

Michael Polanyi and Human Identity

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ABSTRACT: Key words: human and animal identity, figure-ground polarity, habitation of a world, openness, relatedness, determinacy, indeterminacy, singularity.

This paper conceives the distinction between human and animal identity in terms (drawn from theological anthropology) of distinctively human “habitation of a world.” It develops models for this using Polanyi’s account of the figure-ground polarity of acts of knowing in general. It identifies three distinct forms taken by this polarity, each offering its own model for human identity in its engagement with the world. Two of these models prove fatally one-sided. The third discloses the character of human identity in its relatedness and openness, its continuity and discontinuity with animal identity. This characterisation of human identity resonates with ideas found in Christian theological anthropology.

Michael Polanyi’s work is more than a theory of knowledge. It can be read as challenging the assumptions of epistemology itself as we know it. It throws new light as much on the “knower” and the “known” as on the act of knowing. That is, it addresses the fundamental questions of human identity and of ontology. In this paper, I shall use Polanyi’s ideas to pursue the former of these questions: What is a human being? What is distinctive about human life?

Human and Animal Identity

One way of pursuing the question “what is a human being?” is to begin from the fact that human life is emergent from animal life, and then ask how human beings are distinct from animals. This is the approach I follow in this paper.

How are human beings distinct from animals? We might answer: unlike animals, as human beings we can abstract from our situation, visualising what is absent; we can reason; we possess language; we are self-aware (humankind is “evolution aware of itself”); we are capable of intentional action; we possess free will as animals do not. A recent author has pointed out that human beings are distinct from animals in being both consistent-handed and predominantly right-sided; humans are the “lop-sided” animal!

All of these answers provide valuable insight—even the last-mentioned, given the importance of the left and right-hand sides of the human brain! But the diversity of these answers leaves us food for thought. Is the human being adequately described as an animal possessing a set of capacities not shared by other animals? Or does this description miss the distinctiveness of the human being? Should we rather say that the human being represents an integration as distinct from animal life as an animal is itself distinct, as an integration, from the biochemical structures of which it is made up? In this case the above descriptions are inadequate as a definition of the human being unless recognised as derivative upon this higher integration.

Despite all that we know today of what is common to human and animal life, for my part I find myself still won to that most extreme assertion of human distinctiveness—that unlike animals, as human beings we are “made in the image

of God.” Regarding what this might mean, the present paper contains only hints. But for me it is the horizon within which I am confronted most forcefully with the paradox of both a radical continuity and a radical discontinuity between human and animal identity. It is this paradox which gives structure to the present paper.

It is in proposals which hover between psychology and theological anthropology that I find a way of approaching and describing this radical continuity and discontinuity. This approach defines human beings as “inhabiting a world” in a way that animals do not. I believe this approach incorporates the insights of the other approaches listed above, although I shall not attempt explicitly to demonstrate this now.

Martin Buber is among those who distinguish human beings from animals in these terms. Animals, he says, for their part do not “inhabit a world,” but have only a “realm of life”:

An animal’s organism gathers, continuously or continually, the elements which meet the necessities and wants of its life, in order to construct from them the circle of its existence. Wherever swallows or tunny wander, their bodily being carries out this selection from “nature,” which as such is completely unknown to them, and on which they in turn have an effect, again as on something which they neither know or can know. An animal’s “image of the world” is nothing more than the dynamic of the presences bound up with one another by bodily memory to the extent required by the functions of life which are to be carried out. This image depends on, it clings to, the animal’s activities.

It is only man who replaces this unsteady conglomeration, whose constitution is suited to the lifetime of the individual organism, by a unity which can be imagined or thought by him as existing for itself... With him, with his human life, a world exists. The meeting of natural being with the living creature produces those more or less changing masses of usable sense data which constitute the animal’s realm of life. But only from the meeting of natural being with man does the new and enduring arise, that which comprehends and infinitely transcends the realm. An animal in the realm of its perceptions is like a fruit in its skin; man is, or can be, in the world as a dweller in an enormous building which is always being added to, and to whose limits he can never penetrate, but which he can nevertheless know as one does know a house in which one lives--for he is capable of grasping the wholeness of the building as such. Man is like this because he is the creature through whose being “what is” becomes detached from him, and recognised for itself.¹

For Buber, “habitation of a world” comes about through a twofold human action: first “the primal setting at a distance” -that is, differentiation of the world as an “independent opposite” to the human subject--then “entering into relation” with this world. These two movements interact, react and cooperate in an ongoing way.

