THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT/INTERSUBJECTIVITY BY PARTICIPATION

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INTRODUCTION

In 1926 The Methodist Recorder published a tribute to visionary college president and holiness scholar Asa Mahan:

There are two characteristics that often mark great minds—characteristics which are antagonistic and apparently irreconcilable. We might designate one of these as the philosophic or rationalistic tendency, and the other as the mystical or religious tendency. Both of these attributes were found in Dr. Mahan, developed to a high degree.¹

The uniting of these orientations gave rise to a life of integrative energy. Asa Mahan was at once philosopher and theologian, teacher and pastor, social reformer and spiritual guide. Perhaps no fusion was a more pronounced expression of Mahan’s witness than that of deep, personal intimacy with God and broad, uncompromising social action. Spiritual experience and societal justice belonged together.

What about today’s Wesleyan and Pentecostal movements? Is the strong emphasis upon Christian experience and the transforming presence of God a distraction from social justice or does it have liberating effects? Surely the history of accessibility and welcome around issues of social class demonstrates one important legacy. Yet the passion for experience can degenerate into solipsistic practices and individualistic escapism. How might Wesleyan/Pentecostal movements celebrate the appropriate subjectivity of experience while simultaneously grounding their theological reflection in engagement with a world of objective realities and with the demands of social justice?

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This paper will juxtapose the "philosophic" and "mystical" elements within the life and work of Asa Mahan. It will briefly point this synthesis forward by reading Mahan through the lens of Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II). Such a vision of the Christian life is rooted in a reconciliation of the subjective and the objective in human existence. The subjective qualities of humanity express themselves through an appreciation for interiority and spiritual experience. The objective qualities of humanity elevate the person beyond her or his private experience and demand participation among both divine and human community. This relational destiny lives as a kind of objectively established "intersubjectivity" between persons and God and among humanity. Such intercommunion is exactly what Mahan meant when he explored "The Fellowship of the Spirit." It is also precisely what Wojtyla intends when he speaks of "participation" or "solidarity." In articulating a faith that defines the human person as a being for relationship, Wesleyan/Pentecostal movements possess a powerful resource for affirming both intimacy with God and justice for all of God’s people.

**Beyond Objectivism and Subjectivism**

Near the end of his life, Asa Mahan published his magnum opus two-volume history of philosophy. Prior to presentation of the complete work, he released the eighty-page introductory section as an independent treatise. This abbreviated piece served as a synopsis of Mahan’s entire metaphysical and epistemological schema.

In signature fashion, the elder philosopher begins with first principles:

We now advance to a consideration of the hypothesis which lies at the foundation of this entire Treatise, the hypothesis about which all the inductions, deductions, expositions, and elucidations of said Treatise revolve. The hypothesis is this: Four, and but four, realities ever have been, or by any possibility can be, represented as realities in human thought. We refer, of course, to spirit and matter, time and space.

Mahan continues by categorizing these four realities according to the distinction between necessary and contingent ideas. Space and time fall under the designation of necessary ideas. Matter and spirit dwell in the realm of contingent ideas. Yet, for Asa Mahan, knowledge of matter and spirit is just as certain as that of space and time; the necessary and the contingent possess equal claim to absolute certainty. This epistemological confidence leads Mahan to expound a type of realism. In fact, the remainder of his discourse is devoted to advocating this approach in opposition to materialism, idealism, and scepticism.

