**The (old) transcendent way: between idolatry and absurdity**

**The idea of human centrality.**

Anthropocentrism, the moral-ethical idea that requires the placement of man at the center of creation, recognizes a central value in man: in her or his needs and desires, in her or his different or unique skills, in her or his hopes or feelings, and, in short, in everything that is human or is found in certain aspects of humanity (Butchvarov, 2015; Boddice, 2011). This perception considers it a sin to subordinate man to other things. Man, just as she or he is, without preconditions, is of absolute value and should therefore be placed at the center of all our considerations. This means that the individual person is more important, more central, than tradition, the customs of society, historical monuments, and bureaucracy. And, on the flip side, it implies that tradition, custom, objects, the people, money, the state, any ideology we may think about, the homeland—or anything else that comes to our mind—must not be given special value over man; when such a wrong evaluation takes place, evil and harm are born. When man in her- or himself is at the center of our intentions, when man is *the* fundamental criterion in our life, then our considerations and decisions are correct, moral and just, and the whole reality in which we live becomes healthier and of a higher quality.

Yehuda Amichai, an Israeli poet who touched the hearts of many, has described and criticized, in the third verse of his poem “Tourists,” the tendency of humanity to reduce the value we give to man on behalf of historical or other grandiose objects or ideas. These are so valuable to us that the living human being herself becomes secondary and invisible in relation to them. Thus, he writes:

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David’s Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. “You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there’s an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head.” “But he’s moving, he’s moving!” I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, “You see that arch from the Roman period? It’s not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family.” (Translated by Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt)

In a few short lines, Amichai expresses the idea that the main obstacle to the arrival of redemption (no less!) is our tendency to give incompatible value to various things such as heritage, historical sites, monuments and temples. This tendency reduces the value of the ordinary person, of seemingly simple human life, and makes them secondary to that apparently “big deal.” Thus, he expresses the idea that redemption will come when we at last overcome this tendency and give full value to the person himself—here and now. The value of all those other things, symbolized in the poem as an arch from the Roman period, is supposed to stem from the fact that they serve our observation of man, her- or himself. The living person is the purpose, the Holy of Holies.

**Limitations of the idea of human centrality, and opposition to it.**

But Amichai’s description, and the anthropocentric perspective in general, does not take into account cases in which we humans tend to act in a manner opposite to what he described; i.e., placing ourselves in the center, and being the source and only measure of the value of the surroundings. We tend, rather, to desire a matter we name “gold,” and that matter consequently becomes valuable. We have no need in the peel of the garlic or dried leaves on the driveway, so we spend energy to clean them away.

From that perspective stems the critique of anthropocentrism. What makes us humans the measure of all creation?! The radical voices of this outlook believe, as opposed to Amichai’s approach, that all the evil in the world stems from the fact that man treats himself as the center of the world; he transforms himself into the purpose of all things, the measure of all things, and thus finds justification for consuming and unjustly exploiting our surroundings (DeJonge 2011). Anthropocentrism leads to the destruction of nature, to harming the flora and fauna, to harming other human beings and small or antiquated civilizations, and generally violates the balance in the world. Again, man desires ivory, so we sacrifice the life of the elephant; we desire gold and cheap labor, so we sacrifice the lives of the “natives” in the new continent and eliminate their culture. In viewing ourselves at the center, as the purpose of being, as the Holy of Holies (as Amichai wishes), we blind ourselves to everything else in the world, and so to the injustice we cause.

Expressions of this mode of thinking—this critique which calls upon us to *overcome* our tendency to put ourselves (as individual, tribe, community, civilization, or species) at the center of creation—have a long history. For example, throughout history people have given a higher value to a mountain, a river, an animal of one kind or another (let’s say a cow in India), and to institutions like that of “the family” as a whole, the tribe as a whole, and custom. They gave lesser value to the individual person, or to their own social affiliation, than they gave to other things: objects, animals, institutions, or gods. The binding of Isaac can be interpreted as an act that expressed Abraham’s deep understanding that neither man, nor family connections, nor even human love are the *telos* of creation. Today’s environmental activists also express this perspective.

