

# Originary Human Personhood

**Andrew Bartlett**

**English Department  
Kwantlen Polytechnic University  
Surrey, British Columbia, Canada  
[Andrew.Bartlett@kwantlen.ca](mailto:Andrew.Bartlett@kwantlen.ca)**

Theologians, philosophers, psychologists and others have long pondered the category of the person. In the founding texts of Generative Anthropology, one can locate reflections on topics such as the subject, identity, free will, body and soul, the mind-brain distinction, intentionality, and spirituality. But curiously, one does not find a text devoted by title to originary personhood. To fill that lacuna is one goal of this study. My other goal is to analyze a passage that has long puzzled me. I quote from Gans's "*Amo quia absurdum*" (1995):

God as the originary object of human love is also the originary person. But from the minimalist perspective of generative anthropology, this originary person is not understood as human. Personhood is not in the first place characteristic of me, but of the sacred Other whose humanity is not primordial . . . but derived. The person in its originary instantiation is not, strangely, to be understood as human; personhood is characteristic first of the sacred or divine Other. The humanity of the Other is "not primordial . . . but derived." [\(1\)](#)

To desire human personhood would not mean to wish a blasphemous appropriation of the central object-divinity on the scene of representation, but it would mean a desire to have something like the unique personhood of God. Perhaps we need a separate account of originary *human* personhood in order to continue to respect that attention to the God-human difference that originary thinking inherits from religion. Exploring that possibility, my argument has two aspects. First, I suggest that a useful test when wondering if a thing (human or not) might deserve personhood is to ask: *can you love it?* The lovability of objects determines the chances of their becoming persons, in keeping with the hint that personhood belongs first to the sacred Other as an object of human love. [\(2\)](#) The idea of the lovability test rests on the assumption that love opens up the Other (including myself as other) to personhood, whereas resentment erodes and blocks personhood.

Second, I pursue a thesis: *the humanity of the personhood of the sacred other*

*cannot be derived from the public esthetic center without the competing mediation of the private erotic center.* (3) My inclination to foreground the erotic in originary human personhood fits with the lovability test. Although many loves flourish without the erotic (friendship, affection, charity), the erotic inspires love as nothing else does. The most universal image of human love is that of the erotic couple; maybe it has a kind of rival in the image of mother and child—but whence the child? Although it is absurd or impossible for a human to desire erotic reciprocity with God, as if one could exclusively “have” God as one’s lover, (4) by contrast, to “have” another human person is most certainly possible. Furthermore, the invisible afigurality of God in the First Person permits the Divine’s transcendence of human difference. By contrast, human persons without figure would cease to be persons; persons are visible, beautiful, finite, vulnerable, mortal... figures of desire.

Although it is not in the spirit of generative anthropology to list distinctions in a quest for terminological purity, two qualifications will help prepare for the extrapolation of these notions.

First qualification. To be a self is not quite yet to be a person. The *self* designates rather a denuded, anesthetic entity lacking both the concrete bodily vulnerability and the power to create meaning that belongs to the person. “He is a wonderful person” sounds fine; “he is a wonderful self,” awkward. “She is a giving person” makes sense; “she is a giving self” rings oxymoronic. The undesirability of the reputation of “selfish person” tells all: the self is not the person. To have achieved *personhood* and to have *personality*, to be personable, to have personal relationships—those are goods. But to have a self—well, we all have one of those, it takes no work to have one of those; having a self makes no distinction—what can one do with oneself? The erotic self—especially—knows that what it can do with itself is limited. (5) (The erotic *person*, however, may seem limitlessly beautiful.) In the originary event, the moment of consciousness of self is the moment of resentment. In resenting the sacred center, we first experience ourselves as violently dispossessed by it. Originary *selfhood* would thus be resentfully but not interpersonally human. In naming the sacred Object only as object of resentment, we are not yet naming God as a person: the sacred Other whom we selfishly name in resentment is not the divine Person whom we name in love. By contrast, to love God as originary Person is to love something of the way the sacred central Object has moved and moves us. Likewise in human exchange, the self-dispossession of resentment opposes love. We cannot have true love for the one against whom we feel real resentment. (6) These contrasting associations of the self with resentment and the person with love, it seems to me, are worth preserving.

And yet there is value in owning the mere originary self as a kernel of sign-using consciousness prerequisite to personhood. Individual agency, free will, moral

responsibility: several founding texts of Generative Anthropology affirm the value of the contributions made by these categories to the project of our self-understanding. (7) Acclamations of even a resentful free will are a valuable counterweight to the post-structuralist denials of agency that would sever the connection between our internal scenes of representation (i.e., our imaginations), and the many external worlds, local and global, where exchanges of signs and things produce concrete results and where ethical performances have often incalculable consequences for good and evil. (8) Anybody who uses language is a self endowed with free will; to use the sign on the scene of representation is to be a human self. (9) My first qualification aims simply to spotlight the fact that a self consumed by resentment militates self-defeatingly against the openness to exchange of others' personhood, and therefore against its own. Resentfulness is parasitic on love. (10) The totally resentful self is not yet a person because such a self must abolish without loving the otherness of the center, and the desire to abolish the center makes exchange with others as centers, as persons, impossible. (11) Distinguishing between selfhood and personhood may, therefore, illuminate the boundaries between originary resentment and originary love. If I am consumed by resentment of the other, I have not stepped back from myself to recognize the otherness in myself. (12) I have not learned to imitate the sacred central Other withdrawing itself in the founding move of erotic activity from which human personhood is derived.

Second qualification. Personhood is not reducible to *identity*. To assimilate a person to all or a selection of his or her identities is to do violence to him or her. The lovability test may be well applied here. The expression "I love you for yourself" intends its supplemental "for yourself" to disassociate the real person as center (free, creative, unique) from the nonessential identities peripheral to it (identities professional, social, political, economic). There is something mysterious about this recalcitrance of the human person to identity-marking, something related to the weird arbitrariness of all names, something we might understand on the model of the inaccessibility of the afigural God of the First Person. (13) As the name of God is not "God" but we feel God must be named, so the identifying marks are not the human person but we feel persons must be identifiable. We cannot see a human person without the identity he or she is wearing at any instant as a mask; but a whole person includes an invisible but willful presence animating, wearing, behind, the mask. In submitting to that invisible will, we are acknowledging the reality of the person.

