

## THE IMPACT OF FAITH ON RELATIONAL THOUGHT

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It is easy to think of possible tensions between one's faith and academic reality, but I wish to address here a positive relation, namely, the fact that the academy is itself indebted to religious faith. In particular, I want to point to the impact of Jewish and Christian traditions on a phase of thought that began at the end of the nineteenth century. A significant theme of this thinking was the centrality of relations. In fact, in my opinion, relational theory represented the most important intellectual contribution of that period. It included two major lines, both of which will now be described.

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

A significant feature of this kind of logic was that it involved both particularity and generality. In doing so, it differed from earlier systems of logic.<sup>1</sup> Aristotelian logic had employed classes (general categories in reality) as its fundamental notion. The particularist logic that began at the end of the Middle Ages instead treated only particulars as "real," while general ideas were considered to represent thoughts about reality but not reality itself. (In fact, even De Morgan still thought of logic in terms of a mental, "psychological," process and was criticized by Peirce for that in 1865.)<sup>2</sup> Differently, relational logic represented both particularity and generality as "real," or at

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<sup>1</sup> For histories of logic see I. M. Bocheński, *A History of Formal Logic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), and William and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> *Writings of Charles S. Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982-), I, 164.

least as “possible” even apart from thought. It did so in the following way: items that enter into relations are particular, but relations as such are general, for any relation can in principle be repeated.<sup>3</sup> Since a characteristic feature of this new logic was the use of symbols, the difference between particular and general elements could be seen graphically; in a widely current version, general terms were indicated by capital letters, while particulars were represented by small letters.

For Peirce, the combination of particular and general elements in logic was significant, for he was convinced that particularism (called “nominalism,” because it considered general terms to be merely “names,” or thoughts) was deeply flawed. Peirce came to this conviction on two grounds. One ground was social. Specifically, he participated in the critique of individualism that emerged in his time, and accordingly emphasized “COMMUNITY.”<sup>4</sup> Another ground was theoretical in character; it had a religious dimension.

These two grounds were intertwined and were present together in the outlook of Melusina Fay, a religious feminist who was Peirce’s first wife and had a considerable influence on his thought.<sup>5</sup> During their courtship in 1861, the two had intellectual exchanges, as is indicated by the fact that he dedicated several unpublished writings to her.<sup>6</sup> Before they married in 1862, he moved from his previous Unitarianism toward her Trinitarian position. The idea of the Trinity assumes, of course, that relations are basic to reality. Fay had connected this feature with a social outlook. Already in 1859, she presented a feminist interpretation of Trinitarian doctrine, according to which the Holy Spirit is feminine. During her marriage, she advocated and for a while practiced (with the

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<sup>3</sup> More specifically, general terms could be described either as “relations” or as “properties,” but these two descriptions were convertible into each other. That is, properties could be conceptualized as “functions” (i.e. relations) and relations could be treated as properties of pairs, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Capitalization by Peirce, *Writings*, II, 239.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Norma Pereira Atkinson, *An Examination of the Life and Thought of Zina Fay Peirce* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> See Max H. Fisch, “Introduction,” in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, I, xxxi-xxxii.

support of her husband) what was called “cooperative housekeeping,” in which several families share certain activities, including cooking.<sup>7</sup> She was sufficiently prominent to serve as the first president of the Women’s Parliament from 1869-1877.

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

Against this background, we can look at Peirce’s own view. From early on, he had an interest in three-fold structures. This interest may have been fed in part by the appearance of three-fold patterning in Kant’s thought. However, Kant had not presented a good reason why there should be such patterning. Peirce did provide a rationale on the basis of language. Already in 1857 and 1859, while attending college, he had explored

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<sup>7</sup> She wrote on this eventually in *Cooperative Housekeeping* (Boston: Osgood, 1884).

<sup>8</sup> *An Appeal to the People in Behalf of their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1860), 101.

<sup>9</sup> *Scientific Theism* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1885), 114, 205.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt Brace, & Co., 1998), 244.

briefly the role of the three grammatical “persons” (I, thou, it); he pursued this pattern again at somewhat greater length in 1861 while interacting with Melusina.<sup>11</sup>

In 1865, as he focused on the notion of “sign,” which had become important for logic, he described the three grammatical persons in terms of the “three relations” of a symbol.<sup>12</sup> A sign or symbol, however, is different from a sentence, for which the three grammatical “persons” are most obviously relevant. Probably for this reason, Peirce moved in 1866 away from a focus on the three “persons” to a different three-fold structure. In the new analysis, as he presented it with minor variations over the years, “firstness” is the quality to which a symbol refers (this quality may not be actual but represents a possibility and is in this sense general);<sup>13</sup> “secondness” is the phenomenon that an entity refers to something other than itself; and “thirdness” is, as a potential, an interpretant (a responsive event, another sign), for without an interpretation a word has no meaning.<sup>14</sup>

In the lecture series in which he set forth this theory of the symbol, Peirce pointed to the fact that it corresponded with Trinitarian thought, although he knew that the Trinitarian orientation would not be appreciated by his philosophical audience.<sup>15</sup> Later, he argued that “God” as a “name” has no legitimate place in philosophy, but he presented

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<sup>11</sup> *Writings*, I, 4, 8, 15, 45-49, 530.