Mahan understood materialism in standard philosophical terms, as a doctrine which affirmed matter as the “only existing substance.” Idealism was described as a viewpoint which resolved “all realities into mind, or its operations.” Scepticism denied the ability to define any fundamental expression of reality beyond “mere appearance.” Therefore, in one sense, Mahan reiterated the threadbare metaphysical categories of his day and in propounding some manifestation of realism placed himself in the company of habitually-dismissed nineteenth-century thinkers. Yet often overlooked is Mahan’s impressively calibrated exploration of subject/object relations.
If Mahan was so predictably hard on materialism, idealism, and scepticism, it was, at least in part, due to his passion for integrating the subjective and the objective in human understanding. Not only was materialism critiqued as a fallacious monism of the tangible. It was also faulted for its assertion that “knowledge is possible but in its objective form, that is, relatively to ‘things without us.’” Likewise, idealism invites rebuke not only for its singular emphasis upon the immaterial. It also committed the fallacy of proposing that “knowledge is possible but in its subjective form, that is, relatively to mind.” Scepticism not only failed to uphold the possibility of real knowledge. It implemented this denial with reference to both subjective and objective categories of perception. Mahan’s affirmation of realism was as much about his concern to defend the authority of knowledge in both its subjective and objective forms as it was about anything else.

One need not read very far to witness that this integration of the subjective and the objective is woven through Mahan’s entire philosophy. As early as 1840 he stated that “contingent phenomena perceived by the intelligence, are of two kinds, subjective, and objective.” These contingent ideas of both matter and spirit (as distinguished from necessary ideas) are directly linked to objective and subjective reality. Even the very nature of law is defined with reference to this dual emphasis. Law, objectively considered, refers to action “in conformity with certain rules.” Law, subjectively considered, refers to “an idea in some intelligent mind.”

This delineation becomes particularly critical when Mahan considers the ethical aspects of law. The differentiation and integration of subjectivity and objectivity signals the uniqueness of humanity’s moral stature. As Mahan argues, law exists objectively in brute or animal creation but lives both objectively and subjectively in people. In essence, an objectively anchored subjectivity is correlated with free will and the “Divine image” in which humanity was created.

Thus, Asa Mahan’s employment of subject/object typologies ultimately revolves around a particular expression of philosophical anthropology. As was commonplace for his day, Mahan articulated a type of faculty psychology that identified the Intelligence, the Sensibility, and the Will. Within the Intelligence he further located three primary faculties: Consciousness, Sense, and Reason. This garden-variety (some might say uninspired) scholasticism takes an intriguing turn when it engages the universe of subject/object relations.

According to Mahan, Consciousness bears a particular relationship to “subjective phenomena,” Sense to “objective phenomena,” and Reason to “universal and necessary truths.” These three primary faculties are held to be so significant that personal identity and interaction with the world are unfathomable apart from them. Critical understandings of self, others, and the relationship between these two realities find voice in this triadic structure.

Late in life, Mahan brought his two-volume history of philosophy to a close with these words:

In all schools of Philosophy in all ages, as well as by the rest of mankind [sic], it is admitted and affirmed, that in all minds in common there is an absolute
consciousness of a knowledge direct and immediate of the Self as an interior subject exercising the functions of thought, feeling, and willing, and of the Not-self as an exterior object, having real extension and form, and of Space and Time as absolutely necessary and implied realities.\(^{24}\)

Self as subject, Not-self as object, and Space and Time as truths of implied knowledge correspond to the four realities of spirit, matter, space, and time. The first two (spirit and matter) represent contingent ideas perceived through the primary faculties of consciousness and sense. The latter two (space and time) represent necessary ideas apprehended through the primary faculty of implied knowledge or reason.\(^{25}\)

This laboriously close rebuttal of idealism and materialism, as well as scepticism, served to avoid the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism. In Mahan’s view, only when both the subjective and the objective are held in meticulously conceived synthesis does a proper anthropology emerge. The subjective or realm of the Self, unhinged from the objective or Not-self, is prone to an egocentric subjectivism. The objective or realm of the Not-self, unhinged from the Self, is ripe for a dehumanizing objectivism. The philosophical framework was thus established for exploring the depths of intercommunion between people and between humanity and God.