The resentfulness of *self* without personhood is complemented by the "thinness of political-collective identities" that Gans has noticed, a thinness that fits with this distinction between person and identity. (14) A person takes up a collective group identity when he places the ballot into the electoral box, sings the national anthem

amidst the crowd in the stadium, or raises his fist at the demonstration. But such identities (responsible voter, citizen-and-fan, frustrated protester) are just not personal in the way that those expressed by laughing at dinner with friends, reading to one's children at bedtime, or walking hand-in-hand with one's beloved are personal. I suspect political activists may be scandalized by this formulation. But I stand by it: one understands one's love for one's country and one's political cause on the model of one's love for erotic partners, family and friends—but not the reverse. As originary resentment of the center-as-public-other is parasitic on originary love of the center-as-*personal*-other, so is group secondary to personal identity.<sup>(15)</sup> As I will try to show, for the sacred central Object to be personally-individually-loved, it must be named as something more and other than the object of our collectively identical resentment. The erotic, personalized center must be experienced as withdrawing itself from our desire and mediating its own desirability apart from our desire for it. The seeming self-withdrawal of the center is *the* erotic move. Love when helped along by the erotic, therefore, lets the central object *be* in its self-mediating personal integrity even while wishing to have the central object all to itself, as an equal in reciprocal exchange. Thus human love must first become conscious of the central object as a Person before it can love it; but that requires consciousness of the erotic effect that the central object has aroused in us. And the erotic is an effect that we cannot help but take personally.

The two qualifications complete, let us turn to this study's main thesis: *the humanity of the personhood of the sacred other cannot be derived from the public esthetic center without the competing mediation of the private erotic center.*

What is the erotic? It is a component of desire dependent on an act of imagining. The imagining reduces the mimetic triangle between subject, rival, and central object to an intimate duality between subject and object of desire alone. This formulation might appear to break heretically with the mimetic theory of desire, but triangular mediation persists in the erotic. The difference is that in the dyadic erotic relation, the "central object alone" *appears* from the periphery to have become self-mediating. In the erotic, it is as if the central object has always mediated its own desirability. Triangular mediation will never have "gone away" as an historical fact: the knockout beautiful woman or the killingly handsome man, het, gay, bi, straight, who desires her or his own self-centralizing erotic prowess, desires it because, first, *others* desired it. Personhood first belongs to the Other; philosophical barbs obtrude, therefore, if I seek it in myself alone. On the other hand, it obscures things to overvalue the indebtedness of erotic relations to their origins in social triangularity, for the valuable erotic illusion creates a new reality. The sacred power of erotico-sexual love between persons, if it is only imaginary, only an illusion, belongs among those illusions impossible to peel away from the real—not dissimilar to the "illusion" that I am a unique person with free will, the "illusion" that I have a

soul.

How exactly do those on the periphery experience the erotic effect or recognize the central object as an erotic one? What happens is that the sacred central Object *seems to withdraw itself from our desire*.<sup>(16)</sup> The erotic object withholds itself, as if self-conscious because aware of being desired. The self-withdrawal is a move the object makes, drawing more attention to itself. The scenic tension between periphery and center does not collapse. Rather, the radical corporeality and figural attractiveness of the central object takes into itself, or absorbs in self-withdrawal, even more of the attractiveness that has been already generated by center-periphery tension. An erotic object in self-withdrawal intensifies our awareness of the “objective” (inevitable pun) content of its tantalizing bodily otherness, its self-spotlighting figural uniqueness, as if its centrality could allow it to subsist on the basis of its material being alone. Witnessing the erotic body in the center, we see the desirable artist and work of art as one: the artistry of the erotic is to make of oneself a beautiful, desirable *person* whom the would-be-loving other wants to have.

It helps to differentiate the experience of the object as erotic from experiences of it as sacred or esthetic. When we experience a central object as sacred, it appears to us as inaccessible to appropriation, forbidden by communally-sanctioned decree, the force of its objective inaccessibility awe-inspiring, terrifying. The sacred object blocks even hints of the most private fantasy of erotic intimacy with itself; to imagine having human sex with the sacred One, the Creator, is to draw a blank. When we experience the object as esthetic, the oscillation between imaginary possession and recognized inviolability, in permitting imaginary possession itself, initiates desiring activity in one’s imagination. One imagines having it to oneself; one ponders the object-other as something desirable in its specificity. But the formal mediation necessary to the esthetic is not assimilable to the personal self-mediation necessary in erotic experience.

We may continue to explore the distinction between esthetic and erotic. You may find the genius of the fascinating singer-songwriter inspiring you to wonder what dinner with him or her would feel like, you may dream of meeting the creator of the enthralling fictional world of the novel, but an erotic fantasy about sexual consummation with the singer-songwriter or novelist is beside the point of your appreciation of his or her artwork. The artwork has its source in the individual will of the person, certainly; it is not naïve but mature to imagine beyond the work to the individual intention-bearing person, and the person might well be imagined as erotically desirable. But the dreamed-of erotically enticing creator-as-person is detachable from his or her work: that detachability is a presupposition of the fantasy. The artist as maker-of-art is separate from the artist as “ordinary” person,

as God the creator of everything is separable from the creation, as I the person am separable from my masks, my changeable identities, even my body, as the only one who can re-present that body to others, making of it something more than animal meat or molecular packaging. Furthermore, the artist needs a public; lovers do not need a public and seek a place apart from the public.(17)

In the erotic, I am alone with the person that the central object has become. The personhood of the erotic object makes the difference between it and the esthetic. I experience the erotic other as unique, particular, a person with whom I want to consummate a relationship, not a body-thing I want to consume because others find it beautiful or scarce. It does not trouble me if a work of art that I love has value for other people, but I am troubled if the object of my erotic desire attracts the erotic interest of others. If a man remarks that he finds my wife beautiful, it might be said he flatters my taste. But if he says he finds her sexy, irresistible, *really attractive*, he violates an intimate sacred space that she and I together have made. He's asking... for a fight. The peacenik aficionados of free love might challenge my implicit validation of pugnacity here, but I would reply that their love is "free" only to the extent that they have made no real erotic investment in it. The genuine erotic object risks drawing toward itself more, not less, violence, than the esthetic object. *Casual sex* may not be oxymoronic, but *casual love* is. The erotic object is both more vulnerable and less exchangeable than the esthetic, because the erotic object is almost always a human person, an anthropological truth with ethical consequences.(18)

With erotic desire, then, the central object seems to withdraw itself *on its own* from the periphery, as if beginning to vanish, as if in danger of being lost to us. It is as if the object has become its own person, as if the object has... a will of its own. Although we stop with dreams of imaginary possession in esthetic appreciation, we do not stop there with the erotic. In the erotic, we dream, not of consumption but of consummation—the consummation of an exchange with an invisible personal Other willfully expressing himself or herself with body: skin, flesh, muscle, bone, eyes, lips, mouth, face, flesh, sweat, blood, breath. Esthetic experience is episodic, finite, bounded, dependent on the closure of the sign; even the best poetry will not bear endless rereading. Erotic otherness is the foundation of the limitlessness of true love, for we can never "have" enough of the one we love truly (because we can never really "have" a *person*.) One's beloved in his or her self-mediating erotic personhood is not just a seeming divinity, not just a work of art, but something even better than these—a human person like me with whom I wish to exchange the most intimate material and spiritual details.

