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The Impact of Faith on Relational Thought

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It is easy to think of possible tensions between one's faith and academic reality, but I wish to address here a positive relation, namely, the fact that the academy is indebted to religious faith, just as theologies have in turn drawn on philosophy. Specifically, I want to point to the fact that Jewish and Christian traditions made an impact on a phase of thought that began at the end of the nineteenth century and continues to the present day. A significant theme of this thinking is the centrality of relations. In fact, in my opinion, relational theory represents the most important intellectual contribution of this period. It includes two major lines, both of which will now be described.

One line emerged in the work of C. S. Peirce. He developed a system of logic that is based on relations. Such a logic had been initiated by Augustus De Morgan in 1859, but Peirce explored it more fully and consistently from 1861 on.

This kind of logic involves both particularity and generality. In doing so, it differs from earlier systems of logic.¹ Aristotelian logic had employed classes (general categories in reality) as its fundamental notion. The particularist logic that began at the end of the Middle Ages instead treated only particulars as "real," while general ideas were considered to represent thoughts about reality but not reality itself.² Differently, relational logic represents both particularity and generality as "real" or at least as "possible," even apart from thought. It does so by treating items that enter into relations as particular but relations themselves as general, for any relation can be repeated, in principle, at least.³ Since a characteristic feature of this new logic is the use of symbols, the difference between particular and general elements can be seen graphically; in one widely used version, general terms are indicated by capital letters, while particulars are represented by small letters.

For Peirce, the combination of particular and general elements in logic was significant, for he was convinced that nominalism – which treats generality only as “names,” or thoughts, based on particular reality – is deeply flawed. Peirce came to this conviction on two grounds. One ground was social. Specifically, he participated in the critique of individualism that emerged in his time and accordingly emphasized “COMMUNITY.”⁴ The other ground was theoretical in character; it had a religious dimension.

These two grounds were intertwined and were present together in the outlook of Melusina Fay, Peirce’s first wife, who was a religious feminist and had a considerable influence on his thought.⁵ She was sufficiently prominent to serve as the first president of the Women’s Parliament from 1869-1877. During their courtship in 1861, the two had intellectual exchanges, as is indicated by the fact that he dedicated several unpublished writings to her.⁶ Before they married in 1862, he moved from his previous Unitarianism toward her Trinitarian position. Already in 1859 she had presented a feminist interpretation of Trinitarian doctrine, according to which the Holy Spirit is feminine. The idea of the Trinity assumes, of course, that relations are basic to reality. Fay had connected this assumption with a social outlook. For instance, during her marriage, she advocated and for a while practiced with the support of her husband “cooperative housekeeping,” an arrangement in which several families share certain activities, including cooking.⁷

Peirce’s relational view can, then, be seen as emerging from a fairly widespread movement, in which feminism was pursued within a more-or-less religious frame. An early representative of that movement was Catharine Beecher, a pioneer in feminism and a definite (although not traditional) Christian; in 1860, perhaps as the first to do so in a theoretical way, she set forth a relational ontology.⁸ In 1885, Peirce’s male feminist friend Francis Abbot propounded an antinomialist “relationism” that was founded in “the All-Embracing Fatherhood-and-Motherhood of God.”⁹ Another friend of Peirce, William James, had a moderately religious outlook and an appreciation for the feminist writer Jane Addams.¹⁰ Furthermore, John Dewey, who came out of the Protestant “Social Gospel” tradition and retained at least some sympathy for religion, was influenced not only by Peirce, but also by his own wife, Alice, as well as by Jane Addams and several other feminists, as is rather well-known; he thus reflected the same social and intellectual movement.

