A Brief Response to “Between Identity and Truth”

Terryl Givens

University of Richmond

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Cover Page Footnote
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TERRYL GIVENS
University of Richmond

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The Catholic figure most associated with Mauro Properzi’s important project of dignifying the affective realm vis-à-vis the rational and making it the subject of a rigorous phenomenological investigation is Dietrich von Hildebrand. Von Hildebrand’s (2012) thesis is that “the heart [by the heart, he means, as did Pascal, the seat of intuitive knowledge] has not been given a real place in philosophy” (p. 135). “Whereas the intellect and the will have been made the object of searching analysis,” he continues, “the phenomenon of the heart has been largely neglected. And whenever it has been analyzed, the heart has never been given a standing comparable to that of the intellect and the will.” This is both ironic and illogical, Hildebrand points out, for the following reason. The very roots of the Western philosophical tradition esteem human happiness as the highest good. But human happiness is the domain of the heart, not the rational faculty. We explicitly place the highest valuation upon a desired outcome—an affect-laden condition—that is beyond the grasp or the achievement of logic or intellect alone. And yet along the path that leads there, we place far more confidence in cool rationality than in that same human heart with its moral intuitions, its world-transforming compassion and kindness, its intimations of the sacred, and what the poet John Keats (1848) called its heroic “straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness” (pp. 176–177).

Properzi’s noting of this as the “age of feeling” implicitly foregrounds the same irony observed by Hildebrand, one of particular interest to Latter-day Saints caught as either participants in or bystanders to the great realignments of faith commitments occurring at this particular moment in the Church’s history. Properzi notes that increased emotionalism betokens no accompanying increase of what the

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apostle Paul called “natural affection” in our commu-
nal existence. And he—rightly I think—posits ill-
founded, secular conceptualizations of emotion as
preconditioning the contemporary trends we could
characterize as a facile and sterile confounding of
Christian charity (and kindred affects) with simple
emotional self-indulgence.

Properzi urges that a fruitful theology of emotion
would attend to inspired frames pertaining to epistemol-
yogy, identity, and teleology. These are apt correctives. I
will add just a few of my own observations and personal
concerns to second and to expand his thesis.

Epistemology

The strength of personal emotion is not an index
of truth value, or as he puts it, “emotions are not in-
dependent measures of truth” (p. 5). That seems like
a mundane enough observation, except that we are
at a cultural moment when that seems to be an im-
PLICIT assumption behind heated discourse over vexed
issues in and outside the Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints. When emotional truth becomes a
substitute for objective realities, we are all in danger.
As von Hildebrand (2012) wrote with provocative
insight: “what matters is not the question, ‘Do we feel
happiness?’ but rather ‘Is the objective situation such
that we have reason to be happy?’” (p. 47).

At the same time, error can lie in the opposite di-
rection as well. This is also a generation steeped in
scientism, prey to the delusion that science or logic
or rationality can be self-authenticating foundations.
Emotionality itself is not a secure foundation for a
moral or religious life either. But if by “the heart” we
mean, as Pascal did, the seat of intuitive knowledge,
then it is crucial that we validate and dignify those in-
timations that as Latter-day Saints we associate with
heavenly modes of communication.

Identity

The mania for identity formation and self-empow-
erment is rife with fallacious reasoning and perilous
paths. The theology of human identity is not yet fully
and perfectly developed in Latter-day Saint thought,
and we do not know as much as we seem to think we
do in this regard. The question that should give more
pause in our discourse is this: what “I” is the I that will
pass through the veil when we have shuffled off this
mortal coil? We know that “the same spirit” possessing
our bodies at our death will “possess [our] body in that
eternal world” (Alma 34:34, The Book of Mormon).
But what will that “spirit” entail? Our brain chemistry?
Our genetic inheritance? Our hormones and nervous
system? What elements of our bodily incarnation con-
stitute our eternal identity? Once again, I turn to Hil-
debrand for some rich suggestions of a way forward.
The hot-tempered flare-up we experience in traffic is
not an emotion of the same class as the emotion I feel
when I listen to St. Matthew’s Passion on the way to a
temple session. Not because one is bad and one good
but because one seems to pertain to a more bodily self
than the other. And yet, that way too has its dangers,
since we believe bodily incarnation is a step toward
godhood, not away. I have more questions that urge
cautions than knowledge that gives direction when I
ponder the constituting of my own identity and the
role emotion has there.

Teleology

I am happy to see Properzi raise the question of hu-
man teleology. It is common to aver that an “is” can
never be made into an “ought,” especially regarding
challenges conventional wisdom, declaring that “to say
what someone ought to do is at one and the same time
to say what course of action will in these circumstanc-
es as a matter of fact lead toward a man’s true end” (pp.
52–53). MacIntyre points out that consensus about
such a “true end” was not historically a religious ques-
tion, but a matter of philosophical concord. We are
unlikely to find such a consensus today, philosophical
or otherwise. But if we could at least inject into cur-
rent controversies the question “what is most condu-
cive to human thriving?” we would have elevated the
conversation.

In sum, Properzi’s gesture toward “a Christ-centered
approach to the emotions” is a sophisticated attempt
to think through the intersections of Restoration-
truth therapeutic understanding of a most conten-
tious and mysterious realm of human nature. This is
precisely the integrative type of disciple-scholarship
that can enrich our own faith commitments while we
strive to be leaven in the world.
References