Once we experience the erotic effect being aroused in us by the sacred center, we become capable ourselves of arousing it for others (Gans, *Signs of Paradox* 112).

With that notion, nothing seems problematic. However, to claim that a nonhuman object can begin to behave or perform like a peripheral subject seems problematic. How would a deified non-human central Object become apparently self-mediating, erotic? We need a description of the self-withdrawal of a *nonhuman* central object.

Returning to the lovability test, let us ask: when might a nonhuman object begin to seem lovable? Recall that love is not only the deferral of resentment but also the renewal of the promise of care, grounded in a sentiment of tenderness for the other. Tenderness for the vulnerability of the Other provides a clue. Our experience of the self-withdrawal of the object adds to it a supplemental quality of radical otherness, the otherness of its content as separable even from esthetic mediation. That otherness is rooted in its material vulnerability. The central object in its victimary status, we suspect, we anticipate, will be destroyed—it will be annihilated, consumed, gone. Its self-withdrawal is like its seeming to go away. We might say that the erotic's dependency on an intuition of the radical otherness of the object's content originates in the scenic sensation of its vulnerability to being sacrificially *lost*—its being destined to vanish, to disappear in sacrificial violence. Thus the tenderness that must accompany true love.

Among erotic objects of desire, a store-bought birthday cake does not spring to mind. But if, say, it is a one-of-a-kind birthday cake in the shape of a guitar (yes, a guitar) that it has taken your devoted partner all day long to make—a beautiful birthday cake that must be photographed for posterity—then your feeling that it will somehow be a sad thing to eat it is not a childlike misgiving, but a non-esthetic effect of the material thing revelatory of an erotic component in its content. Your resistance to its being consumed adds to the desire aroused by its beauty: what will be lost is this one cake, in its particularity and personality. Even if someday another cake that looks just like it gets baked and presented, that copy-cake will not be *this* one. Anticipated as lost, the eroticized birthday cake is self-withdrawing from your gaze as you prepare to consume it. The “oneness” of the personal has its origin in the oneness of the sacred central erotic Object self-withdrawing from the scene of representation.

While the self-withdrawal of the central object is in reality an effect of the mediation of the desiring periphery, the illusion of the self-withdrawal of the erotic comes with and comes from an intensification of our sense of the object's physical finiteness and vulnerability, an intensification of our sense of its exhaustibility in time, its ephemerality. Something about these qualities resists their being assimilated to the esthetic, to the effects of oscillation between the object-as-referred-to-by-the-sign and the sign-as-signifying-the-object. Material finitude, bodily vulnerability, exhaustibility, ephemerality, mortality—maybe it's not naive to name these qualities of central objects facts of nature, facts of life; the relations between the erotic and



the facts of sex and generation are not distant. Such qualities in themselves mediate the desirability of the radical otherness of the content of the object, so as to make its desirability appear partly independent of scenic mediation. Radical material otherness can never be “had,” in the sense that I can never myself know the interior wholeness of the birthday cake. New lovers want to eat each other up; but to consume the object is not to know it as in *being* it; such knowledge is simply impossible. One is condemned to “have” only one’s own personhood.

Moving toward the target of a model of self-conscious originary personhood, it is time to celebrate the intimacy between the figural resources of the human body and our thinking about human persons. Whatever myriad attributions of sacred personhood we have made over the centuries to culturally significant nonhuman objects—consider the deification and naming of goats, lambs, bears, eagles, leaves, trees, lakes, rivers, mountains, valleys, cliffs, peaks, rocks, stars, planets—our intuitions of originary *human* personhood must have emerged only after some long acquaintance with rituals that witnessed the *human body as occupant of the center of the scene of representation*. Philosophers who have puzzled over personal identity have thus frequently connected the continuity of the body to that of the person. Setting aside odd cases of nostalgia for the sportive animal disguises worn by the sacred Zeus and his ilk, setting aside likewise the enthusiasm of some post-humanists for future sexual congress with high-class robots, most people today still sanely, soundly “privilege” the image of humans loving humans in recognizably human bodies. Nevertheless, we must not lose the edge of the analysis of the exemplary once-special birthday cake as nonhuman object: we can intuit a continuity between a non-human object in the sacred center self-withdrawing and the human body as object in the sacred center withdrawing itself from our desire as we anticipate its *lostness*. The anticipation of lostness is key to understanding how the sacralization of the erotic human body is irreducibly an effect of scenic structures rather than the result of a cosmologically determined biological destiny. In other words, the sacralization of the human body as a personal thing would derive from collective action on the scene of representation: in the first place, from the nonhuman object’s seeming self-withdrawal from the center of the scene of representation.