**The Fellowship of the Spirit/Intersubjectivity By Participation**

It is against the backdrop of Mahan’s surprisingly supple realism that one must approach his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As the holiness professor’s corpus grew during a half century of writing and teaching, it acquired a twofold character. On the one side were specifically philosophical publications, on the other pieces devoted to Christian perfection and the work of the Holy Spirit. In 1870, while president of Adrian College in Michigan, Mahan released his landmark series of lectures, *The Baptism of the Holy Ghost*.\(^{26}\) The explicit purpose of this book was an exploration of pneumatology and Christian experience, but the work also expressed an implicitly relational anthropology that was consistent with Mahan’s philosophy of subject/object interaction.

The ninth chapter of this treatise is seminal. Grounded in an exegesis of 1 John, “Discourse IX” probed the dynamic of human experience as it illumines that which Mahan called “The Fellowship of the Spirit.”\(^{27}\) The language of “fellowship” is not at all an imprecise employment of devotional speech. Mahan meant something very particular when he invoked this term, something that needed to be differentiated from “mere companionship” and from “partnership.”\(^{28}\)

Companionship referred to the given existence of two or more minds in the same locale and the rudimentary interchange of thought between these minds. Partnership implied not only a common proximity and elementary exchange of thought; it also included “co-operation for the promotion of common ends.”\(^{29}\) As Mahan defined the quality and character of human relations, both companionship and partnership fell under the rubric of “mere external connection.”\(^{30}\) Real fellowship is something higher, something deeper, and something much more intimate.

Two minds may be juxtaposed in “the most endearing external relations.”\(^{31}\) They may share a certain level of thought with one another. They may even form a
partnership for common ends. Yet they may never enjoy authentic fellowship. Mahan defines the potential obstruction to fellowship as “principles which may render each to the other the object of inward aversion.”32 True fellowship, in contrast, entails a sympathetic union of “thought with thought” and “feeling with feeling,” “sentiment with sentiment” and “purpose with purpose.” This reciprocal action is further described as “an intercommunion, in which each becomes to the other, as it were, another self.”33 In essence, superficial companionship and partnership remain susceptible to the treatment of one another as mere “objects.” Genuine fellowship requires the kind of intimacy through which people become selves or “subjects” for one another. This intersubjectivity is what Asa Mahan means when he invokes the language of fellowship.

In light of these considerations it is fair to ask whether this kind of relationship is possible between humans and God. At first blush, the sort of intensity implied by Mahan’s “fellowship” might argue against such divine/human familiarity. One could even suggest that only human arrogance would posit a relationship between the finite and the infinite whereby a person might consider God as “another self.” Philosohically speaking there is a danger of collapsing the other’s objectively existing subjectivity into one’s own subjectivity. In short, Mahan’s kind of intimacy can be misinterpreted as subjectivism.

Yet it is precisely at this point that the explication of “fellowship” opens a more profound consideration. One is reminded of the words from Karl Barth:

All communion with this God is barred, of the kind of communion we might have with creatures, such that the Thou can be changed by the I into an It or a He, over which or whom the I thereby acquires powers of disposal. .. The Subject of revelation is the Subject that remains indissolubly Subject. We cannot get behind this Subject. It cannot become an object.34

In a rather paradoxical manner, subjectivism serves to strip the other of appropriate subjectivity. The confession of God as Self or Subject acknowledges the divine prerogative and denies that intimacy with God can ever become a kind of manipulative “companionship” or “partnership” in which the finite reduces the infinite to an object.35 Just as subjectivism objectifies the other, an appropriate objectivity respects the subjectivity of the other. This painstakingly conceived integration of subject/object relations is at the core of Asa Mahan’s “fellowship,” and this divine/human intercommunion blossoms through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, Mahan understands the baptism of the Holy Ghost not as some private experiential possession (a view that could easily lead to subjectivism) but rather as the fulfillment of an objectively situated God/human intersubjectivity. He refers to 1 John 1:3:

You will observe that it is not said, that “our fellowship is with the Father, with the Son, and with the Holy Ghost,” but “with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” It is not with the Spirit that the mind has direct intercommunion; but through the Spirit, with the Father and with Christ.36
This statement is not an attempt to deprecate the Holy Ghost. Quite the contrary, it is Mahan's way of maintaining the absolutely unique identity and critical work of the Trinity's third person. It is also his way of challenging a solipsistic obsession with private experience by calling the believer to consideration of wider relational issues. In short, "The mission of the Spirit...is to bring the soul into direct and immediate intercommunion and fellowship with God." Moreover, this objectively framed fellowship between divine and human subjects serves as a paradigm for human community. The intersubjectivity of the God/human relationship calls forth a kingdom of intersubjectively related people of God.