The official legal strategy in recent years of granting human rights to rivers is an interesting and even more radical expression of this perspective. The first river to have been granted the status of a human being is the Whangaunui river in northern New Zealand, which the locals see as belonging to their ancestors (Roy, 2017). In the same way, there is a struggle to change the legal status of the Colorado River in the United States, and transform it into a holder of human rights (Turkewitz, 2017, Layer Monthly 2018).

**Idolatry: the concept of holiness and the destructive tendency to find absolute value in merely relative things.**

This pendulum that at one extreme places man at the center of creation and then, at the other, takes man out of the center and focuses instead on the importance and value of a mountain, river, commercial company, nation, or an arch from the Roman period, can be attributed to our need for meaning and value. In other words, we need to sanctify something in order to find meaning and value in reality and its components; we need measures and values according to which we can judge, decide, and act in the world. And so, sacred are our needs, or sacred is the river; holy is the family, or holy is winning, and sacred is our reputation; holy is our homeland, and sacred our freedom, equality, or the land itself. But what is holiness?

One perspective on holiness (found, for example, in the ideas of Immanuel Kant and Rudolf Otto, respectively) sees holiness from a normative point of view – that is, as a trait of an entity that is completely (objectively) moral (Marina 2010). For our purposes here, it is more accurate to think of holiness from a descriptive point of view. This means that the “holy” is something whose value (for a person, a group or a culture, and not in a common normative or objective sense) is absolute and complete, not relative to any other thing. Another formal characteristic of holiness is that its value stems from itself, and thus constitutes the source from which (for that person, group or culture) all other things derive their value and meaning. *Absolute value* differs from *contingent* or *relative value* in that its value and status are independent of other things. It is not measured in relation to anything else. In contrast, the contingent or relative value of a thing is a value dependent on the value of other things. For example, the monetary value of 10 square meters in Manhattan is higher than the monetary value of 10 square meters in Omaha; and the touristic value of an arch from the Roman period is greater than the touristic value of a person returning from the market. These are relative values: economic, touristic or otherwise. Of course, their value also depends on time and place.

Holiness, on the other hand, is absolute. If something is given the value of holiness, from that moment it becomes different from all other things—a transformation happens. Therefore, the holy cannot be measured or defined. Everything becomes secondary to it. In other words, the status of holiness creates a totally separate category of existence—a completely different meaning to the concept of “reality.” Because of this, placing man at the center of creation—i.e., the sanctification and transformation of man into the criterion for what is valuable and meaningful—and, on the other hand, the sanctification and transformation of the earthly surrounding and its components, are both *excess* *perspectives* and reflect nonrealistic values for both. It is the giving of absolute value to relative things; and this constitutes idolatry (see the description in Halbertal and Margalit 1992 of Maimonides' approach to idolatry as a great metaphysical error; see also Leibowitz 2009).

Such confusion, or illusion, in relation to the real value of things in the world (finding excess, absolute values in things of relative value), and the internal contradiction contained therein, necessarily leads to ongoing tensions, conflicts, and struggles. In an ongoing struggle, peripheral elements often become the opposite pole to what is at the center, and receive the status of a victim*, a sacrifice*. Why does finding sanctity in the affairs of this world lead to an ongoing struggle, and a polarity of holiness and sacrifice? The answer lies in the fact that giving sacred value to a relative thing requires emptying it of any small amount of intrinsic value *not* included in the holy thing, but existing in relation to the thing itself. Suppose we find an absolute value in the life of an individual, or a certain group of people, or, alternatively, in some objects or some ideas; all other things that are not these (whether individual, group, object or idea) will subsequently lose their intrinsic value. Their value will only derive from their relation to that person, group, object, or idea. In this sense, they will be a potential victim of that holy center.

Let us crudely draw some scenarios of such internal contradiction. An absolute value granted to the state will probably turn the individual into its victim; an absolute value granted to the individual and his autonomy can make the unwanted fetus the victim of a woman’s right over her body; an absolute value granted to the family can make one or both spouses miserable victims of that institution; and giving absolute value to the “poor of your city” may lead to the sacrifice of persecuted refugees who live among them.