We find another description of human “habitation of a world” offered by the Christian theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. He relates it to a unique openness or freedom which characterises human beings. He speaks of the “unique freedom of man to move beyond every given regulation of his existence” which constitutes his “openness to the world.” This leads on the one hand to the emergence, for humankind, of a “world” as such: “One can say that man has a world, while each species of animal is limited to an environment that is fixed by heredity and that is typical of the species.” On the other hand, “this cannot involve only openness to ‘the world’ . Rather, openness to the world must mean that man is completely directed into the ‘open’ ... beyond the world...beyond every possible picture of the world....

Such openness beyond the world is even the condition for man's experience of the world...." ²

What is it that drives human beings into the open in this way? Something different, says Pannenberg, from "the compulsion associated with animal instinct. The compulsive instinct in animals goes into action only when the triggering object is present. In contrast, the pressure of human drives is directed towards something undefined... it drives man into the open, apparently without a goal." ³

The notion of human beings as essentially directed towards something undefined or indeterminate appears elsewhere in theological anthropology, for example in Bernard Lonergan⁴. Importantly, it is also crucial to Michael Polanyi's account of personal acts of research and discovery. Let us turn now to Polanyi for help in clarifying the nature of human "habitation of a world."

As we do so, let us pursue three questions. Firstly, can we develop this approach to human beings as "inhabiting a world," in a way which does sufficient justice to the continuities between human and animal life? Secondly, can we develop it in a way which adequately distinguishes human from animal life without slipping into a false dualism of human subject and non-human world? And thirdly, can we maintain the dialogue with theological anthropology which links the distinctively human to our potentiality for loving, responsible, creative relationships as persons "made in the image of God"?

Polanyi and Polarity

Readers will probably be familiar with that picture which can be seen either as a white vase against a black background, or as two faces silhouetted in profile against a white background. Devised by Edgar Rubin, it demonstrates how we organise our perceptual field into that which stands out (which Rubin called "figure") and that against which it stands out (which he called "ground"); and it shows that this organisation is determined, at least in part, by ourselves and what we bring to the situation rather than by what lies immediately before us.

Michael Polanyi writes of Rubin's picture:

This experience shows that when an area is seen as a figure, it acquires significance and solidarity, which it instantly loses when it is made to function as background --while at the same time the area which a moment ago was mere background now becomes a significant and substantial figure. We may generalise this by saying that the **figure** is something **distinctive** seen against a **background** that is **indeterminate**...⁵ (bold type mine).

Having discussed other examples of figure-ground organisation, Polanyi remarks:

An object is seen as such **by virtue** of our seeing its surroundings as its background --and vice-versa. This... suggests that we are performing one single mental act in jointly seeing an object against its background...⁶

And shortly:

This interplay of background and figure illustrates a general principle: the principle that whenever we are focussing our attention on a particular object, we are relying for doing so on our awareness of many things to which we are not attending directly at the moment, but which are yet functioning as compelling clues for the way the object of our attention will appear to our senses.⁷

For Polanyi, this interplay of figure and ground is fundamental to all our acts of understanding. He speaks of it variously as the polar relation between our ‘focal’ and ‘subsidiary’ awareness, our ‘distal’ and ‘proximal’ awareness, or between what we attend **to** and what we attend **from**.

Importantly, this polarity is found not only in our knowledge of objects but also in our exercise of practical skills. Thus Polanyi writes:

When we use a hammer to drive in a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, **but in a different way**. We **watch** the effect of our strokes on the nail and try to wield the hammer so as to hit the nail most effectively. When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. Yet in a sense we are certainly alert to the feelings in our palm and the fingers that hold the hammer. They guide us in handling it effectively... I have a **subsidiary awareness** of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my **focal awareness** of my driving in the nail.⁸

Notice that for Polanyi, ground need not mean ‘background’ in a spatial sense. It may represent that which is spatially closest to us. We shall discover more about this later.