Consider now a suggestion that the origin of human personhood may be one with the origin of erotic self-mediation. The ironically self-mediating erotic subject-other offers a minimal model of human self-consciousness. Not consciousness of oneself using just any sign to name the center, but consciousness of oneself *using one’s own whole body as a sign by which to name oneself as the center*. Perform this introspective test. Imagine yourself in a social scene, a dinner or party or dance. You find yourself surrounded and alone in the center and you notice that all the people on the periphery—who knew? — suddenly “want” you erotically. They all



want consummation with you, the person. Now they want you because you yourself have become aware of their erotico-sexual desire for you: now you are self-withdrawing. Seeming thus to enjoy being desired by them, you add, by apparently resisting it, to their desire for you. The situation imposes a paradoxical self-consciousness on you as the central object-become-eroticized-subject. *Here I am in the center in the flesh, but what significance have they on the desiring periphery attributed to my body, what a significant thing (suddenly, apparently) is this body of mine! I must will myself to control it as if it were other than me!*

This scenario begins to answer the question—under what material conditions could a human who has learned to name the nonhuman Other object in the center have no choice but to name *himself (or herself)* as subject-and-object at once? The quality of such an instant of recognition of your erotic centrality would be equally embarrassing and exhilarating, flattering and constricting. For consider that because you are erotically desired *equally by many*, to choose the one of your preference from the desiring periphery is necessarily to disappoint all the others. What can you do with yourself in the *public* erotic center? Alas, embodied human, you are not a demigod; you cannot float upward and away, nor can you dissolve into mist. You have no choice but to stay incarnate while you self-withdraw ironically from the force of the desires that have extra-centered you. The paradox of the *self-consciously* erotic human center, experienced on the inside, is that even to ignore the erotic attentions of the periphery, even to pretend indifference to the plural desires for you, only increases their force. [\(19\)](#)

No human person could endure such a centrality of awkwardly surrounded erotic objecthood. Contrary to fantasy, such encirclement by multiple competing partners making equally intense sexual offers would mean lots of cultural work rather than a lazy plenitude of appetitive satisfactions. If the sexy beast surrounded by eager would-be lovers is in fact a human, then he or she will feel more tied to a stake of involuntary centrality than be leaping serenely from romp to romp, no strings attached. No wonder people prefer to go steady for a while or get married. Because public erotic self-mediation is not really a viable option, it is from erotic self-mediation that minimal human personhood is derived.

Consider, too, that reciprocal erotic exchange is only imperfectly modeled by linguistic reciprocity. Rather in the way that there can be only one sacred central Object-other at the communal origin of the sign, you can give yourself erotically as only one person—which means that you signify yourself with the sign of your one body, no matter how beautifully you adorn, ornament, or modify it, doing fifty push-ups, dressing to kill, gussying up your long hair. The language of erotic signs is the language in which “the sign” you exchange is your person embodied, the person of your body. The investment one makes in one’s body as a sign is at least as

expensive as any individual contribution to communal investments in the cultural overhead required by ritual. I can exchange all the words of my community's language that I know, easily; I can perform the many gestures I have learned for participation in my community's rituals, easily. But I have only one body by which to indicate that I am myself prepared for erotic exchange, one body to share in an acts of sexual love.(20)

Incarnate in a human body paradoxically aware of itself as a sign of the body-self-conscious as one body and will, thing represented and representation—the originary human person comes into being. I am a body, totally incarnate; but incarnation means that I must be ironically aware of my spirit and will as things separate from my body. (*How can they find me so beautiful? I must freely will myself to continue being beautiful!* ) Erotic self-mediation models minimal personhood, for in it, one is paradoxically all oneself and not oneself at all. My personal predicament is alienatingly inescapable because although I am subject to others finding me desirable, the alienating inescapability is *mine, all mine*: only I am at that instant the central erotic object-subject.(21)

This minimal opening into personhood hypothesizes a pragmatic crisis every bit as paradoxical as that of the generation of the originary sign itself. The sparagmos is the dissolution there; here, the dissolution will be the transgressive formation of the erotic couple, detaching its dyadic interactive self from the public scene.(22) Thus personhood suggests a model of transcendence that is provided by the unit of the loving couple, the private rival to the public sacred center. The immediate solution to the impossible irony of being sexually desired by all on the periphery is the sacrificially creative one of choosing one partner, and in reciprocal exchange with that one, forming the private sacred of a true love relationship, a shared world of meanings, exchanged words and things, hearth and home, food and furniture, walls and windows, and maybe babies. Babies, newborn children: humans who enter the world bearing in the very material features of their flesh a miraculous blending of physiological signs, their bodies freshly resembling and reassembling the bodies of the adult persons whose act of love in the flesh engendered them. If the originary scene of human personhood had not always helped us do better at producing children, then we would not be here now to ponder it.(23)

We name our children. In the apparent universality of the way that rituals of naming accompany crises in the erotico-sexual life cycle, there is perhaps some corroboration for a model of personhood that privileges the erotic. For it is in the nature of a person to merit a name: even anathema presupposes anonymity; the scapegoat gets named before it gets killed. Individuals change names when they marry; the married produce children who are named not long after birth; when they reach sexual maturity, initiatory rites add a name to mark them as potential parents

now themselves. That acts of naming and renaming accompany the mimetic crises of erotico-sexual activity in the human life cycle lends some support to our intuition that a minimal model of personhood may best be captured by a reframing of erotic self-awareness and self-withdrawal.

And yet there would be a deep, real danger in stopping here with the child-entailing erotic alone, this neat fitting of the cultural to the biological. Such fitting, or collapsing, almost always betrays the reduction of the scene of representation to something less and other than the scene of representation and human being.

For starters, another moment in the life cycle does not quite fit with any of those just mentioned: the moment of death. More or less a stranger to the erotic, unlike birth or initiation or marriage, not biologically fruitful, personal death presses reflection on personhood to a new level. It does so no matter how much hard cultural property one might pass to one's living-on heirs. Generative Anthropology offers reflection on personhood the advantages of minimal scenic thinking, freedom from the futile search for the perfectly logical proposition that might stand as a Super-definition of the human person above all considerations and questions. Simply to say that a person is a lovable one may solve a lot of problems. The metaphysician who demands a foolproof category of "person" independent of human interaction is missing from the outset the whole point of a minimal scenic anthropology like the one advertised here, which would insist that personhood, like any other human activity, is fundamentally mimetic and interdividual. If it makes me philosophically uneasy (for example) that no predication whatsoever of the type *I am and do thus, therefore I am a person* will escape paradox, if it makes me anxious that my personhood depends entirely on what others do with and for and to me, well, I must understand that I am always already welcome to the club, welcome to the class, welcome to the world. The club is humankind, the class is history, and the world is the one where we have always been free only to share.[\(24\)](#) Metaphysics will not solve the problem of personhood, for we did not at the origin and do not now need sentences to be persons. Language, yes; sentences, no; naming precedes predication, chronologically and ontologically.

