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Faculty Psychology in the Holiness Theology of Asa Mahan

Abstract

As America awakened to a greater antislavery consciousness, Asa Mahan, president of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, presented his seminal reflection on Christian Perfection. Mahan offered an unusually precise definition of perfection or holiness. The Oberlin president borrowed from Scottish Common Sense Realism to suggest an understanding of Christian Perfection that was both personally rigorous and socially prophetic. This conception of holiness was also rooted in a commitment to objective truth.

Key Words: holiness, Christian Perfection, realism, Common Sense, faculty psychology

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Introduction

In her riveting narrative of Ohio's Underground Railroad, Ann Hagedorn writes:

Eighteen hundred and thirty-eight was the year of the great escape of the Maryland slave Frederick Augustus Bailey, who, dressed as a sailor back from duty at sea, fled on a train to New York, where he changed his surname to Douglass after a character in the poem *The Lady of the Lake* by Sir Walter Scott. It was the year when Pennsylvania Hall, a large new building in Philadelphia erected for the cause of free speech, including abolitionism, opened with an assemblage of thousands, including William Lloyd Garrison – and closed four days later, after a mob burned it to the ground. And it was the year when the government forced the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole to march a thousand miles along a “trail of tears” out of their indigenous Southeastern U.S. to land west of the Mississippi (Hagedorn 2002: 140).

Eighteen hundred and thirty-eight was also the year that Asa Mahan, antislavery president of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, presented a seminal paper on Christian Perfection. During the evening of September 4, 1838, Mahan addressed the Oberlin “Society of Inquiry” regarding the question, “Is Perfection in Holiness Attainable in this Life?” (Mahan 1838:1). From that point forward, Oberlin's commitment to human rights became inextricable from its promotion of a unique holiness theology. This integrated conviction went far beyond an application of perfectionist ideas to social problems. Mahan articulated a very precise view of Christian holiness. His definition of spiritual maturity demanded an unconditional regard for the intrinsic worth of God and people.

The Case for Egalitarian Realism

Asa Mahan was born on November 9, 1799 in Vernon, New York and thus came of age among a religious populace warmed and worn out by revival fires. His upbringing matched the intensity of New York's “Burned Over District,” and he was graduated first from Hamilton College and then Andover Seminary. In 1831 Mahan accepted the pastorate of Cincinnati's Sixth Presbyterian Church and also took on duties as a trustee of Lane Theological Seminary. His staunch support for the student antislavery movement at Lane brought both condemnation and opportunity (Madden and Hamilton 1982: 26-51). Mahan and many of the Lane abolitionists

eventually moved to Oberlin, Ohio. Here Mahan served as president of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute from 1835-1850.

Asa Mahan did not take up presidential duties without philosophical predisposition. He is best known for uniting a theology of Christian Perfection with uncompromising social principles. However he developed this witness against the backdrop of clear metaphysical and epistemological commitments. From beginning to end Mahan was a realist of the Scottish variety. His two-volume work, *A Critical History of Philosophy* (1883), sorted all cognitive traditions into four basic schools: idealism, materialism, skepticism, and realism. Mahan claimed that idealism reduces external realities to subjective operations of the mind, and materialism subordinates reflection to external objects. Skepticism denies knowledge in either subjective or objective form. Only realism, according to Asa Mahan, offers a perspective that honors both the subject and object in relations of understanding (Momany 2005: 75-84 and Momany 2009: 142-153).

The Scottish philosophy of Common Sense was a form of realism codified and then popularized by Thomas Reid (1710-1796), Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), and others. Most identify its establishment in America with the college presidency of John Witherspoon at Princeton (1768-1794). This perspective claimed for humanity an innate ability to know the world as it really exists. Moreover, realists of the Scottish school held that every human being enjoyed the intellectual capacity to conceptualize both the self and others with remarkable accuracy. Realism was, at once, a straightforward and demonstrably egalitarian viewpoint. It also developed a regional flavor. Idealism held strong appeal in New England. Materialism radiated from Philadelphia to points south. Realism was a quintessentially middle-American philosophy, given distinctive stamp in New Jersey and then sent west.

Asa Mahan's commitment to Scottish Common Sense was typical and is easily overlooked. This form of realism pervaded the frontier expansion of antebellum higher education, so much so that it received the scorn of more imaginative critics. By the twentieth century, Common Sense was judged a superannuated construct possessing little vigor. Even more generous appraisals described it as an artifact of increasingly irrelevant religious traditions. I. Woodbridge Riley's landmark study of American philosophy (1907) considered the role of realism in collegiate life and concluded that it was "an eminently safe philosophy which kept undergraduates locked in so many intellectual dormitories, safe from the

dark speculations of materialism or the beguiling allurements of idealism” (Riley: 477). A nation come of age during the late nineteenth century could not help its urbane desire to cast off shopworn epistemological habits. The Scottish philosophy fell into disrepute.