Asa Mahan's nineteenth-century exposition of "The Fellowship of the Spirit" is remarkably similar to the twentieth-century phenomenological realism of Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II). Wojtyla begins his first major work by exploring "The Person as the Subject and Object of Action." At root is an ontological conviction that proper subjectivity can not exist without appropriate objectivity. According to Wojtyla, "We must, then, be clear right from the start that every subject also exists as an object, an objective 'something' or 'somebody'" Correspondingly, the human person, as a particular kind of object, must be described as a "somebody," a rational being who, in addition to a necessary objectivity, possesses a unique subjectivity.

The quintessential expression of Wojtyla's integration is found in his philosophical opus, The Acting Person (1969/1979). Here the complexity of subject/object relations terminates in a conceptual understanding reminiscent of Asa Mahan's "fellowship." Wojtyla describes this reciprocal dynamic as "Intersubjectivity by Participation." In a later article, he clarifies the meaning of this terminology: "...I conceive participation in The Acting Person as a positive relation to the humanity of others, understanding humanity here not as the abstract idea of the human being, but...as the personal self, in each instance unique and unrepeatable." Further on he continues in language almost identical to that of Mahan:

The thou stands before my self as a true and complete "other self," which, like my own self, is characterized not only by self-determination, but also and above all by self-possession and self-governance. In this subjective structure, the thou as "another self" represents its own transcendence and its own tendency toward self-fulfillment.

The subjective and objective are therefore integrated in two fundamental ways. First, the human subject objectifies the self through the act of consciousness. Second, the objective reality of the other is affirmed in all of its subjectivity. This really existing mutual subjectivity lives as an objectively referenced intersubjectivity among selves. It is not at all surprising that Wojtyla ultimately links this relational anthropology to his own understanding of "Life According to the Spirit."

**The Future of Dialogical Realism**

With the preceding analysis in mind, it is possible to offer some particular suggestions.
(1) It may be necessary for holiness people to entertain anew the strengths of some carefully delineated realism. This statement must welcome examination, given the way realism can be conceived as a simplistic epistemological perspective. Much contemporary reflection on nineteenth-century philosophy has rightfully critiqued the unsophisticated nature of evangelical realism. If one adds to this the identified correlation between realistic epistemologies and the rigidity of fundamentalism, one has good reason to be wary of anything that might resurrect the predispositions of "common sense."46

The practice of contrasting nineteenth-century evangelicalism's purported "naive realism" with more contemporary kinds of "critical realism" provides further impetus for spurning those of Mahan's age as little more than hack philosophers.47 Yet encountering the scrupulously formed contours of Asa Mahan's realism evokes a more generous assessment. His epistemology did claim an ability to know things as they are, but it did so as a considered alternative to the objectivism of materialism, the subjectivism of idealism, and the nihilism of scepticism. When viewed in this context, Mahan's philosophy takes on a richer, more subtle quality. The upshot is not so much a predictably overconfident theory of knowledge as it is a nuanced relational anthropology. Hence, one might argue that Mahan's thought is neither "naive" nor "critical." It is, rather, dialogical.

