

BOOK REVIEWS

Review Articles

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Louis Dupré,

Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of Inner Life
New York: Seabury Press, 1976.

This is a remarkable book, concentrating as it does, on the meaning and function of transcendence in understanding the authentic self of man. The problem we face today is that even a man-oriented civilization like that of the West is too preoccupied with the physical environment to pay any attention to the inner self of man with which religions are concerned. The author finds the basic reason for this loss of self in "the objectivist naturalist attitude" which Husserl in his last years called "the original sin for which the West was being driven into cultural exile." This objectivism which started with the search of the Greeks for the *physis*, the intrinsic nature of things, has led to an absence of transcendence. The Christian faith and mystical subjectivism was not able to prevent the inevitable slide into objectivism and the present crisis. Even Descartes, Kant and the German Romantics who emphasized the subject over against the object, were not able to overcome the objectivist attitude, since "Kant's subject never exceeded the status of a principle that constitutes objective intelligibility but remains itself unknowable."

According to Dupré, only Husserl and Heidegger recognized the need to give the subject a certain content and thus overcome the objectivist prejudice. Though Marx, Freud and Nietzsche criticized the consequences of objectivism, alienation and nihilism, they did not question the basic assumptions of objectivism "the view of man essentially as an objectifying being" and "the objective value system upon which our civilization is built." (pp. 10. 11). Though Nietzsche established a clear connection between the devaluation of values and the loss of transcendence, he excludes the very possibility of transcendence by equating being with value and reducing the ground of reality to the sum of separate entities. According to Dupré, even in the heart of Christian culture, in spite of faith, expressions such as 'first cause' and 'supreme value' reveal a fundamentally objectivist attitude. "What is needed is a conversion to an attitude in which existing is more than taking,

acting more than making, meaning more than function—an attitude in which there is enough leisure for wonder and enough detachment for transcendence.” The question of actual faith is entirely secondary to the recovery of freedom by detachment from the purely objective.” (p. 17)

Encounter with transcendence according to ethnologists like Durkheim and Mauss and religious phenomenologists like Otto, Van der Leeuw and Eliade has been expressed in the past in the symbolic complex of the sacred. But Dupré questions the crucial role of the concept of the sacred whether it be in the primitive or in the contemporary mentality. It is too general and vague a concept to be applied to the direct and immediate experience of transcendence. In several religions the divine is beyond the sacred. Only in the Biblical perspective is the sacred totally identical with God, the wholly other. In most religious cultures the sacred is something below the divine: “that which encompasses all human experience and gives them their ultimate integration.” (p. 22) The sacred, supposed to be manifested by the religious awe and irresistible attraction, is unfamiliar to modern man. Art, science, philosophy and morality no longer look to religion for support. Even the so-called return to the sacred is merely “a more radical effort to be secular by expanding the immanent world-view so as to include even the religious experience.” (p. 25). Hence Dupré suggests that we must not tie transcendence to the much more particular category of the sacred.

Similarly, traditional faiths making global claims but forming “marginal communities issuing requirements which their members can fulfil on a part-time basis” (p. 27) cannot stand today for transcendence. In this secularised situation, where the whole process of naming and holding the sacred is demoted to a secondary role, the focal point of transcendence is the decision of the individual whose “initial contact with transcendence occurs in an inner self that is neither sacred nor profane.” (p. 29) This inner experience decides what outer symbols will be accepted.

Self is the centre of transcendence because it transcends its striving as well as achievements. Self goes beyond the individual, which has its most important point on the day of its birth, while for Self the day of death of the individual is “the secret birthday”. Person includes both individual and self, but primarily emphasizes the dynamically evolving substantial aspect, while self “refers to a subjective mode of being to which the category of substance hardly applies at all.” (p. 32) Self is the subjective core of the person

and that is what makes man the wonder of wonders and provides him with a criterion of good life above that of the approval of the community. Kant recognized it as the principle constitutive of objectivity. Schleiermacher found the principle of transcendence in the self's feeling of absolute dependence. Kierkegaard conceived the self as choice which included the acceptance of the circumstance in which one chooses; to refuse to choose was a refusal to be oneself. In repentance, where one rejects one's own failure as self-betrayal and in resignation in which one enters into the very immanence of self-realization through the obedience of religious abandon, Kierkegaard found the ultimate ethical expression. The culmination comes in the suspension of the ethical, by which "the self abandons its own immanence and yields to transcendence." (p. 36) Dupré goes on to show that not only in the awareness of failure, but also as Kant has shown, in the need for a transcendental foundation for moral law, one reaches the religious level, where one is never satisfied with a mere code of conduct, but "attempts to symbolize his response to a transcendent calling in ever new ways." The most properly religious precepts are not precepts at all, but "ideals" or "counsels", leaving the voluntary character intact. (p. 39)