Returning for a moment to Rubin’s picture, this might be taken as showing only that figure/ground organisation takes place where we bring to a situation, already established meanings. After all, if we lived in a culture lacking any objects like a vase in appearance, we would not be drawn to see such a thing in this picture. But Polanyi’s theory extends beyond this. It describes how we come to discover meaningful entities in the first place:

...the efforts of perception are evoked by scattered features of raw experience suggesting the presence of a hidden pattern which will make sense of the experience. Such a suggestion, if true, is itself knowledge, the kind of foreknowledge we call a good problem... The knowledge of a true problem is indeed a paradigm for all knowing. For knowing is always a tension alerted by largely unspecifiable clues and directed by them towards a focus at which we sense the presence of a thing - a thing that, like a problem, embodies the clues on which we rely for attending to it.⁹

Creative research and discovery is for Polanyi our paradigmatic, most lively act of knowing. It involves the most lively interanimation between our focal and subsidiary awareness, and the deepest personal ‘indwelling’ on our part. This is also the character, says Polanyi, of our awareness of persons and of works of art.

His claim that this constitutes the paradigmatic case for all knowing gives radical content to Polanyi’s theory. In the quotations above he describes three acts: perceiving an entity, exercising a practical skill, and making a discovery.

His claim is, in effect, that the first and second of these are ultimately to be understood by reference to the third. This claim opens up a way of pursuing further the question of distinctively human identity.

Three Forms of Polarity

I shall now use figure-ground polarity to model the distinctively human “habitation of a world” alluded to by Buber and by Pannenberg.

I shall start by demonstrating that this polarity takes **three distinct forms**. I shall show how each of these provides its own model for what is involved in distinctively human “habitation of a world.” I shall then argue for the priority of one of these models and tease out the implications of this.

My aim will be to bring out as clearly as possible the underlying logic of each form taken by the polarity. In order to achieve this, I shall discuss three examples of visual perceptions relating to motion. This will limit the imaginative power of what I am describing. To compensate for this the reader is asked to recall the richness of Polanyi’s account of polarity to which I have referred above.

The first form taken by figure-ground polarity arises when we are spinning upon an axis. Here, amidst all the flux of our perceptions one “still point” remains by reference to which we can make sense of our situation. This lies down the axis upon which we spin, as we look along it. This “still point” is a singularity in our field of vision. At the same time it is continuous with everything else in this field. The closer that things lie to this point in our field of vision, the closer they proximate to its stillness. Conversely, as our eye moves away from this axis of spin, movement increases; things blur; indeterminacy increases.

The “still point” lying down the axis upon which we spin is the perceptual ground against which we see everything as figure. That is, we rely upon it to make sense of what we see.

We also experience this form of figure-ground polarity when we are speeding down a straight tunnel. Again, amidst all the flux of our perceptions one “still point” remains. This is the point which lies straight ahead. Again, the closer that things lie to this point in our field of vision, the closer they proximate to its stillness; the further they lie from it, the more rapid their movement, the more indeterminate their location.

Since neither of these experiences is particularly common, the images above may not communicate very effectively with the reader. Or they may be quite familiar from some of the entertaining visual displays shown today on computer screens when at rest, and through cinema screen effects used in some advertisements. Patterns radiating from a central point on the screen give the impression either of our travelling rapidly through a tunnel or alternatively of matter radiating outward towards us.

Note this equivalence between the form taken by polarity as we spin upon an axis and as we travel along a line. This suggests, for example, that just as light radiation can be thought of as a progression of rapidly travelling particles or of waves, so it can be thought of as a rapidly spinning axis or as a rapidly spinning helix.

But let me come to the fundamental point I want to make about these instances of figure-ground polarity. In

each case **there is a continuous link between the “still point” and ourselves.** In the case of our spinning, the perceptual “still point” lies not just beyond us, but at every point along the axis stretching from infinity to ourselves; in the case of our travelling along a line, it lies not just beyond us but at every point along the line of our travel stretching from infinity to ourselves. The ground against which every figure is seen **includes both what lies beyond us, and ourselves.**

One further point: the operation of this form of figure-ground polarity is wider than is suggested by the images of spin and travel down a line. Although this may not be immediately apparent, this form of polar relation of figure and ground, in which we ourselves share essentially in the stillness of our perceptual “ground,” **is implicit in any perception of ourselves as having a determinate location.** Why do I say this? Because **to perceive ourselves as having a determinate location is to register all change or indeterminacy as deriving from changes of orientation on our own part.** And this, in turn, when we reflect on it, is **to register ourselves as rotating upon an axis perpendicular to the plane of any such change in our orientation.**

In the second example to which we now turn, figure-ground polarity takes a rather different form. Imagine that we are travelling along a road which winds through a changing landscape. Amidst all the flux of our perceptions as we travel, one “still point,” or rather one coherent set of still points, remains by reference to which we can make sense of our situation. These are the horizon or background against which we see everything including ourselves, and from which we take our bearings. This horizon is a unique singularity (an extended one) in our field of vision. At the same time it is continuous with other things in our field of vision. The closer that things lie (spatially) to this visual background, the closer they approximate to its stillness. Conversely, the further things lie from it the more changing and indeterminate they are against it.

