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A Brief Response to “Between Identity and Truth”

Cover Page Footnote

Terryl Givens is Professor of Literature and Religion and holds the Jabez A. Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond.

A Brief Response to “Between Identity and Truth”

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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 communal 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 epistemology, 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 independent 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 implicit 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 direction 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 intimations that as Latter-day Saints we associate with heavenly modes of communication.

IDENTITY

The mania for identity formation and self-empowerment 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 constitute our eternal identity? Once again, I turn to Hildebrand 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 caution 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 human teleology. It is common to aver that an “is” can never be made into an “ought,” especially regarding matters of human morality. Alisdair MacIntyre (2007) 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 circumstances 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 question, 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 current controversies the question “what is most conducive 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 contentious 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.

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