Against this background, we can look at Peirce's own view. From early on, he had an interest in three-fold structures. This interest may have been fed in part by the appearance of three-fold patterning in Kant's thought. However, Kant had not presented a good reason why there should be such patterning. Peirce did provide a rationale on the basis of language. Already in 1857 and 1859, while attending college, he had explored briefly the role of the three grammatical "persons" (I, thou, it); he pursued this pattern again at somewhat greater length in 1861 while interacting with Melusina.¹¹

Somewhat differently, in 1865 – as he focused on the notion of "sign," which had become important for logic – Peirce described the three grammatical persons in terms of the "three relations" of a symbol.¹² Thus, an interest in triple analysis continued, although the focus was no longer on the three grammatical persons that appear in the structure of a sentence. He did see in the structure of the symbol an "analogy" with the structure of a sentence. Over the years Peirce developed his analysis of the symbol with minor variations which arrived at the following characterizations: "Firstness" is the quality to which a symbol refers (this quality may not be actual but represents a possibility and is in this sense general).¹³ "Secondness" is the phenomenon that a particular entity (the concrete sign) refers to something other than itself. "Thirdness" is a potential (different from sheer possibility, since it presupposes actuality), specifically an interpretant (a responsive event, another sign).¹⁴

In the lecture series in which he set forth this theory of the symbol, Peirce pointed to the fact that it corresponded with Trinitarian thought, although he knew that the Trinitarian orientation would not be appreciated by his philosophical audience.¹⁵ Later, he argued that "God" has no legitimate overt place in philosophy, but he presented an argument for the reality of God in a journal devoted to religious thought.¹⁶ Thus, the religious perspective was important for Peirce but was placed into the background.¹⁷

In the same lecture series, Peirce began to outline a theory of indeterminism, or "chance."¹⁸ This theory implied that entities are partially independent of each other; it cohered with his relational outlook. Indeed, relations – if they are real, not merely thought – simultaneously connect and separate, for without a degree of separation there are no entities to enter into a relationship.¹⁹ Such a recognition had long been present in Christian discussions

concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁰ Peirce may not have been aware of these discussions, but in 1861 he said that the three grammatical persons “cannot be expressed in terms of each other, yet they have a relation to each other.”²¹

Although it is apparent that Peirce learned from religious tradition, he did not accept it as an authority to be taken uncritically. Rather, Peirce came to furnish a mathematical justification for his view that triplicity is fundamental. He argued that a triadic structure must be a primitive or basic structure of reality, for a triad cannot be derived from a simpler pattern, although more simple and more complex structures can be derived from a triadic structure by compression or expansion.²²

It is certainly noteworthy that a relational view of reality, which had not been well represented in Western philosophy after the Presocratics, entered into philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. Earlier, Ockham had argued that relations are fundamental only within, not outside of, God.²³ Differently, Peirce and others in his time came to believe that relations are fundamental everywhere.

One can then ask, “What brought about the change?” The most likely answer is that social conditions changed. Nominalism was part of so-called “bourgeois” culture (as Peirce recognized in 1903).²⁴ As such, it reacted against an earlier Platonism that had been associated with aristocratic structures and had privileged generality over particularity. The particularism of bourgeois culture, however, created social havoc, with an increase in social disparity and perhaps even an actual decrease in living conditions for persons at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.²⁵ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, then, there arose the sense that a balance was needed between particularity and generality or, otherwise stated, between separateness and connectivity.

Such a balance may be more in line with biblical and most other cultural traditions than was either Platonism or nominalism, which can be thought of as one-sided.²⁶ Thus one can see in relational theory an acceptance and development of an old point of view, which had been sidelined in philosophy.²⁷ Still, one can ask, “Which aspect – the social or the intellectual/religious – was primary in bringing about the reorientation?” A possible answer is that, since the religious traditions involved had a longer life than socioeconomic systems, they should be considered to have made a long-range impact across

millennia, while developments in social order had a stronger effect in regard to shorter-range variations. However, one can leave this issue open and simply point to the fact that there was a change in ethos, which had a religious side.

Peirce was not alone in taking up a relational position. To distinguish his relational way from others that emerged, his way can be called “semiotic-pragmatist.” This dual label, “semiotic-pragmatist,” is appropriate for Peirce’s perspective, for his pragmatism was concerned with the interpretive implications of a sign. (In contrast, some other forms of pragmatism, from William James to Richard Rorty, contained a nominalist component.)

Another relational line that emerged in the twentieth century took as its basis the three “persons” of language (I, you, it). I call this approach “grammatical-dialogical.” The label “grammatical” is appropriate when consideration is given to all three corners of a conversation – the speaker, the addressee, and something that is discussed. The term “dialogical” is useful when only two of the three sides are highlighted.