<sup>12</sup> *Writings*, I, 174.

<sup>13</sup> On “firstness” representing something “general,” see, e.g., Peirce, *Writings*, II, 53 (1867); on “possibility,” cf. II, 52 (1867), and later, e.g., *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), I, § 537; V, § 532.

<sup>14</sup> *Writings*, I, 473-477, and later. It is possible, although far from certain, that Peirce was aware of Augustine’s anticipation of this analysis, for he referred to Augustine’s “logic” in 1865 (*Writings*, I, 163); cf. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 2.1. Gradually, Peirce developed a theory of different kinds of signs, of which symbols are only one, but that does not concern us here.

<sup>15</sup> *Writings*, I, 503.

an argument for the reality of God in a journal devoted to religious thought.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the religious perspective was important for Peirce but was placed into the background.<sup>17</sup>

In the same lecture series, Peirce began to outline a theory of indeterminism. This cohered with his relational outlook. Indeed, relations—if they are real, not merely thought—simultaneously connect and separate, for without a degree of separation there are no entities to enter into a relation.<sup>18</sup> Such a recognition had long been present in Christian discussions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>19</sup> Peirce may not have been aware of these discussions, but he said already in 1861 that the three grammatical persons “cannot be expressed in terms of each other, yet they have a relation to each other.”<sup>20</sup> In 1866, he introduced more specifically the notion of “chance.”<sup>21</sup> This implied that entities are at least partially independent.

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

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<sup>16</sup> See *Collected Papers*, VIII, § 126 (1902); “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” *Hibbert Journal* 7 (1908), 90-112; also, an oration in 1863 (*Writings*, I, 107-114).

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Hookway rightly observed that Peirce’s “metaphysical views were inseparable from his religious outlook” (*Peirce* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985], 276).

<sup>18</sup> Thus, already, Thomas Hill Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), § 28. (Green, like Peirce, had a religious orientation.) Among many later observations along this line, especially noteworthy is that of Julius Schaaf, “Beziehung und Idee,” in *Parusia*, ed. K. Flasch (Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1965), 3-20.

<sup>19</sup> Thus, again, Joseph Ratzinger, *Eine Einführung in das Christentum* (Munich: Kösel), 142-43.

<sup>20</sup> *Writings*, I, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Writings*, I, 417, 421.

<sup>22</sup> *Collected Papers*, I, § 363 (1890).

In any case, it is noteworthy that a relational view of reality, which had been important in theology but had not been well represented in Western philosophy after the Presocratics, arose at the end of the nineteenth century as an explicit way of thinking. In particular, Ockham, an earlier standard bearer of a moderate nominalism, had argued that relations are fundamental within, but not outside of, God.<sup>23</sup> Differently, Peirce and others in his time believed that relations are fundamental everywhere.

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

Such a balance may well be more in line with biblical and most other cultural traditions than was either Platonism or nominalism, which can be thought of as one-sided.<sup>26</sup> Thus one can understand relational theory in part as an acceptance and further development of an old point of view, which had long been side-lined in philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

Still, one can ask, “Which aspect—the social or the intellectual/religious—was primary in bringing about the reorientation?” A possible answer is that, since religious traditions have had a longer life than social organizations, they should be considered to have a long-range impact, while differences in social order have a stronger effect in regard to short-range variations. However, I will leave this issue open and simply point to the fact that there was a change in ethos, which had a religious side.

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

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

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

An important figure in this movement was Hermann Cohen, who favored a kind of socialism that also values individuals, finding in his Jewish tradition such a dual concern. Thus Christianity by no means furnished the only stimulus for relational theory. Especially after retirement from his professorship in philosophy in 1912, Cohen pursued the religious aspect of his thought with a strong emphasis on relationality.<sup>29</sup> However,

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

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

already before then he had dealt with relations between the different “persons” of language. The Other, he said in 1904, is actually the origin of the (first-person) “I” but becomes a “you” in ethics.<sup>30</sup> Poetry, according to what he said in 1912, is more strongly oriented toward the “I” than is ethics, but it, too, requires a “you” more than it requires an “it.”<sup>31</sup>

Cohen’s perspective proved to be very influential. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a Jew who converted to Christianity, applied Cohen’s three-persons approach to literature, psychology, and sociology over a number of years from 1916 on.<sup>32</sup> Even more importantly in the long run, Cohen’s analyses made an impact on Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian Christian, whose work became well-known for its emphasis on literary dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Within the realm of Jewish thought, the three-persons approach was carried further by Cohen’s student Franz Rosenzweig.<sup>34</sup>

A little later than Cohen, although apparently without knowledge of him, a similar but more elaborate analysis was made by the Roman Catholic Ferdinand Ebner. In reflections that began to appear in print during 1921, he connected ethics with the use of “I” correlated with “you.”<sup>35</sup> God, he said, is the absolute “you” to whom a person speaks; above all, God is one who says “you” to the person.<sup>36</sup> Neither “I” nor “God” can thus be properly spoken of in the third person, although it is sometimes necessary to speak of

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<sup>30</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1904), 201-202.