And now we come to a fundamental difference between this example and our first example of figure-ground polarity. In the present case, as our eye moves from the horizon towards ourselves, indeterminacy increases until the things closest to us are a blur. When we now go a step further and introduce into this picture ourselves as an object of our perception, we introduce a basic discontinuity in our perceptual field. This discontinuity is marked by the boundary between ourselves as a determinate object of our own perception and the indeterminacy of everything else lying closest to us as we look towards the horizon.

In our first example, the “ground” from which we made sense of things extended towards us along an axis or line, and embraced us; in this second example, “ground” is strictly a matter of a “background” against which we stand and move in discontinuity. Here figure-ground polarity acquires **the fundamentally dual structure which holds in all our perception of discrete, enduring objects--including ourselves as objects.**

Our first example, we noted, is the form of polarity implicit in any perception of ourselves as having a determinate location. Our second example, in complementary fashion, is the form of polarity implicit in any perception of ourselves as having a determinate **orientation.** How is this? Because **to perceive ourselves as having a determinate orientation is to register all change or indeterminacy as deriving from change or indeterminacy of location on our own part.** And this, in turn, when we reflect on it, derives from **our travelling while being turned steadily towards a still point on the horizon.**

It may not be immediately apparent that bearings on the horizon provide us with a determinate orientation rather than locate us. In particular, this may be hard to see when, as we stand on solid ground, an unchanging landscape extends

from the horizon to our feet and in this way seems to locate us. It is easier to see, however, when (for example) we are on a boat at sea during the night, and when it is obvious that a distant lighthouse which offers us a definite orientation does little to locate us.

There remains a third and critical form of figure-ground polarity, which stands in odd relation to the previous two. In the two examples given above, we make sense of what we perceive by reference to a “ground” already adopted as such by us--in the former case our own axis or line of travel, in the latter case a distant horizon or set of bearings. In each case we have a “still point” or set of still points by reference to which we see everything. But what of the situation where we have no such given “ground” from which to see things? How do we come to register such still “ground” in the first place? Supposing, for example, that we are astronauts travelling through a planetary system. Looking out from our spaceship we try to make sense visually of a complex set of relative motions of planets and moons. In so doing we have to work out how much of this relative motion reflects changes in our own location and orientation. In other words nothing is given. We must discover what to count a fixed location and orientation. This discovery must be made through our observations themselves. It cannot be based upon prior commitment to any given coordinate-system, whether this be unreflective or a matter of our deliberately adopting and testing a system by way of hypothesis.

It is this kind of primary discovery which Polanyi describes so well in terms of the polarity of figure and ground emergent in our most lively knowledge and research. Essentially such discovery involves **our immersion in a dual indeterminacy, out of which arise figure and ground in polar relation to each other**. This point is of fundamental importance. Figure and ground arise together, interanimating each other. **Even though having once arisen, ground appears logically prior to figure, ground does not arise before figure: they arise together**. This, Polanyi shows us, is the structure of our most creative discoveries in science, and also of our language-acquisition.

It is also, Polanyi claims, our paradigmatic act of knowing. If this is so, it is quite crucial that we should not automatically reduce it to other acts of knowing. This is the mistake we make when we automatically reduce finding our bearings to a process of testing successive hypotheses. Now this latter process comprises discrete steps and contains two distinct elements: committing ourselves to an hypothesis is one thing and testing it is another, and the former precedes the latter. By contrast, in creative discovery commitment and testing are as inseparable as they are in the act of trying to master a skill. For example, when learning to ride a bicycle “trying to” ride and “trying whether we can” ride are inseparable. And our act of commitment in “riding a bicycle” acquires definition only in the process of discovering whether we can ride. In the same way when seeking our bearings, our commitment to what offers us bearings acquires definition only in the process of viewing all that is before us--including what is (as we shall come to discover) in motion rather than at rest.