The grammatical-dialogical approach appeared early in the twentieth century in several circles, which extended some older relevant observations, working to some extent independently of each other.²⁸ The fact that several similar formulations became prominent in this way shows that a broad change in ethos was taking place.

An important figure in this movement was Hermann Cohen, who favored a kind of socialism that also values individuals, finding in his Jewish tradition such a dual concern. Especially after retirement from his professorship in philosophy in 1912, Cohen pursued the religious aspect of his thought with a strong emphasis on relationality.²⁹ However, already before then, he had dealt with relations between the different “persons” of language. The Other, he said in 1904, is actually the origin of the (first-person) “I” but becomes a “you” in ethics.³⁰ Poetry, according to what he said in 1912, is more strongly oriented toward the “I” than is ethics, but it, too, requires a “you” more than it requires an “it.”³¹

Cohen’s perspective proved to be very influential. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a Jew who converted to Christianity, applied Cohen’s three-persons approach to literature, psychology, and sociology over a number of years from 1916 on.³² Even more importantly in the long run, Cohen’s analyses made an impact on

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian Christian, whose work became well-known for its emphasis on literary dialogue.³³ Within the realm of Jewish thought, the three-persons approach was carried further by Cohen's student Franz Rosenzweig.³⁴

A little later than Cohen, although apparently without knowledge of his work, a similar but more elaborate analysis was made by the Roman Catholic Ferdinand Ebner. In reflections that began to appear in print during 1921, he connected ethics with the use of "I" correlated with "you."³⁵ God, he said, is the absolute "you" to whom a person speaks; above all, God is one who says "you" to the person.³⁶ Neither "I" nor "God" can thus be properly spoken of in the third person, although it is sometimes necessary to speak of God (improperly) in the third person.³⁷ God, in other words, is not an object of impersonal knowledge but is present in personal relations.³⁸

Ebner's reflections echoed widely in theology and indirectly beyond it, through their impact on Martin Buber and Ludwig Wittgenstein, both of whom were quite influential. Buber was, like Cohen, both Jewish and a moderate (nonstatist) socialist, although in a different way. Wittgenstein self-identified as a Jew. The background of Buber's dialogical thinking, which included but was not limited to the impact made by Ebner, has already been well established and does not need to be described again here.³⁹ However, associations between Ebner and Wittgenstein deserve attention.

In Wittgenstein's second major phase of thought, he spoke of a difference between "language games" (pragmatic versions of speech) and expressed in particular an interest in the difference between first- and third-person speech, both of which are social. Such an analysis was clearly similar to Ebner's view. The similarity may perhaps be explained simply on the basis that the two thinkers operated within a common cultural sphere and made reference to many of the same works.⁴⁰

In addition, however, the likelihood of a direct connection between Ebner and Wittgenstein is indicated by the following observation: After Wittgenstein had completed the writing that exhibited his first phase of thought, he received as a gift copies of the journal *Der Brenner* (as he mentioned in a letter to Paul Engelmann, 5 August 1921). In this journal, Ebner's work was serialized from 1919 on, prior to its publication as a book. The mere fact that Wittgenstein received this material does not prove that he read it.

However, in one of his posthumously published notes, he described as a “grammatical remark” a claim that one can hear God’s speech only when one is its (second-person) addressee.⁴¹ This analysis apparently referred to Ebner’s declaration that a human being is a “you” addressed creatively by God.⁴² If Wittgenstein himself did not read Ebner, the substance of his thinking could have been conveyed by Ludwig Hänsel, a close religious friend of Wittgenstein since about 1918, who was impressed by Ebner’s work from its very beginning.⁴³

In notes and letters, Wittgenstein not only described but also practiced a distinction comparable to Ebner’s. During 1936 and 1937, he referred or spoke to God under the following two specific conditions: (1) in those portions of his notes that were written in code, probably symbolizing first-person speech, and (2) in letters to Hänsel in expressions that employed the second person, including a wish (“God with you”) and a friendly exhortation (“Think much on God”).⁴⁴ Reflections *about* religion and ethics appeared in those years, as well as at other times, in analytic or descriptive (third-person) speech.

