the field of tension here being unsurpassable. Dialogical self theory would seem to be well-placed to flesh out this relationship. My hope is that thinking Otherwise about it may be useful in extending its reach.

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