This deliberate juxtaposition of subjectivity and objectivity is at the heart of Mahan's pneumatology. The baptism of the Holy Ghost represents the apex of subjectivity, interiority, and spiritual experience. But it also includes the most ontologically profound kind of objectivity, engagement with the other, and affirmation of relationship. Religious experience becomes not an end in itself but a gateway to the real meaning of solidarity. Both the subjective and the objective are as critical for Mahan's notion of Spirit baptism as they are for his epistemology. Thus, one's social and solidaristic orientation becomes a bellwether of one's spiritual depth, and one's spiritual maturity becomes a measure of one's social and solidaristic authenticity.

(2) It is precisely this Spirit-inspired "dialogical realism" that beckons comparison with the more imaginative emphases of Karol Wojtyla's thought, and here Mahan speaks a word for our time and for our future. Wojtyla concludes his seminal work on the human person with, among other topics, an analysis of "individualism" and "anti-individualism."48 Individualism roots itself in an extreme form of subjectivism that entrones the private desires of the self to the exclusion of the other. Anti-individualism grounds itself in a dehumanizing objectivism that strips the human agent of all dignity. It is no stretch to read in this discussion an anthropological critique of both capitalism and Marxism. Wojtyla's philosophical confrontation with "dialectical materialism" and its accompanying "objectivism" is now lauded. But his multifaceted anthropology has also given rise to a judgment upon capitalism's quasi-idealism and its corresponding "subjectivism." In his 1995 encyclical, Evangelium Vitae, John Paul II leveled a post-Cold War broadside at the West and identified a "mentality which carries the concept of subjectivity to an extreme and even distorts it."49

Given Asa Mahan's own refreshingly well integrated commitment to subject and object, one wonders if there might be resources in the holiness heritage for the kind of
anthropology that will offer an alternative to both Marxist anti-individualism and capitalist individualism. At present the self-aggrandizement of economic elites is celebrated among a world disillusioned by collectivist failures, but does capitalism in the age of globalization and its narcissistic excesses reflect an adequate understanding of the human person? If one considers the more dialogical aspects of both Mahan and Wojtyla one must raise significant doubt. The answer to oppressive objectivism can not be a self-absorbed subjectivism. It will remain for future reflection to develop an adequately detailed articulation of some alternative model. Suffice it to say that this “Fellowship of the Spirit,” this “Intersubjectivity by Participation,” this “dialogical realism” suggests crucial anthropological insights often overlooked in today’s philosophical and theological conversation.

NOTES
4. My language here is similar to that of Richard J. Bernstein in his piece Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). Yet Bernstein’s work places particular emphasis upon hermeneutical questions; at this point my interest is directed toward more ontological concerns.
7. Ibid., 13.
9. Asa Mahan, Introduction to the Critical History of Philosophy, 37
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Asa Mahan, Introduction to the Critical History of Philosophy, 37
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 38.
17. Asa Mahan, Abstract of a Course of Lectures on Mental & Moral Philosophy (Oberlin, Ohio: James Steele, 1840), 32.
18. Ibid., 190. See also Asa Mahan, A System of Intellectual Philosophy (New York: Saxton & Miles, 1845), 184.
19. Ibid.
20. Asa Mahan, Abstract of a Course of Lectures on Mental & Moral Philosophy, 191, Asa
Mahan, _A System of Intellectual Philosophy_, 280-293; Asa Mahan, _Science of Moral Philosophy_ (Oberlin, O.: James M. Fitch, 1848), 24-34; and Asa Mahan, _The System of Mental Philosophy_, 178-192.


28. Ibid., 152.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 153.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.


39. Ibid., 21.

40. Karol Wojtyla, _The Acting Person_, 261-300. The 1979 English text is controversial, to say the least. Wojtyla’s penchant for blending traditional Catholic philosophical categories and contemporary phenomenological insights is well known. This particular text of _Osoba i czyn_ was prepared in collaboration with Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, and many argue that her editorial commitment to an even more explicitly phenomenological approach skewed some expressions of Wojtyla’s argument. Nevertheless, the basic concept of “participation” remains authentically available for our reflection.

41. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 245.
44. Karol Wojtyla, The Acting Person, 42.