Against the background of the relativity of affairs in our reality, identifying one of its elements as having an excess, absolute value would require an investment of power for cancelling the value of things that would subsequently stand against the apparent absoluteness of its value. These matters will always arise because in *truth* their value and meaning are relative to one another.

It should also be noted that this necessary conflict stems from both the practical and logical impossibility of giving concrete, complete, and final meaning to the abstract concepts we use, such as “man,” “we,” and even “me.” Any real and concrete meaning given to one of them will ultimately be in tension and contrast (as described above) with everything that it does not include. Let us illustrate this with the most general possibility: suppose that the concept of “man” means *all the human beings that live*. Even in such a case, individuals, small groups, or large societies will inevitably emerge which will pay a price, even in their lives, for the perception that the interest of all the human beings that live is absolute and central. An example would be if this general “man” required individuals, groups and peoples to give up their unique historical identities, or to treat their particular identities as secondary to a universal one. In addition, even if, for the purposes of discussion, we accept the assumption that all living people may accept the same identity and characteristics of the general “Man,” tension and contrast will immediately arise between all living human beings and *future* living human beings. This tension and contrast will be expressed, for example, in the question of whether it is right to sacrifice the quality of life, or even the very lives, of the future generations to be born in 2050, for the quality of life of the human generation living today, or vice versa.

It seems that the obvious conclusion is to remove all holiness from our relative reality. Only thus will we achieve the same flexibility of thought that sometimes allows us to listen to the voice of custom, and sometimes to bend custom in the name of the value of something else. This flexibility will allow us to accept that sometimes we have to sacrifice a human interest for the interest of the river, but sometimes the interest of the river should be compromised for the sake of human interest—that sometimes individual freedom should be reduced in the name of social need, and sometimes vice versa. But is it possible to remove all holiness from our reality and our thinking? Can we find value and meaning in our reality without holiness at all? The problem is complicated.

**The experience of absurdity and futility of living in a world devoid of holiness.**

One of the issues repeated throughout human history is that the search for truth (let’s say: after the real, true value of things—the *right* value and meaning) leads to an undermining of the value of things which are wrongly ascribed unrealistic value. Thus, for example, this search undermines the excess value of cultural myths and old tribal taboos, as well as the value of other ideas, such as traditional perceptions of family structure and gender roles. The struggle against slavery was a struggle against the excess value given to peoples’ skin color; feminism fights the excess value given to masculinity over femininity; the scientific revolution and liberal democracy fought the excess value granted to religious ideas in understanding the physical world and in shaping our way of life.

But even if we believe that the struggle to undermine idolatry—the excess value of relative things in our world—has greatly improved our quality of life, this process often involves difficult consequences. As a result, it often happens that a hole of meaning is opened, and a sense of absurdity and lack of taste begins to permeate the individual soul and the spirit of culture. An expression of these moods can be found in Ecclesiastes, whose sense of futility—expressed in the assertion “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)—involves a man of great knowledge: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:18). “Those who increase knowledge” are a woman or a man who found the real, realistic value of things, while undermining the excess value of things that have so far filled her or his world with meaning and taste.

This process can also be seen in Plato, who describes in the *Symposium* how the longing for beauty and perfection has never been satisfied by the objects of this world. The state of mind of a human culture that has undermined any surplus value and meaning from its world is reflected in the modern art, thought, and lifestyles familiar to all of us at this time. These are lifestyles that include black humor, cynicism, pain, crying, loneliness, Sisyphean quests for self-fulfillment, existential anxieties, various addictions, career foci, searches for idols, technologies, and the Messiah—the redeemer king, a strong leader. The man who shattered everything that was considered valuable in the past and which gave meaning to the life of her or his ancestors, the idols of heritage, nation, religion, society—was left alone. And so, alone, one must create taste and value for one’s life and all that surrounds her or him.

But from where can one start?! One of our cultural icons, known for portraying the experience of the individual’s inability to impart meaning to the world, is the painting entitled “The Scream” (in Norwegian: *Skrik*), by Edvard Munch. This iconic painting expresses the horror gripping the individual left alone in a world devoid of meaning. The faceless, unnamed individual feels limited and partial compared to infinite nature, space and time. How will she or he be the source, the center, which gives value to all this?!