The distinction between first- and second-person speech, on the one hand, and third-person speech, on the other, may shed some light on the process of academic secularization insofar as that has occurred. Partial withdrawal of religious speech from the academic realm, as evidenced already in the work of Peirce, can be supported by this distinction.

These observations by no means exhaust the impact of religious traditions on twentieth-century culture. Religious and cultural traditions other than Jewish and Christian also made contributions to relational thought. These emanated from Asia, Africa, and native America, more than can be shown here.

Although the present essay has focused especially on intellectual aspects, mention should also be made of the fact that not only ideas but, even more importantly, social and political programs of the twentieth century were indebted to Judaism and Christianity. These programs continued a biblical outlook favoring the oppressed, which had not made a major impact on secular thought prior to the twentieth century. Marxism – which drew on the biblical tradition, though modifying it – provided a powerful conduit through which this outlook entered into the academy.

Of course, twentieth-century culture by no means fully reflected religious tradition, and this fact can in many ways be welcomed. Marxism (with a one-sided and highly aggressive social orientation), Nietzscheanism (radicalizing nominalism and opposing social democracy and feminism), and capitalism (continuing a version of nominalism, although in actuality capitalism is not pure) have features that are incompatible with almost all religious viewpoints and which I, too, find objectionable. In addition, however, there are now ideals in the culture – perhaps especially in the academy – with which I agree, in contrast to what is said in traditional religion. Sexual equality is one such issue. Although this ideal, expressed in feminism, can indeed draw on some religious themes (especially, favoring the oppressed), it represents a break with their past. It is true, sexual equality has not been stressed in past secular thought any more than in past religion, but secular thought may well be less tradition-bound than religion in this and other respects. Therein lies both a potential problem, which is evidenced by “social Darwinism,” and a promise.

The implication of this analysis can be stated in terms of the idea of freedom, which has been highlighted in the discussion of which the present essay is a part. To the ideal of negative freedom, which was dominant in the nominalist tradition, relational thought added the ideal of positive freedom, which emphasizes community. A combination of the two freedoms can be called “interactive.” Interactive freedom is appropriate for relations between faith and the academy. Faith and the academy indeed cannot and should not be identified, but they can engage in a constructive interchange, as has, in fact, already taken place.

Notes

- ¹ For histories of logic see I. M. Bocheński, *A History of Formal Logic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), and William and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- ² In fact, even De Morgan still thought of logic in terms of a mental, “psychological,” process and was criticized for that by Peirce in 1865 (*Writings of Charles S. Peirce* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982-], I, p. 164).
- ³ More specifically, general terms could be described either as “relations” or as “properties,” but these two descriptions were convertible into each

- other. That is, properties could be conceptualized as “functions” (i.e. relations) and relations could be treated as properties of pairs, etc.
- 4 Capitalization by Peirce, *Writings*, II, p. 239.
 - 5 See, e.g., Norma Pereira Atkinson, *An Examination of the Life and Thought of Zina Fay Peirce* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1984).
 - 6 See Max H. Fisch, “Introduction,” in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, I, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
 - 7 She wrote on this eventually in *Cooperative Housekeeping* (Boston: Osgood, 1884).
 - 8 *An Appeal to the People in Behalf of their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1860), especially p. 101.
 - 9 *Scientific Theism* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1885), pp. 114, 205.
 - 10 See, e.g., Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt Brace, & Co., 1998), p. 244.
 - 11 *Writings*, I, pp. 4, 8, 15, 45-49, 530.
 - 12 *Writings*, I, p. 174.
 - 13 On “firstness” representing something “general,” see, e.g., Peirce, *Writings*, II, p. 53 (1867); on “possibility,” cf. II, p. 52 (1867), and later, e.g., *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), I, § 537; V, § 532.
 - 14 *Writings*, I, pp. 473-477, and later. It is possible, although far from certain, that Peirce was aware of Augustine’s anticipation of this analysis, for he referred to Augustine’s “logic” in 1865 (*Writings*, I, 163); cf. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 2.1. Gradually, Peirce developed a theory of different kinds of signs, of which symbols are only one, but that does not concern us here.
 - 15 *Writings*, I, p. 503.
 - 16 See *Collected Papers*, VIII, § 126 (1902); “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” *Hibbert Journal* 7 (1908): 90-112; also, an oration in 1863 (*Writings*, I, pp. 107-114).
 - 17 Christopher Hookway rightly observed that Peirce’s “metaphysical views were inseparable from his religious outlook” (*Peirce* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985], p. 276).
 - 18 *Writings*, I, pp. 417, 421.
 - 19 Thus, already, Thomas Hill Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), § 28. (Green had a religious orientation.) Among many later observations along this line, especially noteworthy