Meanwhile, I do not mean to mock the anxious person who seeks in metaphysical principles some lens through which to look at the faceless spectre of death and not go blind with incomprehension. For trying to stare down and get into focus the annihilation of one's personal consciousness is no easy thing. The line taken by Lucretius and much later by the supremely complacent David Hume, the line *I was not around before I was born so not being around after I die troubles me not*, is a flippant evasion that cancels the "I" by presupposing the meaningfulness of the world without the "I." *How noble and stoic and generous am I! I will calmly let the world exist without me when I am dead and gone!* But real originary thinking about

one's personhood asks the question of the *meaning* of one's personal life, an ethical rather than an ontological question; and it values the irreversible contribution however small made by each human life to the course of human history. When we meet the Divine Interrogator at the gates of the afterlife, the question will not concern, I expect, how the world wagged before we were born and how it will wag now that we have been required to absent ourselves from it. The question will be *what meaningful things (good, beautiful, charitable, honorable) have you done with your time? Whom did you love, and how?*

There is another real danger in stopping with a model of personhood in the mind-body unity of erotic centrality. The danger is flagged by the reader who asks this: how does such a conception include children who die before sexual maturity, people who never have sex or beget children, people with disabilities that affect sexual performance, people in conditions demented or comatose, babies not yet born? Are these non-erotic bodies not persons?

Originary thinking's model of personhood, like its model of Divine self-performance, would be interactively Trinitarian. The minimal personhood proposed in the crisis of bodily erotic self-consciousness opens gracefully toward maximization in spirit. The simplest way to notice that opening toward spirit is to say that once the human individual is aware of its erotic body as the sign of itself, he or she is free to *take possession of that body in ways other than the erotic*. The minimal presupposition is that as a person, one must have awareness of one's freedom to use one's body *ironically, to use it as the inadequate sign of one's merely re-presented self*. From that awareness, in effortless metonymical steps, the things one does with one's body—the food one cooks, the tools one makes, the garments one fashions, the dwellings one builds, the love one makes, the children one raises—all these *acts of the body* become acts of a person. The body once discovered as the expressive material of the minimal person is opened up to the maximal performance of both myriad erotico-sexual gestures and every bodily gesture imaginable. Those whom one might fear to have excluded are included by way of this effortless pluralizing of personal bodily performances.

Furthermore, Generative Anthropology acknowledges the connections between the humanization of the sacred Object and the attitudes and ideas that have flowed from the world-historical Christian revelation.<sup>(25)</sup> Other philosophers and anthropologists—among them Emile Durkheim,<sup>(26)</sup> Marcel Mauss,<sup>(27)</sup> Louis Dumont, Martin Hollis,<sup>(28)</sup> and David Bentley Hart,<sup>(29)</sup> have claimed that accounts of the category of the person should award a starring role to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and its influence on Western individualism and the notion of the meaningful career. But before we consider the vocation of Jesus, the Incarnation itself, to think over the difference between the God-kings of the archaic empires and

the God-man of Christianity is worthwhile.

In the archaic empires, rulers claimed to re-present the gods in their very persons; Roman emperors claimed demigod status, to represent again the gods in their persons. The difference Christianity made was its lending dignity to all human bodies, even the “defective” or damaged body. In Christian personhood, the divinely-sanctioned dignity of the human body regardless of its erotic desirability is affirmed. How does this happen? It happens as Christianity eroticizes the invisible soul. For what is faith in the eternal significance of the resurrected body of the Crucified, if not faith in the significance of a *non-erotic* figure that occupies a scene of representation where the structure of intergenerational exchange is not corporeally genetic, not dependent on the material history of one’s flesh-and-blood family, but spiritually freed to create a history of adoptive relations of non-erotic self-giving (affection, friendship, charity)? The leper, the cripple, the outcast and the ugly may belong to the center of the scene of representation. Thanks to the Incarnation, self-mediation may now deny the erotico-sexual body altogether: one may occupy the center of the human scene even if no other human finds one’s body erotically tempting. Asceticism and eroticism become paradoxical twins, fully alive only when accompanied by the other as coeval rival. The figural sexiness of Greek secular esthetic culture fuses with the austere iconoclasm of Jewish monotheism. The universalization of the dignity of the human body fuses with the eroticization of the invisible, willed soul of the human person. The person self-mediate his or her desire for his or her own divinely-sanctioned, finite and vulnerable, but memorable and meaningful, soul.

Gans has hinted that it is not so naive to think of God as a person.[\(30\)](#) Presumably he would extend the idea in suggesting that it is not so naive to insist that the historical personhood of Christ is essential to the historical rootedness of Christian theology. Perhaps we must concede that the Passion narrative partakes of the esthetic structure of any other tragedy. Even so, it remains true that not to take the tragedy of the passion “personally” is not to get its point. One loves Christ not because he sacrificed himself in some inscrutably bizarre ransom arrangement with a deranged vengeful Father.[\(31\)](#) Rather, one loves Christ as one believes that his living and dying were intended to mean something, and the intention was directed at us. His crucified body was to signify; it was no accident, no side-effect, no random surprise. The meaningfulness of the non-erotic body is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who guaranteed its originary meaningfulness by inspiring the memory of Divine vulnerability and giving access to the voice of Divine forgiveness.

The doctrine of the Incarnation seems to insist that the body of Jesus is a human body *unlike* that of any other human, that his bodily self-sacrifice is unique among such human sacrifices, something done “once and for all.” Jesus as God in his

victimary, figurally unique Objecthood is one with the invisible will of God the Father as afigural and inaccessible. Whatever bodily performances we in imitation of Christ on the periphery might manage to bring off in ascetic self-discipline or charitable self-denial, the doctrine of the Incarnation suggests that nothing matches what the Divine Human has done. Following this implication of the Incarnation, we feel our love for God Incarnate must have nothing to do with the erotic.

The problem in this naming of an absurdity and the accompanying prohibition is that it risks voiding the scene of any orientation by which our relation to the Divine body in the scenic center might be personal. To restore the personal connection, the solution is not a bottomless pity and compassion for the Crucified one.

Certainly, such pity must be a big part of any respect for the historical Jesus. But on this point, it is worthwhile to register that Gans has had the courage to propose that in the relation named love, even in that naming love of the Crucified, *one does not treat the beloved as abject or victimary*.[\(32\)](#) How might one love the body of Christ while getting beyond the victimary temptation to see him simply as a victim? The answer, I think, is to ask about the meaning of what he did with his body, which returns us to our minimal model of personhood. The minimal model of personhood seeks to establish scenically the self-conscious use of one's intention-bearing self. What the Crucified reveals is that the intention-bearing body given in loving self-sacrifice may well prove just as historically powerful as the body given in erotic exchange. The history of the erotico-sexual genetic human community generates its non-monstrous rival in the adoptive history of a loving "spiritual" humankind.