The human self manifests this transcendence not only in the self-awareness of a normal person but even in the condition of mental illness in which, to the extent a patient remains aware of his predicament, he may be in a better position to gain authentic selfhood than normal people, especially when normality is equated with hiding the inner self. Mental suffering is the most acute form of suffering, and only in suffering one experiences the need for salvation. Hence religion itself is not an escape from reality but rather the positive vision in which suffering appears necessary for spiritual growth. On the other hand, against the common opinion, Dupré holds that art, even religious art, does not necessarily imply transcendence. The religious aspect of art, does not necessarily imply transcendence. The religious aspects of art are so much tied up with special cultural contexts that no single trait may be designated as specifically religious. Nay, sometimes the very notion of absolute transcendence has led to iconoclastic movements. This is especially true about contemporary art which merely articulates modern man's feeling toward the world, his loneliness and despair without any concern for the transcendent.

The self is also the point in which man transcends the limitations of space and time and can maintain an immortal identity

in eternity. Leaving aside the question of the self's intimate relation to this particular body for its continued identity, it is clear that the reflective self alone can overcome the restrictions of ordinary consciousness, its variety and discontinuity. In the final chapter of the book, Prof. Dupré appeals to the experience of the mystics to establish a concept of selfhood which fundamentally differs from the one prevailing in common states of consciousness: "To the religious mind the soul is always more than it is: it transcends itself... This transcendence becomes manifest in the mind's self-understanding when the ordinary consciousness starts loosening its grip. At this point, religious man claims, we enter the sanctuary where God and the soul touch." (p. 93). This experience of God at the deepest centre of one's self is a common phenomenon both in primitive religions and in the more advanced ones. Basing himself on the statements of the mystics, Dupré concludes as their ultimate message that "the self is essentially more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is immanent to itself, and that a total failure on the mind's part to realize this transcendence reduces the self to less than itself." (p. 104).

After reading this significant book, full of metaphysical and religious insights, one is left asking what the central thesis of the book is. As the author admits in the preface, no attempt is made to present "a comprehensive theory of transcendent selfhood." Evidently, the claim is not made that the human self is spontaneously aware of its transcendental reality, or of its insufficiency and dependence on a transcendent Being. Such an awareness can be reached only through philosophical or religious interpretations. All that seems to be claimed is that self provides a privileged and unique point of experience for arriving through interpretation at a level of reality that transcends space and time and their limitations. Not every experience of self is helpful: idea of the sacred with its awesomeness and fascination for the self is not transcendent enough; experience of the self in art is not by itself transcendent; an objectivist view is not transcendent. Self that goes beyond achievement and ethics in repentance and resignation is transcendent. The sick self that is stuck in neurosis and schizophrenia, provided it is aware of its condition, is transcendent. The self that craves for redemption from time is transcendent. The mystical experience is transcendent. But, if transcendence is not self-evident and has to be discovered through interpretation, why make the difference? Is not a blade of grass and grain of sand rooted in and revelative of the transcendent just like the finite human self?

Perhaps the most ambiguous term in the whole book is 'transcendent' itself. No effort is made to explain its meaning. It can, depending on the context, mean (1) the reality which is beyond all particularity and limitation, God, or, (2) that which points by itself to a level of reality that goes beyond all time-space limitations, or, (3) even the different modes, aspects and approaches through which one can interpretatively go from the particular to the beyond. Prof. Dupré's preference for the self as the point of transcendence seems to lie in the third meaning, and he has to indicate in what way the self has its privileged position for going beyond itself than any other finite reality.

In philosophical traditions of the world, transcendence has been arrived at through all the four causes of a thing, formal, efficient, final and material. The Greeks seem to have shown preference for the formal cause. For Plato any finite thing points to the Idea, ultimately the Good and the Beautiful for its transcendental reality. Aristotle conceived it as the essence and the transcendent for him was the Immovable Mover who moves everything by his being the object of their knowledge and love. For Plotinus the transcendent was the One, to which no one could add any specification. Even the so-called objectivist view of the Scholastics was not without transcendence. But they gave priority to the efficient cause which gives existence to the effect as something other and distinct from the cause. They, however, did not put a plus between the finite world and the infinite "first cause". They proceeded on the assumption that the cause as cause included the effect. For Aristotelian teleology and the contemporary philosophy of hope, the transcendent is the infinite and final goal to be realized. In these three directions of causality, the formal, the efficient and the final, the human self has no privileged position in revealing the transcendent. Any finite thing and any experience point to the infinite reality.