As the twentieth century dawned more refined intellectuals continued to distance themselves from Scottish Realism. Not until Sydney Ahlstrom’s 1955 article, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology,” did a more charitable evaluation appear (Ahlstrom: 257-272). Ahlstrom was no promoter of naïve realism. Rather, hindsight brought a less disdainful treatment of the movement.

Meanwhile, Common Sense Realism remained a force in certain church circles, especially those attracted to fundamentalism. Mainline and secular academics could appreciate Scottish thought by the 1950s, primarily because they had not defended its assumptions for decades. Evangelical scholars faced a unique challenge. Among conservative Protestants, the assertions of Common Sense were alive, if not exactly well, long into the twentieth century. George Marsden and Mark Noll have charted the tradition’s trajectory among Evangelicalism from the Civil War to World War II (especially Marsden 1980 and Noll 1985: 216-238). Yet they and others have never really made up their minds whether Common Sense proclivities deserve a residual courtesy or outright censure. By the late twentieth century, self-conscious Evangelicals considered Scottish Realism an intellectual embarrassment. However, this belated criticism invites its own critique, especially since the dominant historiography has come from Reformed church historians (Noll 1994: 83-107).

Even before most Protestant conservatives declared independence from their cumbersome legacy, others were prepared to consider realism anew. The publication of a two-volume work, *A History of Philosophy in America*, by Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphey (1977) introduced an authentic appreciation for Scottish Common Sense. Flower and Murphey acknowledged that the philosophy had long been dismissed, but they wielded their impeccable Ivy League credentials (the University of Pennsylvania) to register a series of “character witnesses” for realism (1997, vol. 1: 203). As with the earlier analysis of Ahlstrom, Flower and Murphey did not endorse simplistic theories of knowledge, but they did commend the tradition’s more admirable qualities.

Recent scholarship has noted ways in which Common Sense was employed by the dispossessed and marginalized. Maurice Lee’s fascinating

study of nineteenth-century American literature and its philosophical grounding is one example. Lee compares two of the autobiographies written by Frederick Douglass in 1845 and in 1855. He demonstrates how the latter version incorporates specific themes from the Scottish school that are lacking in the first book (Lee 2005: 93-132). The second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, contains analysis similar to that of Douglass's colleague, James McCune Smith – a Scottish-educated physician of African descent. Smith even wrote the preface to this second autobiography.

By 1855 Douglass insisted upon speaking for himself, not only *about* his experience but most especially about the *meaning* of his experience. Invoking and then deploying peculiarly Scottish notions regarding the mind, Douglass was no longer content to narrate his victimization. He became the proprietor of his reflection. He claimed the power of his consciousness. When white New England abolitionists asked Douglass to present the “facts” of slavery so that they could give it a philosophical critique, he confronted them (Douglass 1994: 367). Douglass eventually moved from the controlling, New England influence of William Lloyd Garrison and to the more independent (and western) environment of Rochester, New York. The realism of Frederick Douglass affirmed his intellectual powers; that of Asa Mahan embraced those excluded by more fashionable philosophies.

Faculty Psychology and the Law of Love

Key to understanding the Scottish tradition is its assertion that all people share a universal human nature. The claim that this nature provided all with direct access to reality might be lampooned by more sophisticated critics, but the implications regarding equality and human rights were compelling. This latter point was not lost on Asa Mahan.

In 1846 Mahan released a most intriguing, eclectic, and evocative article. Writing for *The Oberlin Quarterly Review* he gave his piece the rather nondescript title: “Certain Fundamental Principles, together with their Applications.” This article was really a manifesto of first principles for human rights advocacy, as conceived by the Oberlin president. Front and center stood the statement that all rights and interests of humanity “rest exclusively upon the permanent and changeless laws of human nature itself, upon the elements of humanity common to all individuals of the race” (Mahan 1846: 228). Further on he concluded that this shared identity is so seminal, any acceptance of its violation in a single person degrades our own dignity (Mahan 1846: 229-230).