is that of Julius Schaaf, "Beziehung und Idee," in *Parusia*, ed. K. Flasch (Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1965), pp. 3-20.

20 Thus, again, Joseph Ratzinger, *Eine Einführung in das Christentum* (Munich: Kösel), pp. 142f.

21 *Writings*, I, p. 45.

22 *Collected Papers*, I, § 363 (1890).

23 See, e.g., Mark G. Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories, 1250-1325* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 132.

24 *Collected Papers*, I, § 17, with reference to support for local government.

25 See, e.g., Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 140, 161.

26 The Aristotelianism of the high Middle Ages provided a halfway house between Platonism and nominalism but, in my opinion, did not solve the problem of balance as well as twentieth-century relational theory has done.

27 Such a process is more than giving a new answer to an old question, as Hans Blumenberg suggested for "modern" philosophy without considering relational theory (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984], p. 65).

28 Not treated here is a line that ran from Josiah Royce to Gabriel Marcel.

29 Published in *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1919), but known earlier by others via oral communication.

30 Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1904), pp. 201f.

31 *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1912), II, p. 23.

32 Rosenstock-Huessy emigrated to the US in 1933. He acknowledged Cohen's relevant orientation in *Angewandte Seelenkunde* (Darmstadt: Roetherverlag, 1924), p. 30.

33 Specifically, Bakhtin knew Cohen's aesthetics and ethics, including his discussion of the "I and the other," as has been recognized.

34 Thus in *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann, 1921), and later.

35 *Schriften* (Munich: Kösel, 1963-65), I, pp. 227f.; II, pp. 25, 79, 93, 133.

36 *Schriften*, I, pp. 96f., 233, 248f.; II, p. 44.

37 *Schriften*, I, pp. 33, 255f., 258f.; II, pp. 27, 33, 133.

³⁸ *Schriften*, II, p. 23.

³⁹ In addition to other overviews, see Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou,"* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988). Horwitz's statement that Buber "explicitly denies having been influenced by Cohen" (167), however, is not quite correct, for Buber said only that he did not read Cohen's 1919 work until after his own writing on dialogue (Buber, *Werke* [Munich: Kösel, 1962], I, p. 298); Buber had referred to Cohen (approvingly) already in 1903 and (with moderate appreciation) in 1916 (*Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten* [Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider], I, pp. 211f., 455f.) and could have been familiar with Cohen's relational leanings already before 1919, even if only through reports by students whom he knew.

⁴⁰ See Luigi Perisinotto, "Linguaggio e filosofia in Ferdinand Ebner e Ludwig Wittgenstein," in S. Zucal and A. Bertoldi, eds., *La filosofia della parola di Ferdinand Ebner* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1999), pp. 481-96.

⁴¹ *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 124.

⁴² Ebner, *Schriften*, I, 97 (cf. 96, 249). Louis Althusser later drew similarly on biblical speech as a model for describing human beings as addressed ("hailed") by an ideology and thus formed by it ("Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état," *Pensée* 151 [1970]: 31-34).

⁴³ See *Ludwig Hänsel and Ludwig Wittgenstein: Eine Freundschaft* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1994), pp. 9, 11.

⁴⁴ See especially *Denkbewegungen* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1997), pp. 68-103 (English: *Public and Private Occasions* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003]); *Ludwig Hänsel and Ludwig Wittgenstein*, pp. 144f. It should be clear that such statements do not imply a belief that "God exists," for that would be a third-person expression.