And at that point, the problem of the prohibitive naming of an absurdity is solved to the extent that pondering the Incarnation teases us into the thought that the body of Jesus is somehow just like ours and Jesus somehow a person just like us: not kept at a forbidding distance, but approachably intimate. For if we are to imagine the body of Jesus as really that of a fully human being after all, then we must imagine him as human in the first place and so *choosing* to become God, choosing to recognize God in himself, and imagine ourselves as able to witness that choosing.[\(33\)](#) Jesus in humanness would have chosen to self-mediate in submitting to the will of God in himself, God-as-himself. His choice would have included submission to a sacrificial vocation; the submission would have been self-mediating. Jesus was not God-robot. He was God-human. If we are imitating the self-giving charitable love of the Crucified, we are imitating the choice of the fully human Christ.

Not to take the tragedy of the passion "personally" is not to get it. We on the periphery *can* put ourselves in the tragic place of the Divine Incarnate, to the extent that we can grasp Jesus' Divine self-choosing as meaningful. That self-choosing is one with the self-withdrawal of the central object: we cannot think it without



thinking the lostness of the Divine Object. From our perspective, Jesus' choice of his sacrificial destiny is one with his self-withdrawal from the finite, historical, worldly scene of merely-human interpersonal exchange. His may not be thinkable as an erotic self-withdrawal, but it certainly may be understood as a personal and bodily self-withdrawal.

That is why those who see Jesus as another sacrificial mythic hero just do not "get" him, or the "it" he is trying to give them. His was a self-mediation of the spirit, not the body. His self-mediation of the desirability of his body was not the thing (for who would wish his or her body to be crucified?). His was a self-mediation of the desirability of his quest for his soul-his oneness with God (a quest which necessitated his victimary destiny).[\(34\)](#) In imagining that quest, we find the merely human being of Jesus "attractive" in a quasi-erotic way-beautiful-and we picture him as a particular historical actor like us, rather than a mythical deity like any other. Our freedom so to imagine his personhood is what might make him the one God Incarnate rather than another exotic but replaceable demigod such as those who ruled in the archaic empires. We might learn to think of the Incarnation as "erotic" in the attractiveness of its infinite meaningfulness.

A Trinitarian model of human personhood is completed in the mystery of Spirit, the personal sacred center neither as inaccessible will nor as victimary object but rather as mediator of meaningfulness. For meaning is a blessing of the center as source of spirit.[\(35\)](#) From loving the one sacred Object-other at the origin, we come to love each other as sacred centers in the end. We love each other as persons. The periphery has vanished; each of us is a sacred center.[\(36\)](#) The originary sacred center as Person has wanted nothing other than to have us taking up our own human personhood, after all. To be human is to be blessedly endowed with originary human personhood.

## Notes

1. A similar formulation appears in *Signs of Paradox* (1997): "The first personhood is attributed to the sacred center as the originary desire-object and the model for the actions of human desire-objects in the life-world" (*Signs of Paradox* 112). Likewise, the following, in 2007: "But it [the postmodern revolt against authority] ignores the fact that the individual before the existence of the center is *not yet* a subject; his appetite, mimetically enhanced, is not yet desire. Humanity is born from the sign in relation to whose originary referent [humanity] is always *second*" ("[Transcendence and Cultural Will](#)," *Chronicle* 350, 3 Nov. 2007). ([back](#))
2. Gans: "... any object of desire may occupy the scenic center, and we may love another person, an animal, or even an object to which we attribute imaginary



personhood..." (["Age, Love, and Culture," Chronicle 63, 19 Oct. 1996](#)). ([back](#))

3. To acknowledge one of the many puzzle-pieces of the background context of this thesis: "The couple as self-contained unit in which sexual pleasure is exchanged constitutes an 'other scene' that rivals the community assembled around the central sacred object. This rivalry is not a mere structural homology but a mimetic relation" (Gans, ["Originary Thoughts on Sexuality," Chronicle 220, 25 Nov. 2000](#)). ([back](#))

4. The personhood of God must be conceived of as paradoxically particular only in its universality. God can be the One for all humans together at once, the One both resented and loved, but God can never be the one erotic other for any one of us individually. It is simply unthinkable, which unthinkability tells us something about interpersonal human love as opposed to our love (if we have any) for God. ([back](#))

5. To illuminate this poverty of the self in Trinitarian terms, God the Father-master who enforces with terrible absoluteness the inaccessibility of the central object is not yet God in three persons--and the forms of human action inspired by the center as awe-inspiring inaccessible Being forbidding any intimacy are going to be in the first place acts of resentment. ([back](#))

6. Regarding my deployment of the phrase "true love," consider this from Gans: "But beyond the recipes for multiple orgasms, these publications are primarily focused on finding and keeping the right person, not merely as a spouse, but as one's 'true love.' However corny this term appears in an academic context, it sells in a popular one because true love, in all its simple transparency, is what people want--it is what we need" (["Carnal Knowledge," Chronicle 109, 20 Sept. 1997](#)). ([back](#))

7. "Today, identity has been reestablished with a vengeance and, however collective and victimary it may be, that is on balance a good thing. The most resentful identity is better than none at all" (["Models of Identity," Chronicle 103, 2 Aug. 1997](#)).

"GA's problem is that it is indeed an anthropology, that it affirms that culture is made by people, [made by] 'selves' if you like, whereas our cultural specialists have been deconstituting and deconstructing the self . . . for the last 150 years" (["Resistance to GA," Chronicle 110, 27 Sept. 1997](#)).

"The human self is a user of signs in a community of like selves, with all the uncertainty that such an individual-collective entity suggests. Yet the arrogant dismissal of this truth by the overweening bourgeois Self should nonetheless not lead us, however understandably, to affirm that we have no selves at all" (["Mind and](#)

[Brain," Chronicle 133, 18 April 1998\).](#) [\(back\)](#)

8. In the context of the Paul de Man scandal, Gans notes "that the ethical dereliction implicit in the denial of the responsible self [goes] beyond simple inconsequence. If I cannot be identified as accountable for my acts, then all evil is possible" ("[Models of Identity," Chronicle 103, 2 Aug. 1997](#)").

