

**MYSELF AS
ANOTHER**

MYSELF AS ANOTHER

A Journey to the Heart of
Who We Are

John McNerney

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Foreword

Reading *Myself as Another* reminded me of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, fifteen beautiful movements, each dedicated to one of his friends—the first to his wife, Caroline, the last to himself. He dedicated the *Variations* to “my friends pictured within.” And you can feel that each of John McNerney's eighteen brief explorations here have become his “friends pictured within.” Readers of this book, I think, will find its subjects become our friends too. Befriended by such luminous friends, we could become better friends to ourselves and to others.

Again and again, as I listened to John's “variations,” they brought me to the inner life of some of the more knotty people here—a Ludwig Wittgenstein or a Jacques Derrida, for example. By getting to the heart of each one, John made even these complicated persons “others” unrevealed to me in my previous readings of them.

Seven are Jewish, three Protestant, and others Catholic—but each comes across as a brother or sister united by their discovery of their “who” in their reaching out to “you.” For many of the twentieth-century “variations,” the historical backdrop to their exploration was the totalitarian canceling, the murder of millions of human beings who were mere “its” for the Nazis. Victor Klemperer (1881–1960), a German scholar, describes the gradual narrowing of his world during 1930s Dresden in his diaries, *I Shall Bear Witness* and *To the Bitter End*. As Jewish, he had to leave his job as a professor of Romance languages, then lose his car, his bicycle, his apartment, and even his pet cat, only escaping during the Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945. But he and his non-Jewish wife's love for each other overcame the lethal hatred of the regime, and his writings continue to bear witness to the indestructibility of who they were.

Elgar never really explained the “enigma”—maybe it was some concealed leitmotiv of his *Variations*. But a few words may be offered as a help to unpacking the underlying common thread of John’s “variations.” To do that, I will follow the steps of the Ukrainian-born Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (1878–1965). According to his biographer, Maurice Friedman, “the decisive experience of Martin Buber’s life” was what Buber later came to describe as the “mismatching” between himself and his mother, who abandoned her family when he was four. Speaking on the balcony around his home near Lvov at that time, a little girl of only a few years older said to him, “No, she will never come back.” Many years later, Buber wrote, “I suspect that all that I have learned in the course of my life about genuine meeting [encounter] had its first origin in that hour on the balcony.”¹

To lead into what became the focus of his work, let us speak of three ways I can relate to another person. There is the relationship I can have with any crowd of people—on the street, in a shop, fellow-travelers on a plane—where I relate to “them” and “they.” There are the various role-relationships I can have, as a student with a teacher, a customer with a shop-assistant, a patient with a doctor: each recognizes the other within more or less clearly marked-out limits.

But if we turn to the central theme of Buber’s 1923 study, *I and Thou*, we find how he articulates another kind of relationship, where I am relating to another not as an anonymous one of a crowd, nor in terms of a particular task, but as a person, as who he or she is. It is this kind of relationship that Buber wrote of as an I/Thou relationship. Buber tells us that:

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing, there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only

through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but they must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I can take out from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do he ceases to be *Thou*. And just as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, sacrifice not in space but space in sacrifice, and to reverse the relation is to abolish the reality, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I do not meet with him [primarily] at some time or place or other.

The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. . . . I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.²

In 1953, the writer Aubrey Hodes met Buber in Jerusalem, and told him of his difficulties with a mentally sick relation. Buber

spoke of my involvement with my relative's illness as one of the crucial human encounters. . . . Her illness, he said, had a hidden significance for my own life. Only I could discover the meaning it held for me. But in order to do so I had to check my unconscious view of her as a person who was being drained of her human shape and becoming a thing, an object. I had to penetrate through the skin of her sickness to the basic unchanged humanity, enter her world, but with understanding, not with pity, concerning myself directly with her recovery. And, in doing so, I might discover the deeper meaning of my existence and my capacity for love. Otherwise I would not be able to

reach her, and would not be able to unlock the riddle of my responsibility towards her.