Let me refer back now to our experiences of spinning on an axis and of moving against a far horizon. In these experiences we made sense of what we saw by reference to a given, still ground, which represented respectively determinate location and determinate orientation. Here in this third example, however, we have the form of polarity through which we discover **what counts both as a fixed location and a fixed orientation in the first place**. We have the emergence, out of a dual indeterminacy, of what it means for us to look to the world, from the ground at once of a determinate orientation (disclosed as from beyond and over against us) and a determinate location (disclosed as both beyond and within us)--and in this act, to make sense of a world in which we are spatially located.

Consider the nature of what is discovered here, in the discovery of fixed orientation and location. Firstly, this

is the discovery of what counts as absolute rest--zero movement, zero acceleration, zero value for every differential of location or orientation with regard to time. It is not just the discovery of what is contingently at rest. Secondly, this discovery is the discovery not just of what to rely on as bearings in a particular situation, but a renewed discovery of the very meaning of bearings, absolute rest, location and orientation in the first place.

This last point about the original discovery of meaning is of fundamental importance if we are to understand the possibility that the third form of polarity is primary and not reducible to the other two forms of polarity. Let me therefore illustrate this point in another way.

Kurt Goldstein conducted an experiment with people who had been brain damaged and left with a condition he labelled "amnesic aphasia."¹⁰ On the face of it, their condition was that they could not match words with properties or classes of objects to which these referred. Goldstein established that their problem was of a different and deeper kind. He did so by presenting such people with skeins of wool of varying colour, thickness, length, etc., thrown together in a heap. He began selecting from the heap strands of wool with a common characteristic--say, the same colour but of differing thickness, etc. --and invited them to continue the procedure. This they could not do. If, however, the strands were identical among themselves in every respect, they were able to continue the procedure.

It appeared that Goldstein's patients could not integrate multiple concrete experiences in such a way that the possibility arose of a meaning "standing out" from them. Their thinking had been reduced entirely to the immediate; Goldstein described them as capable only of a "concrete" attitude to the world.

Now it would be wrong to assume that because Goldstein's patients could select identical strands that they could see "red." Similarly regarding ourselves, it would be wrong to assume that when as young children we first integrated multiple experiences in such a way that the meaning "red" stood out for us, this was a matter of our recognising the common denominator among various discrete meanings already known to us prior to this act of integration. Rather we must think of meaning arising in the first place as we indwell multiple, indeterminate experiences and achieve a form of dynamic equilibrium in which meaning arises as a figure-ground polarity.

In conclusion, the primacy of the third form of figure-ground polarity has two aspects. Firstly, it is epistemologically prior to the first two forms of polarity. Discovery precedes knowledge. Only through our participation in it do we ever come to experience the first two forms of polarity. Secondly, it involves more from us than these other two forms of polarity by way of attention and creative, responsive "indwelling." Indeed we can understand the first two forms of polarity as special cases of the third, in which the issue of what counts as ground (and with it the vitality of interanimation of figure and ground) has lapsed in one way or another. By contrast, we cannot understand the third polarity by reference to the first two.

I want to suggest now that **this third form of polarity models our very discovery of a world and of ourselves as inhabiting a world.** Human "habitation of a world," which gives an account of human identity, can be seen as about **our indwelling a dual indeterminacy from which there emerge in polar interanimation that to** which we attend--our world--and that **from** which we attend--our embodied selves and our transcendent bearings.

Let me develop this suggestion further by reflecting that each of our three forms of figure-ground polarity provides a model for human identity. I shall consider each model in turn, and show how the third embraces the positive

insights of the first two while avoiding their respective limitations.

The Openness of Human Identity

Let us consider, as a model for human identity, the first form of figure-ground polarity described above. Can we regard human identity as about an open system comprising a polarity of this form, in which humans and their environment are bound together and constitute one common ground for a distinctive figure-ground polarity?

Certainly, I would suggest, at least we may view the identity of a given animal species in this way. We can think of an animal specimen as an open system oriented towards dynamic equilibrium with its environment. The identity of the animal is defined by a regulating principle which sustains a particular morphological field characteristic of the species. This determines the animal's actions from moment to moment, which actions can therefore be thought of as at once constituting and as directed towards the "self-actualisation" of the species.