"Treating criminals as moral agents rather than as amoral creatures subject only to stimuli and conditioning provides both more effective deterrence by strengthening the causal link between crime and punishment and a better chance of rehabilitation by contributing to the criminal's self-respect" ([Chronicle 61, 5 Oct. 1996](#)). Notice the hint of erotic self-mediation in the phrase "self-respect": the moral self in its self-respect has taken steps to becoming a person, a self aware of the desirability of being something in itself. [\(back\)](#)

9. "The self-conscious self is the sign-using self; we become conscious of our selves only when we can talk about them, and we talk about them in the first place to others" ("[Mind and Brain," Chronicle 133, 18 April 1998](#)").

"The originary model of freedom is the communication of a necessary deferral of appetite by means of a freely emitted sign. What is free is not the mere fact of deferral, but the *intention* to communicate it, *which makes the process of deferral more than the mere inhibition of an appropriative gesture*" ("[The Four Freedoms," Chronicle 348, 1 Sept. 2007](#)") [emphasis added]. [\(back\)](#)

10. It is worth noting in this regard that the serpent in the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden is the figure of pure resentment in the story of the Fall of Man. [\(back\)](#)

11. "But the resentful dream of defiguration is parasitic, as are all such [resentful] dreams, on the figure that concentrates in itself the mimetic power the resentful subject wishes to destroy" ([Chronicle 3, 29 July 1995](#)). [\(back\)](#)

12. Consider the implications: "what the resentful subject always *really* demands from the central authority he claims he would abolish" is "a new degree of self-knowledge to justify its role" ("[Transcendence and Cultural Will," Chronicle 350, 3 Nov. 2007](#)"). [\(back\)](#)

13. I am not loved for my identities. Pile up the proofs of them—my birth certificate, university diploma, driver's license, professional credentials, marriage license, union membership, credit card, title to insurance, passport, last will—pile up the material items guaranteeing my group identities and make a bonfire. I confess the comfort of such documentary reassurances has value (losing one's wallet is always a crisis of

the first order), but that I can imagine standing and watching such an imaginary bonfire demonstrates that the sum-total of my identities is not my personhood. [\(back\)](#)

14. "The thinness of political-collective identities is concomitant with their resentful nature" ("[Models of Identity](#)," *Chronicle* 103, 2 Aug. 1997). [\(back\)](#)

15. It is no coincidence that the revolutionary slogan went *the personal is the political* and not the reverse. The copula *is* hides the desire for a movement of the energies from one sphere of action into another sphere of action. People impatient with the pace of political change understandably like the idea that the powerful erotic energy of *the personal* might be mediated to effect change in the public sphere. The slogan aims to move what is rightly believed to be the powerful erotic energies involved in personal relationships—*the personal*—into the public sphere. And this dreamed-of movement promoted by the slogan (as if simply to say it is so will make it so) aims to overpass the tedious, tiresome, detailed labour of negotiation and campaign and compromise that goes into real political activity (that is, democratic political activity rather than coercion, conquest, conspiracy and *coup d'état*). Complete the chiasmus: *the political is the personal* does not carry the same delicious frisson of shock. It does not, because one is not intuitively attracted to the fantasy that representatives of the palace or the state might always be a guest at one's dinner table and witnesses to the goings-on in one's bedroom. [\(back\)](#)

16. For Gans' most sustained treatments of the erotic, see *Signs of Paradox* (1997) 112-120, and "[The Erotic](#)," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 128, 28 Feb. 1998). [\(back\)](#)

17. Gans: "the erotic creates a microcosm of the human universe that requires no external transcendent figure" (*Signs of Paradox* 114); "Love creates a personal scene of representation . . . with the beloved as its sacred center" (*Signs of Paradox* 114-15). [\(back\)](#)

18. We do not sell or trade wives and husbands in a person-respecting culture where the erotic and the personal are celebrated as one. Sex trade workers trade in sex, not love. They have trade names partly to protect their real persons from the violence of their customers. That sex trade work, however pitifully enslaved or resolutely voluntary its practitioners, lacks something in moral prestige is not an effect of illiberal prejudice but of originary intuition. I do not wish to beat the play-acting fool that the favour-dispensing-king already regularly beats, but sex trade work lacks prestige because of the dehumanization entailed, or at least risked, by the bottomless instability of the irony required by the worker's obligation constantly to be pretending that the personal act one is performing is (by some ruse)

impersonal. An impersonal “business” model of erotic exchange cannot help but erode the sacrality of the personal erotic; I would suggest that constantly to pretend otherwise will spiritually exhaust and damage all human persons except those most amazingly skilled in keeping an ironic distance from the erotic situations they are in. There may be such amazingly skilled persons working in the sex trades; my point is only that for the majority not to wish to be obliged to develop such skills is not prejudicial but reasonable, or at least as reasonable as any form of preservation of personal self. ([back](#))

19. As for the other direction, you might be bold and encourage your self-objectification, maybe with sultry come-hither looks or manly *hey-babe* broadcasting. But such encouragement would only increase your vulnerability by leading on all the peripheral desires at once, all the sooner pressing you into the strategy of pseudo-indifference and self-withdrawal. If you *do* perform gestures of erotic encouragement, you must make them hypothetical, ironic- to seem to desire *yourself* as a way of disowning your desirability as it is being mediated by others. You must seem to desire not to be desired, which will only increase your desirability. ([back](#))

20. Gans: “Care of the kind merited by the divinity is essentially infinite. The saintliest person cannot love his neighbor in a way approximating his love of God, because he has many neighbors and only one God, and because his devotion to God encompasses that to all his neighbors whereas the converse is not the case”; “But for the one person I care for most, the social institution of the couple, married or not, facilitates the exercise of infinite care”; “Personal mediation tends to take the place of the public mediating function of religion because it alone offers genuine interaction with the mediator” (“[Love, Resentment, and Generative Anthropology,](#)” *Chronicle* 100, 12 Jul. 1997). ([back](#))

21. Some of the reflections at this point in the argument are rooted in my thinking about passages such as the following: “The erotic object is self-mediating because we can feel it deliberately resist our desire. Only a person, a subject of ‘free will,’ is truly capable of such resistance...” (*Signs of Paradox* 112). ([back](#))