So just what was the Common Sense anthropology? For this realists turned to the sub-discipline of Mental Philosophy. Accordingly, humans were posited as beings of three distinct faculties: the Intellect (or Intelligence), the Sensibility, and the Will (see especially Meyer 1972). Variations on this triad abounded in antebellum America, and moral philosophers were especially adept at bending these categories to advance their respective theories. Asa Mahan made explicit late in life the viewpoint he carried very early. His 1882 text, *The System of Mental Philosophy*, reiterates a more-or-less typical faculty psychology. Yet one curious fact remains. Mahan is remembered for an emphasis upon volition. His *Mental Philosophy* devotes 185 pages to the Intellect, 74 to the Sensibility, and a mere 13 to the Will (Mahan 1882).

This imbalance is more than rectified by an earlier book devoted exclusively to the Will. His 1845 *Doctrine of the Will* is often cited as a classic refutation of the determinism bequeathed by Jonathan Edwards, and some have concluded that the book trumpets a “decisionistic” ethic (Maddox 1995/1996: 160 and Maddox 1998: 46-47). Regardless, careful readers will detect an impressively subtle and supple faculty psychology.

Mahan granted that the Intellect and the Sensibility are dominated by involuntary characteristics. We know that which we know and feel that which we feel. However, the realm of action has a quality all its own. We are not destined to act in the same way that we know or feel things (Mahan 1845: 124-129). Mahan’s explication of this peculiar freedom is open to debate. Traditional Wesleyans might wonder whether he leans more toward a natural ability than a gracious ability, but it is not quite fair to accuse him of teaching a bootstrap theology. Additionally, if Mahan appears at times to suspect the affective side of things, we might withhold our judgment until hearing him out.

The eleventh chapter of the *Doctrine of the Will* is crucial. Here Mahan addresses the relationship between the Intellect, the Sensibility, and the Will when action is deemed morally right and when it is deemed morally wrong. His remarks are revealing: “In all acts and states morally right, the Will is in harmony with the Intelligence, from respect to moral obligation or duty; and all the desires and propensities, all the impulses of the Sensibility, are held in strict subordination. In all acts morally wrong, the Will is controlled by the Sensibility, irrespective of the dictates of the Intelligence” (Mahan 1845: 156). This statement may lead one to conclude that Mahan was suspicious of all feeling, that he was some kind of rigid

formalist when it came to ethics. Yet the real focus of these remarks is the Intelligence. Consistent with his Common Sense tradition, Mahan trusted humanity's ability to know the world outside, its character, and especially its value. In fact, his reliance on the Intellect, as opposed to the Sensibility, was actually Mahan's way of avoiding self-absorption. His brand of realism was not so much an overconfident theory of knowledge as it was a reminder that we have obligations to those around us, even when we do not *feel* such commitment.

This other-directedness is given more specific articulation when Mahan moves into a discussion of the moral law. Like most he reiterates the teaching of Jesus regarding love of God and neighbor. However Mahan also attempts to place this instruction in philosophical context. He pushed himself to develop a specifically metaphysical, even ontological, principle that captures the essence of love. His expression may not be elegant, but it is comprehensive: "It shall be the serious intention of all moral agents to esteem and treat all persons, interests, and objects according to their perceived intrinsic and relative importance, and out of respect for their intrinsic worth, or in obedience to the idea of duty, or moral obligation" (Mahan 1845: 163). The notion of an intrinsic worth, outside of the self, is the fulcrum around which Mahan's entire ethic turns.

Because God and human beings are of inestimable worth, they command our primary regard. In 1840, Mahan wrote: "If the question be asked, why ought God to be the object of supreme regard? the answer, and the only answer is: His intrinsic excellence is greater than any or all other objects. If it be asked: why ought we to love our neighbor as ourselves, the only answer that can be given is this: his [or her] interest is of the same intrinsic value as ours" (Mahan 1840: 208). Mahan considered this axiology an objective truth.

The Oberlin president's 1848 *Science of Moral Philosophy* clarifies the role of the Intelligence in perceiving intrinsic worth. Here he discusses "subjective servitude" or the captivity to feelings. In contrast, Mahan argues that people are free when they act toward objects according to "their intrinsic and relative importance, as apprehended by the intelligence" (Mahan 1848: 307). If subjective servitude entails being driven by the Sensibility, then an affirmation of intrinsic worth, as known by the Intelligence, promises true liberty.