For I had a responsibility, he said. Love was responsibility for the loved person by the one who loved. Only by accepting this responsibility could I affirm my real self, my authentic personality. The situation called upon me to make a concrete commitment, to realize my responsibility in action—to see her as a single, unique, distressed individual, not just one of a depersonalized throng of mental patients.³

So when I refuse to accept any so-called I/They or I/You relation as enough, there is a challenge to widen them out to the scope of the I/Thou relation. I must do all I can to personalize even apparently transient encounters with others; otherwise, I will have failed the core topic of this book, which is that each other is a part of myself and I a part of them. All of John's protagonists overcome the challenge each other poses to them in time and space, and somehow, transcending those limits of time and space, become the other and thus become themselves.

In his chapter on "The Neighbor," in *Person and Act*, Karol Wojtyła enriched the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's focus on the "Other," and the cumulative effect of the "variations" here is that John's *Myself as Another* draws us into a shared we-communion.⁴ Further, several of the partners in dialogue with us in this study are quite clear that underlying the I/Thou relationship between myself and the Other, is a deeper relationship each of us has, whether aware of it or not, with the eternal Thou. As Edith Stein put it in her *Finite and Eternal Being* (1936), the riddle of the I remains because "I am not by myself (not a being *a se* and *per se*), and by myself I am nothing; at every moment I find myself face to face with nothingness, and from moment to moment I must be endowed and re-endowed with being.

And yet this empty existence that I am is *being*, and at every moment I am in touch with the fulness of being.”⁵

So each person is fundamentally a You-for-God, a Thou for the divine I AM. Not only is the Other more than an Other: he or she is my neighbor. And in some way, God too enters into our space-time transcending dialogue as a divine partner in eternity. The more we allow the “variations” contained in *Myself as Another* to interact with our own open quest for relationship, the more the “enigma” behind them all will reveal itself as Love.

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Introduction: The Search for *Who I Am*

In today's world, there is no doubting the importance of the question we pose throughout this book, that is, asking *who* we are as human persons. Indeed, the question "who am I?" has multidimensional implications on the individual, spiritual, economic, and political levels.¹ Therefore it is, as St Augustine says, an issue and question "ancient and so new."² Plato, in the *Gorgias*, explains to Chaerephon that if he really wants to know what Gorgias's art [skill] is, then ask him "*who he is*" [447d, my emphasis]. In the *Republic*, we also see Plato outline how the *polis* (political reality) is the human being written large. In other words, it is an expression of *who* we are as human beings.

In Mark's Gospel, we similarly see the identity question clearly emerging. As Jesus walks north toward Caesarea Philippi, we hear him ask his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:27–30). Consequently, when we ask "Who am I?" it sets off a whole symphony of explorations that equally reverberate and remain unfinished for each one of us. If the truth be told, it is a never-ending story retelling itself anew in our own lives. It is surely true to say that only persons *know* persons. But we can easily "unbecome" who we are, and we see this spelled out in some of the chapters of *Myself as Another*, where the experiences of alienation undergone in the concentration camps are recounted and philosophically reflected upon. These shed light upon the horrendous ideological blackspots in our history that blinded us from the truth of *who* we are.

In the *Confessions*, St Augustine discovers a need to move beyond his own limitations and inadequacies if he is

going to come to terms with knowing who he is as a human being. Following the death of his dear friend Nebridius, he describes how “black grief closed my heart.” He says, “My eyes sought him everywhere, but he was missing.” Augustine observes, “*I had become a great enigma to myself, and I questioned my soul.*” In other words, he “became a question to himself” because of the loss of his friend, an experience that was a huge suffering for him. During this time, Augustine describes his own fear of death, but he comes to the insight that “Woe to the madness which thinks to cherish human beings as though more than human.” He confesses, “I should have lifted . . . [my soul] up to you, Lord.”³ In other words, Augustine must “exit” himself in order to understand his own uniqueness as a human being. The question posed in *Myself as Another*, in the last analysis, can only be addressed by “going beyond” ourselves. The issue of *who I am* involves us in the discovery that I can speak of myself in terms of “another” who is “other” than myself.