The Hindu, the Buddhist and to a certain extent the Chinese, showed a preference for the material cause or maternal principle in their search for the transcendent. For the Chinese it was the infinite and empty nature, the womb of all possibles. For the Buddhists the authentic and transcendent condition of reality is termed emptiness or *nirvāna* and is attained only by denying all that can be conceived and affirmed by the mind. The Hindus gave a positive meaning to that transcendent maternal principle. On the empirical level, it is the hidden force that controls the evolution of things; on the psychological level, it is the pure spiritual subject in constant tension with the material principle the source of

all evolution; on the metaphysical plane it is the pure Self, the subject.

Western tradition never made any serious effort to develop the concept of transcendence in line with the material or maternal cause. Hence the subject was treated as an object among its own objects. Even when Husserl and Heidegger endeavoured to take the subject in its own right and give it content, they filled it with decision-making will or with self-projecting existence. For, as Dupré rightly admits, the West was too much taken up with the environment and the world of objects to be concerned with the reality of the subject. It takes the subject for granted very much like the glasses we wear.

Dupré is trying to arrive at the transcendent by way of the subject and that is where the self has a privileged position. But by his background and formation he seems to be handicapped in this task. He does not claim any extensive acquaintance with Eastern thought and its basic insights either. The basic mistake of objectivism is not in the intentional constitution of the object, but in its failure to note that by thus constituting the object's intelligibility the subject is meeting it on a higher level of subjectivity. Only on the level of a transcendent subjectivity can a thing become an object to a subject. This is clear in the self-understanding of a subject. To use certain analogies familiar to Eastern thought, the space in an empty glass will understand itself (if it had intelligence to do so) not by absolutizing the walls of the glass, but by breaking down the walls and seeing its unity with the space outside. The reflected moons on the moving billows will not understand their identity by focusing attention on the waters they illuminate, but only by looking away from the sea upwards to the real moon as their ground and source. An objectivist is like a person who goes to the sea-shore and concentrates his attention on the dimensions of each drop in the ocean. But if a drop of water wanted to find out its authenticity it would ignore its limitations and see the whole ocean within itself.

Hence, there is an intimate relation between transcendence and immanence. Prof. Dupré often opposes transcendence to immanence, meaning by the latter term, that which lies within the finite self. But, something cannot be really transcendent unless it were also immanent and embraced the whole reality of the finite from within. Otherwise it will be just another finite by the side of the finite. Hence, in all forms of causality, immanence is the true test of transcendence. That a higher subject and a limitless light can grasp and illumine me from within myself, "*intimius*

intimo meo'' , without itself being bound by my limitations is the highest experience of transcendence. Prof. Dupré's negative criticism of art regarding its transcendental significance may be valid only in as far as it concerns superficial art, which tries to speak the language of the age and express the trivial feelings picked up on the street. But the real artist who agonizes to express his deepest experience of form is definitely bearing witness to the immanence of the transcendent form in finite nature.

The attitude and specific relationship to the Transcendent also may be different according to the nature of the causal approach one uses. In the perspective of formal causality the Transcendent is the supreme, the inimitable and unduplicatable One. For the Judeo-Christian tradition which emphasized efficient causality, the transcendent is the Creator and Father of all beings who stands apart from them all as the wholly Other. But in the Eastern approach through the self by way of material causality, the relation is one of identity. It is the relation of reflection to reality, which is not one of a potency to an act but of a limited perfection to its fullness. The transcendence is not experienced as another self, but as the Self of one's own self. That is why Vedantic thinkers always defined man-God relation in terms of identity or non-dualism. They were able to express that experience in the classical statement, *Aham Brahmasmi*, my Self is God, without falling into pantheism.

In the approach to the transcendent, an appeal to the experience of mystics is of dubious value. If as Dupré argues the experience of the numinous is common for the mystics as well as the followers of primitive religion we are dealing with an experience of transcendence available to every thinking person. Indiscriminate use of the term mystic helps only to confuse the issues. Describing Eastern thought in general as mystical indicates only a lack of familiarity with the structure and process of Eastern thinking and to the extent it implies that Eastern thought is not philosophical it indicates a very narrow conception of philosophy itself. Realization of the transcendent in and through one's own intimate self is an experience available to all, and it is both philosophical and religious at the same time.

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