Mahan's faculty psychology provided much more than a variegated theory of action. It grounded his entire pedagogy. The free and

educated person was characterized by an ordered Intelligence, Sensibility, and Will. Mahan gave intricate expression to this view when he said:

The great want of universal humanity is a knowledge of truth, and a state of feeling and action in harmony with truth manifested to the mind. To this great end all the mental powers are, as designed by the Creator, in fixed correlation. The intellect is adapted to one result – the discovery and retention of truth, and its presentation to the heart. The exclusive sphere of the Will is perpetual action in harmony with truth known, and the continued employment of the intelligence in the discovery of the unknown; while the equally exclusive sphere of the Sensibility is to delight in the former, and through the influence of desire to impel the Will in directing the Intellect in search of the latter. The true idea of education is mental development in fixed correlation to this great end (Mahan 1846: 234-235).

This text invites several observations. Perhaps most important is its holistic character. To consider these words is to ponder an integrated, even symbiotic type of faculty psychology. For instance, the Sensibility seems to receive greater recognition here. Was the college educator simply inconsistent? No. He appreciated the affective more than most contemporary commentators grant, but the delight involved was a joy in the presence of truth. Always the realist, Mahan began and ended his reflection with a respect for the value of things as they are.

Holiness as Delight in Truth

It is perhaps ironic that Mahan titled his groundbreaking 1838 essay, “Is Perfection in Holiness Attainable in this Life?” Much of the ensuing Holiness Movement would be preoccupied with this question. It can be argued that more energy has been expended debating the attainability of Christian perfection than defining what is meant by Christian perfection. The latter issue was exceedingly important to Asa Mahan.

The best known expression of Mahan’s holiness teaching is his 1839 *Scripture Doctrine of Christian Perfection*. The book begins with a chapter on the “nature” of Christian perfection. Mahan links his definition of holiness to a healthy interaction of the mental faculties. Within the sanctified person, the intellectual powers will seek “the truth and will of God, and by what means we may best meet the demands of the great law of love” (Mahan 1839: 14). Likewise, the feelings and susceptibilities will

be “in perfect and perpetual harmony with the truth and will of God as apprehended by the intellect” (Mahan 1839: 15). Mahan employed a faculty psychology in his very early articulations of holiness theology.

An even more detailed explication of the role faculty psychology played in Asa Mahan’s holiness teaching can be found among his handwritten, manuscript notebook. After various lecture outlines, sermon ideas, and philosophical musings, Mahan explored the topic of “Sanctification” with reference to the mental faculties. Underscoring these notes is a connection between the conception of Christian perfection and that of “truth.” Mahan referenced John 17:17, as translated by the KJV: “Sanctify them through thy truth” (Mahan, “Manuscript Writings, Miscellaneous”). Whether Mahan’s interpretation of “truth” is the same thing intended by the writer of the Fourth Gospel can be argued. Yet truth, in some expression, anchored the Oberlin president’s approach to holiness, just as it figured prominently in his faculty psychology.

A considerable part of Mahan’s emphasis on truth can be traced to his belief in a knowable, objective reality. These same notes on sanctification stress that the holy person is one whose intention “will be in perfect harmony with the nature, character, and relations of all objects apprehended by the intelligence” (Mahan, “Manuscript Writings, Miscellaneous”). Moreover, one’s “feelings will correspond with the nature of the objects presented” (Mahan, “Manuscript Writings, Miscellaneous”). The interaction between Asa Mahan’s faculty psychology and his theology of holiness is so complete that it is virtually impossible to extricate one from the other.

While some might question the role played by the Sensibility in Mahan’s holiness teaching, others may find his focus on the world outside refreshing. There is nothing in Mahan’s witness that deprecates “heart” holiness, but there is plenty to keep us from turning the tradition into incessant navel-gazing. This might be Asa Mahan’s most powerful and enduring contribution. It might also be an incisive gift for today’s church.

Popular religious language these days is all about “passion” – how to find your passion, how to live your passion, how to maintain your passion. Not surprisingly, this terminology differs little from that celebrated in the rest of American culture. We might note that one university with a reputation for releasing annual lists of overused and clichéd terms opened 2013 with a ban on the word: “passion” (Patterson 2012). Such self-anointed policing of the language could be nothing further than hype and bombast

generated by the culture it seeks to correct, but there may be something to the indictment.

I work with young adults as a college chaplain and as a professor. My scholarship needs to intersect with the deepest yearnings of undergraduates. My student friends might seem to want outlets for their constructive passion, and to a significant degree, they do. However I have been astounded by the ways in which they want more than passion. They want truth – truth in all of its forms. They want something substantial enough to sustain them when their short-lived desire fails. They want something eternal and beautiful that can orient their delight and joy. They want holiness that will leave them with more than a warm feeling. They want a holiness that will point them toward God and other people. Here is where Asa Mahan’s theology has much to offer us today.

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