Can we think of human identity in the same way? Certainly there are those who have believed so. Among them was Kurt Goldstein (again), whose beliefs drew their impetus from his observations of the striking power of morphological principles operating in people who had suffered brain damage in war. He formulated an "organismic" theory of personality, seeing the human organism as directed essentially towards "self-actualisation." His theory influenced popular psychotherapy such as that associated with Karl Rogers.¹⁴

Such an approach to human identity helps us to take seriously the richness of continuity between animal and human life. But I suggest it cannot, by itself, capture the distinctive character of human beings (over against animals) as "inhabiting a world."

Can we develop the model afforded by the first form of figure-ground polarity so as to cope with this distinction? We cannot, I believe, develop it thus from within itself. We can, however, develop it suitably by starting rather from the third form of polarity described above. In order to see this, let us begin by noting that the first form of polarity, as we have described it, already involves the dimension of perceptual depth: we look **along** our axis of spin or path of travel as it stretches away from us. But on reflection we must acknowledge that this dimension of depth presupposes our participation in the third form of polarity, through which we discover ourselves differentiated from a world which we inhabit spatially. Without such prior participation, perceptual depth does not arise. The first form of polarity will now be equivalent to spin on a flat surface on which we are stuck. **Here we recognise, indeed, the character of animal identity expressed by Buber's description of an animal as wearing its "world" as a fruit wears its skin.** By contrast, the introduction of perceptual depth to the first form of polarity allows for differentiation between the human subject and its world while linking these continuously in perceptual ground. In such terms, then, we can develop the model for human identity afforded by the first form of polarity so as properly to distinguish human from animal identity.

The emergence of perceptual depth in human experience correlates, I suggest, with the emergence of a new openness of identity--or should I say with the emergence of essentially emergent identity. A spatial analogy for this is as follows. When we look straight along a stick we have no sense of its depth: the stick is foreshortened to the point of being "flattened." The sensori-motor activity of an animal is analogous to this. Stimulus-response reflexes bind an animal to its environment without depth or distance. These get coordinated together, in an overall pattern of figure-

ground excitation, by the morphological field of the animal species concerned. In human life the emergence of depth breaks down this field and reconstitutes it in a way that requires a whole new integration. This new integration can be likened to learning to coordinate a lot of optical tubes so as to look through them together in one direction rather than many.

There arises now the question what counts as depth in a determinate direction, i.e. as the alignment of stimulus-response “vectors” (indwelt “sticks” or “tubes”) in a coherent direction. Openness to this new question constitutes the new openness and orientation towards personal integrity distinctive of human identity. This contrasts with the bondage of an animal species to its regulative principle, which unlike it is adequately modelled by the first form of figure-ground polarity.

I find this new, distinctively human “openness” reflected in Jerome Bruner’s account of infant behaviour and in particular, the emergence of “open” systems of behaviour alongside automatic ones. He writes:

It is quite apparent that many biological systems operate from the outset as hierarchically organised wholes by their very nature. But it is also true that some systems achieve structure slowly and haltingly. In early human growth, the initially well-organised systems seem to be predominantly of the automatic or overcontrolled type as with breathing, swallowing an initial sucking. With a minimum of initial priming, all three of these are potentiated easily and go off in appropriate ways to appropriate stimulation.¹¹

By contrast there are emergent “open” systems which grow slowly and with awkwardness. Bruner considers, by way of example, a child’s efforts at performing voluntarily an act of sucking which had previously been a matter purely of reflex. This involves learning, in groping manner, to detach the sucking reflex from its original stimulus and coordinate it with other systems of response.

As Bruner points out, these open systems “are the systems of action that become generative in the linguistic sense... it is the open quality of these systems that allows for their incorporation of prosthetic devices and tools on the one side, and of language as a medium of programming action on the other.”¹²

The openness Bruner describes is modelled by the openness of our third form of figure-ground polarity as compared to the first. It is not simply the actuation of a reflex in which we are bound to the world in a manner analogous to the figure-ground polarity we experience when spinning on an axis down which we look. It is rather analogous to the groping search for bearings in which we are open to what counts as a determinate axis of spin in the first place.

We should note how radical is the openness before us here. Within any hierarchy of systems, identity at a given level is always open or indeterminate relative to the level below it. Even the dynamic equilibrium of a candle flame has no description in terms of the particles which make it up. However each system does have its own level of description. In the case of human identity, however, we witness something unique--we testify to a system which is essentially emergent or self-transcendent--open relative even to itself. As human beings we are directed beyond every regulation of our existence. Recalling Pannenberg’s words, we are directed beyond ourselves towards the world, and beyond this world, and beyond every possible world...