22. Gans: “What threatens the social order is . . . the fact that their [the sexual couple’s] mutual desire ‘naturally’ expresses itself in language”; “But, as Bataille makes clear, sexual relations are *always* transgressive. Marriage as a rite of passage is not simply a permitted move in a game; it is the conferral or a right of transgression equivalent to the right to eat the (normally forbidden) totem animal at a ritual feast” (“[Originary Thoughts on Sexuality,](#)” *Chronicle* 220, 25 Nov. 2000). ([back](#))

23. This remark is perhaps a transmutation of the following enigmatic formulation: "The minimalism of originary thinking encounters the erotic as a 'temptation' that it cannot encompass but only refer to obliquely. The erotic is recalcitrant to originary theory, for the very reason that the purpose of cultural deferral is to permit it" (Gans, ["The Erotic," Chronicle 128, 28 Feb. 1998](#)). ([back](#))

24. Gans: "However incommensurable the 'author-function' may be from any worldly interaction, both author and reader know each other to be, not 'functions,' but human beings. What we are primarily linked to and separated from by the deferring mediation exercised by all signifying practices is not 'language' or even God, but each other" (["What is an Author?" Chronicle 129, 7 Mar. 1998](#)).

"The brain as an organ cannot account for the mind because 'mind' is not something physical contained within the brain. . . . It is a virtual, interpersonal reality that subsists in human culture and in which we participate. Our certitude that we are thinking beings is not illusory; but the instruments of our thought are signs that we share with others and that have no meaning outside of this interaction" (["Mind and Brain," Chronicle 133, 18 Apr. 1998](#)).

Or again: "the individual human Subject . . . never really exists except in interaction with a human community. The deconstruction of the individual subject is an avowal of the mutually mediated nature of human desire" (["Deconstructing the Subject," Chronicle 163, 20 Mar. 1999](#)).

"Just as ideas are now thought to reside in the brain not in specific neurons but in interactions among neurons, so do the signs of language and culture exist not in individual minds but in the interactions among human beings" (["Body and Soul," Chronicle 194, 15 Jan. 2000](#)). ([back](#))

25. Gans: "Christian dramatization of the soul's struggle for salvation, along with its secular derivatives, is arguably the driving force in the West's historical success. The more advanced the exchange system, the more individual participants are obliged to invest in their own 'story'" (["We Are All Buddhists Now," Chronicle 242, 25 Aug. 2001](#)). ([back](#))

26. On the inclusion of Durkheim in this list, see Collins 63. ([back](#))

27. Marcel Mauss: "It is Christians who have made a metaphysical entity of the 'moral person' (*personne morale*), after they became aware of its religious power. Our own notion of the human person is still basically the Christian one" (19). ([back](#))

28. Martin Hollis: "the notion of a person in Greek tragedy . . . seems to me to have a category of self implicit in it. What then is modern? It is, I think, the idea that we

construct our own social identity. Without Roman law and mediaeval Christianity, I doubt if the idea would have come to make sense. It needs notions of individual person and private spiritual substance” (230). [\(back\)](#)

29. David Bentley Hart: “even Christianity’s most implacable modern critics should be willing to acknowledge that, in these texts [the canonical gospels] and others like them, we see something beginning to emerge from darkness into full visibility, arguably for the first time in our history: the human person as such, invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity, and possessed of an infinite value” (167; for other pertinent passages on the link between Christian faith and the emergence of fully humanized conceptions of personhood, see 180, 203, 208, 211). [\(back\)](#)

30. Gans: “the originary central object, defigured in the *sparagmos*, reveals to us the permanence of the Being-*undecidably person and Idea*-that sustains the human” ([Chronicle 3, 29 Jul. 1995](#)) [emphasis added]. [\(back\)](#)

31. For the background of this remark—in an account of how the history of Christian doctrines of the atonement should be radically rewritten from the perspective of Girard’s anthropology—see Anthony Bartlett’s powerful book *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (2001). [\(back\)](#)

32. Gans: “Influenced by . . . Levinas, a recent vogue emphasizes the abjection of the Other as an appeal to our Care. But while recognizing (through ‘tenderness’) the other’s mortality which s/he shares with me, love never treats the Other—not even the Crucified—as denuded or abject, in a word, as *victimary*. What I see in the beloved Other, beyond mere human vulnerability, is her sacred power to give and take away meaning from my world” ([“Love, Resentment, and Generative Anthropology,” Chronicle 100, 12 Jul. 1997](#)).

Compare this remark from [“Moral Heroism” \( Chronicle 237, 9 Jun. 2001\)](#): “We may associate the moral integrity of the post-millennial era with a categorical imperative derived . . . from the scenic configuration of the originary hypothesis: act in such a way as to diminish—first locally, then, as far as possible, universally—the amount of resentment in the world. We would do better to devote ourselves to *persons rather than victims*, and lend our support to others who try to do likewise” [emphasis added]. [\(back\)](#)

33. It may be appropriate to juxtapose the following not-unrelated remark from Gans here: “Foucault’s exclusively discursive orientation leads him to omit from consideration the most fundamental category of textual authority: that of *the witness*, whose authority comes not from subjective but from *objective* experience. Memoirs of people involved in historically important or simply unusual events always find an audience” ([“What Is An Author?” Chronicle 129, 7 Mar. 1998](#))



[emphasis added]. We might describe those humans whose memories nourished and nourish the model of personhood provided by the Christian revelation as members of the community of witnesses to the “objective experience” of the origin of the *maximal* humanization of the scenic center. ([back](#))

34. Gans: “The ‘sublimation’ of eros into agape occurs at the point where the object of the mediating Other’s own (self-)desire is understood not as a physical image of the desirable but an immortal ‘soul’” ([“The Erotic,” Chronicle 128, 28 Feb. 1998](#)).

“When the Western tradition renounces worldly desire, it is in the service of the individual soul’s *spiritual* desire—a desire that can still arguably enter into an inter-human dialogue—rather than the search for Nirvana” ([“We Are All Buddhists Now,” Chronicle 242, 25 Aug. 2001](#)). ([back](#))

35. Gans: “love possess spirituality. The *spirit* is the agency that preserves the shared meanings of language”; “the Spirit is the center as the locus not of figure but of meaning. Spirituality is communication in and through the transcendental guarantee of the spirit” ([“Generative Spirituality,” Chronicle 66, 9 Nov. 1996](#)). ([back](#))

36. Gans: “The freedom of the periphery to intend a center has become the freedom of the peripheral self to intend itself as a center” ([“The Four Freedoms,” Chronicle 348, 1 Sept. 2007](#)). ([back](#))

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