Undoubtedly, the question of our identity as persons is, as we have said, a “many-layered” reality and actually resists “any easy synthesis.”⁴ Thomas Aquinas even said, “No philosopher has ever been able to grasp the being of a single fly.”⁵ Indeed, in “What is it like to be a bat?” the philosopher Thomas Nagel poses a somewhat similar dilemma in terms of other “beings” and their knowability by us. He asks, for example, how can we ever get to “the inner life of the bat from our own case.” He is not just concerned with “what would it be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves.” Nagel’s question is much deeper; it is to know “What is it like for a *bat* to be a bat.”⁶ Actually, although he does not explicitly say so, in asking “what is it like to be. . .?” Nagel is already revealing something of our uniqueness as human beings. It is *we* as persons who have this unique capacity to put ourselves in the place of the “other” and ask, “what is it like to be. . .?” We can pose these kinds of questions because we

actually “know what it is like to be us.”⁷ But there again, in our world, there is even perplexity and debate in admitting that we have this in common. We can often act as if we are islands entirely unto ourselves, which is indeed very far from the poet John Donne’s adage that “no man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”⁸ In the face of such challenges to the question of *who* we are, we can easily become paralyzed by the demands of the task. Actually, Meno in Plato’s dialogue complains how Socrates is like “the flat sting ray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes in contact with it, it numbs him.” But Socrates says that he is not interested just in confounding other people for the sake of it. “The truth,” he says, is that he infects them “with the perplexity” he experiences in himself. He is, in fact, ready to carry out “a joint investigation and inquiry,” and this is also the intention of *Myself as Another*.⁹

Doubtless, *who* we are is guarded by profound mystery pervaded often by the presence of absence. And while we might know and recognize each other as persons we can never reach “any definitive or exhaustive understanding” of this reality.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Nagel’s example of a person asking, “What is it like to be a bat?” shows how human beings can set themselves aside in trying to understand another being. Because of this, we can say that human beings are, in fact, “beyond being” as such.¹¹ They are essentially “self-transcenders,” meaning that they go beyond themselves and consequently create relationships with others. Indeed, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas described this reality when he said that the unique characteristic of human beings is how they live the “priority of the other.”¹² And so, to do this, you must forget yourself. Forget in order to be *who* you are. Jesus suggests this personalistic perspective when he recommends “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25).

In fact, as we will see clearly outlined in this book, “person means relation.”¹³ Humans are “*relaters*.” As Martin Buber said, “in the beginning is relation.”¹⁴ So too, the Scottish personalist philosopher John Macmurray describes how human beings’ proper existence is “as a community of persons in relation.” In fact, “The personal relations of persons is constitutive of personal existence,” which brings us beyond any merely individualistic or cognitional characterization of the experience of personhood.¹⁵ Indeed this points to a person’s total “uniqueness, incomparability, and therefore, nonrepeatability,” which can easily be occluded and forgotten about within our present culture.¹⁶ Of course, we constantly run the risk of being “impersonal,” and then the whole experience of depersonalization emerges. But this happens exactly because we are “persons.” We can only give a name to these pulverizing experiences precisely because we are persons.¹⁷

In fact, the reality of *who* we are as persons “involves [the possibility of] its own negation.” We can easily lose the reality of being persons since “only a person can behave impersonally.”¹⁸ In this book, we will hear about people whose lives give witness to the fact that I can only live and be “myself” as “another.” The “mother and child” reality is a good example of this, of how person fundamentally means relation.¹⁹ Human experience is “shared experience . . . a common life . . . a reference to the personal Other.” We exist not as individuals but as “two persons in personal relation . . . in virtue of our relation to one another. The personal is constituted by personal relatedness. The unit of the personal is not the ‘I,’ but the ‘You and I.’”²⁰ This applies equally to unborn children since they are “the purest possibility of the person. Of that which *is* without visible manifestation.”²¹ The “other” defines me as a person, and this is not reducible to tangible components. It is not I who define the “other” but they who define me.