It might seem that, given all this, if we now continue claiming that there is such a thing as determinate human identity, when it is now apparent that this refuses equation with any conceivable determinate open system in the world, then we claim for human beings an identity radically discontinuous with and unrelated to the world. This calls us now to explore the second form of polarity as providing a model for human identity.

The Relatedness of Human Identity

The approach outlined above finds animal identity unproblematic, but finds human identity problematically open or indeterminate. However, if we start instead from what we take to be human identity, the matter appears quite different, as we shall now see.

Imagine that, walking through the park at night, we hear a noise nearby in the bushes. Is that someone about to attack us? Ah--no, there's nobody there, it's only a cat. When we speak in this way, we testify implicitly to a primary perception of ours, of the **absence** of human presence or agency. Granted lower levels of cause and effect are present, but these do not count decisively for us as a "presence." Such perception underlies our way of thinking of human beings as "there," possessing identity over against their environment, in a way that animals are not--still less, inanimate causes such as a sudden breeze which shakes the bushes.

Now this way of thinking corresponds to the model for human identity provided by the second form of figure-ground polarity described above. According to this model, our identity is distinct from and discontinuous with the perceptual ground against which we see ourselves as moving and acting. Indeed we are dependent upon this separation in order to "be there," to stand out from our environment. This separation gives us an independent existence from which we can act freely upon our environment--as opposed to our being determined by our environment as some kind of dynamic system **within it**.

Now it may seem that this approach offers the surest possible statement of the fact of human existence by comparison with the existence of anything else in the world. People are there! On further reflection, however, the situation is more ambiguous. Two problems arise. Firstly, is our apprehension of human presence and absence really very different from the experience of looking for a particular friend in a crowd with the outcomes either of apprehending her presence or absence? Jean Paul Sartre would say not, and he effectively builds a whole theory of human identity out of it.¹³

Secondly, even if we hold that our apprehension of human presence relative to its absence involves something crucially more than the recognition of a friend among strangers, is it not true that we apprehend animal presence in a parallel way relative to inanimate objects? We recognise "something there" in the case of a living organism, which we surely do not see--despite some striking similarities--in the case of the dynamics of a thundercloud¹⁴ or of a computer "virus." Yet in the context of the question of human presence, animal life is merely part of the environment. And we can go a step further: in turn we recognise an inanimate object as "there," standing out from its background, despite the fact that in the context of the question of a living presence, it is merely part of the environment.

The point is that this second model for human identity--or for animal or inanimate identity for that matter--fails to acknowledge the relatedness of what it models to its setting. It fails to acknowledge the polarity of figure and ground, as described by Polanyi and quoted early in this paper. Nor can we develop this model from within itself so

as to do so. We **can** develop it suitably, however, by starting instead from the third form of polarity. In order to see this, let us begin by recalling how we and our world arise together in mutual interanimation. **Only subsequently does the appearance of discontinuity between ourselves and our world arise, and then only with respect to our habitual “middle” environment.** By contrast our primary, lively experience of an emerging world and of our emerging selves is one of relatedness--of unity as much as of separation. It is an experience of participation and of creative response. This remains our experience in personal relationships and in moral, artistic and spiritual encounter--that is, in the realms of knowledge which entail, as Polanyi says, “deep indwelling.” Deep indwelling implies lively mutual interanimation of figure and ground, as we give ourselves fully and creatively to discovering the world and ourselves.

Seen strictly by reference to the second form of polarity, this relatedness of human identity remains problematic. It appears to be some kind of transitional stage between ignorance of and knowledge of a world essentially distinct from ourselves. It appears to be situated at that odd moment incomprehensible to traditional epistemology, when we seem miraculously to bridge the gap between ourselves and our world and we know something. But this problem for a dualistic viewpoint is hidden from itself, and instead the problem posed by our relatedness gets evaded: the “knowledge” which has essentially to do with our relatedness gets dismissed as merely a matter of self-relation --as a circular, subjective act of self-definition. Personal, moral, creative “knowledge” are discounted as knowledge of the real world.

Once we start from the third form of polarity, however, the relatedness of human identity reveals itself, on the contrary, as integral to our paradigmatic experiences of reality and of ourselves as real. **The world we “inhabit” (a habitation which defines us as human beings...) is first the world of people, morality, creativity--and, Christians would say, of God.** In these matters our primary encounter with reality is not as autonomous agents viewing the world in detachment and manipulating it, but as lively, responsive and responsible persons indwelling, participating in, creative and moral life.