<sup>31</sup> *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1912), II, 23.

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

<sup>33</sup> Specifically, Bakhtin knew Cohen’s aesthetics and ethics, including his discussion of the “I and the other,” as has been recognized.

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

<sup>35</sup> *Schriften* (Munich: Kösel, 1963-65), I, 227-28; II, 25, 79, 93, 133.

<sup>36</sup> *Schriften*, I, 96-97, 233, 248-49; II, 44.

God (improperly) in the third person.<sup>37</sup> God, in other words, is not an object of impersonal knowledge but is present in personal relations.<sup>38</sup>

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

The similarity of Wittgenstein's second major phase of thought, in which he spoke of the difference between "language games" with a special interest in the difference between first- and third-person speech (both being social), to Ebner's view is noteworthy. This similarity can be explained in part on the basis that the two thinkers operated within a common cultural sphere and made reference to many of the same works.<sup>40</sup> In addition, however, the likelihood of a direct connection between them is indicated by the following observations: After Wittgenstein had completed the writing that exhibited his first phase of thought, he received as a gift copies of the journal *Der Brenner*, in which Ebner's work was serialized from 1919 on, prior to its publication as a

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<sup>37</sup> *Schriften*, I, 33, 255-56, 258-59; II, 27, 33, 133.

<sup>38</sup> *Schriften*, II, 23.

<sup>39</sup> In addition to other overviews, see Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to "I and Thou,"* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988). Horwitz's statement that Buber "explicitly denies having been influenced by Cohen" (167), however, is not quite correct, for Buber said only that he did not read Cohen's 1919 work as such until after his own writing on dialogue (Buber, *Werke* [Munich: Kösel, 1962], I, 298); Buber had referred to Cohen (approvingly) already in 1903 and (with moderate appreciation) in 1916 (*Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten* [Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider], I, 211-12, 455-56) and could have been familiar with Cohen's relational leanings already before 1919, even if only through reports by students whom he knew.

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

book, as he mentioned in a letter to Paul Engelmann (5 August 1921). The mere fact that Wittgenstein received this material does not prove that he read it. However, according to one of his posthumously published notes, to say that one can hear God's speech only when one is its addressee represents a "grammatical remark."<sup>41</sup> This note appears to allude to Ebner's declaration that a human being is not primarily an "I," but rather a "you" addressed creatively by God.<sup>42</sup> If Wittgenstein did not himself read Ebner, the substance of his thinking could have been conveyed by Ludwig Hänsel, a close friend of Wittgenstein since about 1918, who was impressed by Ebner's work from its very beginning.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, in his notes, Wittgenstein not only described but also practiced a distinction comparable to Ebner's. Specifically, during 1936 and 1937, he referred (or even spoke) to God under the following two conditions: (1) in those portions of his notes that were written in code, probably symbolizing first-person speech, and (2) with the use of the second person in a wish ("God with you") and in a friendly exhortation ("Think much on God") in letters addressed to Hänsel, especially understandable since Hänsel was religious.<sup>44</sup> Reflections *about* religion and ethics appeared then, and at other times, in the third person.

Such a distinction between first- and second-person speech, on the one hand, and third-person speech, on the other, may shed some light on the process of secularization,

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<sup>41</sup> Zettel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 124.

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

<sup>43</sup> See *Ludwig Hänsel and Ludwig Wittgenstein: Eine Freundschaft* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1994), 9, 11.

<sup>44</sup> See especially *Denkbewegungen* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1997), 68-103 (English: *Public and Private Occasions* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003]); *Ludwig Hänsel and Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 144-45. It should be clear that such statements do not imply a belief that "God exists," for that would be a third-person expression.

insofar as that occurred. A partial withdrawal of religious speech from the academic realm, as evidenced already in the work of Peirce, can be supported by this distinction.

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

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

Of course, twentieth-century culture by no means fully reflected religious tradition and this fact can in many ways be welcomed. Marxism (with a one-sided and highly aggressive social orientation), Nietzscheanism (radicalizing nominalism and opposing social democracy and feminism), and capitalism (continuing a version of nominalism, although capitalism was modified) had features that were incompatible with almost all religious viewpoints and which I, too, find objectionable. In addition, however, there were ideals of the culture—present perhaps especially in the academy—with which I agree, in contradistinction to traditional religion. Sexual equality represents one such issue. Although feminism indeed can draw on some religious themes, it represents a break with their past. Sexual equality has not been stressed in past secular thought any more than in past religion, but secular thought may well be less tradition-bound in this and in other respects. Therein lies both its danger and its promise.

The implication of this analysis can be stated in terms of the idea of “freedom,” which has been highlighted in the discussion of which the present essay is a part. To the ideal of negative freedom, which was dominant in the nominalist tradition, relational thought added the ideal of “positive” freedom, which emphasizes community. A

combination of the two freedoms can be called “interactive.” Interactive freedom is appropriate for relations between faith and the academy. Faith and the academy indeed cannot and should not be identified, but they can engage in a constructive interchange, as has, in fact, already taken place.