I hope that *Myself as Another* is a development on the Delphic oracle's imperative "know thyself," meaning that we cannot do this unless we realize "that our existence depends upon the existence of the O[o]ther."²² I can know myself only through "another." These short chapters will help us catch a glimpse of our "person-reality," thus unfolding *who* we are. It is all too easy to give in, as Socrates says, to the easy option of skepticism, thinking that since we do not know then we cannot know what we are to look for.²³ This is why in *Myself as Another*, we positively explore and excavate the writings of political leaders, psychiatrists, and philosophers because the subject of personal identity is ever emergent in them, and its reality is disclosed in all of its truth, splendor, and persistent challenges. The search for the meaning of *who* we are is, for example, traced in chapters like the one on the friendship between the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell and the African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. What emerges here is a beautiful narrative on the meaning of "fraternity," showing how O'Connell and Douglas saw each other primarily as "persons," revealing vital, important political implications in these insights. Their story is largely unknown but uncovers how it was through the power of the language of people like the Irishman O'Connell that Douglass discovers the beauty and worth of his own being as a human person.

In the chapter on St John Henry Newman, reflections on *being persons* are given in a discussion of his "heart speaks to heart" perspective in education. His person-centered approach goes beyond purely intellectual concerns. Education is not just the result of syllogistic reasoning, but is effectively about the direct apprehension of reality through the "other." Speaking about the power of personal influence in education, Newman explains how it is "the personal presence of a teacher. . . . It is the living voice, the breathing form, the expressive countenance" that ultimately educates.

In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Ascent*, Newman explains, “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason . . . but by the testimony [of others]. . . . Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us.” He observes how many a person will “live and die upon a dogma” but nobody will be “a martyr for a conclusion . . . no one . . . will die for his own calculations: he dies for realities.”²⁴ Throughout *The Idea of a University*, Newman argues for a “wholeness of view” in terms of education. If we eclipse the person-centric approach to teaching, we can end up trying to understand Hamlet without the Danish Prince. The “truth” of the “person” is not “only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge.”²⁵

In “Søren Kierkegaard: Stages on Life’s Way,” we see how Kierkegaard outlined the fundamental challenge in life as concerning not “what am I to know” but “*what am I to do.*” He says, “The thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I can live or die.*”²⁶ He places the imperative on “living” and actively participating in the stages of life’s way. In “Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Personal Odyssey,” we discover how our use of language uniquely discloses the nature of being human. At the same time, Wittgenstein was always keenly conscious of the “mystery” of *who* we are; indeed, he famously ends his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with the enigmatic words, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”²⁷ For Wittgenstein, “Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.”²⁸ For him, the human being is engaged in action and not an abstraction. Wittgenstein reflects that we should not just assume that the meaningful is limited only to what we speak about or can put into words. Meaning in life reveals itself in living and not—as Newman highlights—in logical analysis. It has not just notional but real existential significance. Wittgenstein was fond of saying that nothing can be its own explanation, which is especially

evident regarding knowing *who* I am as a human person. Its unfolding necessarily involves the “other” and cannot be explained in terms of a “solitary” understanding of ourselves. We can say that “the Self as Subject is the isolated self” and is not *who* I am. Myself “exists only in dynamic relation with the Other.”²⁹ Descartes’s motto was “I think, therefore I am,” but we can assert instead, “Myself as Another, therefore I am.” Wittgenstein is normally known as a philosopher of language. In his early writings, he describes how “language disguises” thought with clothes that do not allow “the form of the body to be recognized.”³⁰ In my view, and I outline this in *Myself as Another*, behind his reflections on language, we can find an emergent “person-centric” perspective. Words may have the meaning we give them, yet it is persons using the words that constitutes their meaning.³¹

This emerges, of course, not by means of any simple analysis based on solipsistic abstraction but very clearly by reflecting on the lived experiences of those who were both victims and survivors of the Holocaust. We focus on these in *Myself as Another*. Such cathartic events are seen through the firsthand stories of Edith Stein, Etty Hillesum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Alfred Delp, SJ, and Viktor Frankl. Stein helps us to ascend the stairway to the “other,” helps us understand that not all problems can be solved, but they can be loved. This is clearly evidenced in her way of life, which was a going beyond herself in living out “empathy” for each one she encountered. She lived out the reality “person means relation.” The chapter “Etty Hillesum: The Girl Who Learned to Kneel” makes it clear that the time for armchair theorizing is over. Through her suffering, she learns of the need for an inner sculpting that gives rebirth to *who* she is as a person. In the chapter “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Journey to the Center of the Person,” we read in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* the words: “Who am I? They mock me, they mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever, I am, You know, O God,



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