Once again this truth can be illuminated from early childhood experience. Children do not address first the inanimate world, and then people as belonging to this world; rather they first respond to people who engage them in relationship. And as they do so they do not bring set questions, but rather they reach out, as Bruner says, gropingly. From this primary, exploratory participation (in that commitment of indeterminate range which Polanyi calls “indwelling”) there slowly emerges a sense of the real world and of personal identity.

Let me emphasise again: **we do not first exist as persons, and then indwell this life: our indwelling, our habitation constitutes us as persons.** The second form of figure-ground polarity cannot adequately model this relatedness, but portrays us ultimately as self-sufficient, self-determining individuals; while human relatedness as modelled by the first form of figure-ground polarity is ultimately deterministic. Only the third form of figure-ground polarity captures the paradox of our relatedness and our openness or freedom as human beings.

The Dialogue with Theological Anthropology

We have been pursuing what is distinctive about human beings as compared to animals. We began with the proposal in theological anthropology that human beings “inhabit a world” in a way that animals do not. We have explored what this “habitation” or “indwelling” may be like, and discussed in particular the distinctive openness and relatedness of human identity. The conclusions we have reached resonate in various important ways with the insights

of Christian theological anthropology regarding what it means for human beings to be made “in the image of God.” Further attention to these resonances may therefore help us enlarge our understanding of the conclusions to which we have come.

Let me finish by indicating briefly five such points of resonance, and so indicate an agenda for this unfinished dialogue:

1. Both affirm human identity as grounded essentially in participation in lively, moral, practical, personal knowledge--rather than in technical knowledge and mastery of the material world on the one hand, or in the automatisms of cultural “self-expression” on the other. This lively knowledge --and searching--is vital to human life in a strict sense; our humanity is drawn from it. To evade its demands is to contradict ourselves practically, as human beings. Christian theology makes this connection between knowledge and life (and between evasion and death) in its theology of the Spirit.
2. Neither posits a dualism between subject and subject. Both affirm that human identity is essentially relational, rather than being either undifferentiated within a larger whole on the one hand, or an isolated individual agent on the other. Christian theology speaks of human life as created to share in the inner relational life of the Divine Trinity.
3. More generally, neither posits a dualism between subject and world. Both affirm that the ground of our human identity is at once beyond us and within us, in an infinite horizon which lies both beyond us and within us. Christian theology speaks of God as at once transcendent and immanent.
4. Accordingly, neither posits a dualism between our own initiative as agents and either the initiative of other people or what happens to us generally. Our most lively, creative initiatives are fundamentally a response to the reality of other people and of the world. Christian theology affirms the paradox of grace, that God’s activity towards us is expressed not in human passivity but human vitality.
5. Both affirm human identity as essentially emergent. We are by nature directed forward into the open--in the primary instance, in responsiveness towards undisclosed personal, moral, creative reality--rather than “possessing” an identity. We live under the summons to “become what we are.” Christian theology speaks of this emergent character of human identity whenever it speaks of us as standing under the summons of God--and also when it speaks in eschatological terms of a life beyond the material world in which we may now already share.

ENDNOTES

¹Martin Buber, “Distance and Relation”, *The Knowledge of Man* (ed. Maurice Friedman, London 1965), 59-71, 60-61.

²W. Pannenberg, *What is Man?* (Philadelphia 1970), 8.

³Ibid, 9.

⁴Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (London 1983). See, for example, Ch12.

⁵Michael Polanyi, “The Unaccountable Element in Science”, *Knowing and Being* (ed. Marjorie Grene, London 1969), 105-120, 110.

⁶Ibid, 111.

⁷Ibid, 113.

⁸Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London 1958), 55.

⁹Polanyi, “The Unaccountable Element in Science”, 117.

¹⁰Kurt Goldstein, “The Problem of the Meaning of Words based upon Observation of Aphasic Patients”, in *Selected Papers* (The Hague 1971), 345-57.

¹¹Jerome Bruner, On Voluntary Action and its Hierarchical Structure, *Beyond the Information Given* (London 1974), 280-94, 280.

¹²Ibid, 282.

¹³See Sartre’s well known analysis of looking for his friend Pierre in a cafe: Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London 1969), 9.

¹⁴W. H. Thorpe, *Animal Nature and Human Nature* (London 1974).