The dilemma facing us therefore seems to be as follows. The first possibility is to relinquish the truth and the attempt to find the real value of things, and to flow on with our psychic tendency, giving unrealistic absolute values to some relative aspects in our reality—man, idea, nature, or object. Only by attaching and identifying ourselves to our primitive instincts will value and meaning fill our world. The price we would pay is that we would have to fight against the elements in reality that are in contradiction and tension to the principle of meaning we are setting; that is, we would have to live by our swords so that we would not be victims of another subjective determination of meaning-principle, and so that we could eliminate aspects of reality that contradict the principle of meaning we exercise.

The second possibility is to continue the quest for the real values of things and ideas in the world, but to take into account the possibility that their value will be undermined and found meaningless, and that we are incapable of giving meaning to ourselves and/or the things around us. The great question is whether or not we are doomed to live in this pendulum. Or perhaps we can, on the one hand, quest for the real value and meaning of things, fearless of the undermining excess and unrealistic values we tend to falsely find in things and man, and, on the other hand, live in a reality which—rather than a vacuum of such—is rich in values and meaning?

**The idea of transcendent holiness and the possibility of a meaningful but realistically valued life**

I believe that the idea of transcendent holiness can connect these two seemingly contradictory approaches. On the one hand it preserves the place of the sacred as a source for values and meaning in our lives, but, due to its transcendent character, it logically excludes the possibility of granting absolute, unrealistic meanings to the relative aspects within reality. As mentioned, any attempt to give such value to something will be excess and unreal—a bubble that will explode—and until then it causes injustice, demanding an immolation from another element. Therefore, the idea of holiness which is *beyond* our world, transcendent to us, and our inability to grasp it once and for all, preserves our value and the value of the things in our world (I will shortly try to explain how). This is the paradox of *knowing the sacred*. If we know it, that is, if we put it into our relative world, we will make it available and concrete, and then the real value of the other things in our world will be lost. Therefore, paradoxically, in order to find a rich but harmonious value in man, ideas, nature or any other things, we must *not* possess the whole knowledge of the absolute value, the absolute criterion, the holy; rather, we should be always aware of our limitation in *once and for all* grasping it.

How can the belief that the holy is transcendent provide a meaning to our life which is both rich and endowed with values realistic to us and to our relative world? This is the paradox, for on the one hand we must recognize that what is sacred is beyond us (i.e., that nothing in our world is sacred), but on the other hand we must honestly believe in the good existence of that holiness, and make an effort to know it as much as possible. It is a strange effort, for it is always made under the awareness that we will never be able to grasp the whole of it once and for all. And here we are moving from a formal, neutral examination of what generally and principally may build value and meaning in our world – sanctifying this or that – to a normative conclusion with substantive content regarding what effort we *should* take in order to balance between the need for meaning and value, on one hand, and our love of truth and aversion for the illusion of giving excess value to relative things, on the other. In this sense we can name this effort “philo-sophy.”

This effort, as far as it fits into our daily life-routines, strengthens our belief in our own value and the value of our world, but without giving ourselves or our world an unrealistic sacred value. This effort is expressed in a daily attempt to direct, as much as we can, all our actions, to be as good as we can in the specific context we are in; it is expressed in inquiry and study, in asking questions, and, generally, in trying to understand the fixed and fundamental aspects of our reality: the principles of nature, of man, of morality, the principles of justice, thought, and reason.

To sum up: Transcendent holiness is needed if we are interested in truth and believe in it; that is, if we seek the *real* value of things and find it difficult to accept giving them excess value. If so, as we have seen above, it is very difficult to find value in things; and so often the seekers of truth (individuals and cultures) remain with a sense of meaninglessness and absurdity. This article suggests that, for those who love truth but are afraid of undermining any meaning in this world while questing after that truth, there exists a value in the idea of transcendent holiness. I remind us of the old normative way of life – philosophy – that combines both meaning and value on the one hand, and truth and reality, on the other; a life of seeking transcendent holiness with the awareness that it will never be revealed once and for all.

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