

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

SEPTEMBER 2008

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 1

## BEING HUMAN IN A POST-HUMANIST WORLD

*Richard V. Horner*

One of the most fundamental and important developments in Western culture over the past few centuries has been the move away from thinking about humans as sharing some purpose or meaning that is essential to being human. Though people may have argued as to just what the essential meaning or purpose of being human is, throughout most of the modern era they would have at least shared the assumption that there is such a purpose or meaning and that it is important to know what it is. Only by knowing such truth and by living according to it could one succeed at life. More recently, however, the idea that there is some purpose that has been given to human existence or a meaning that is essential to being human has been left behind. At this point in our cultural story, the important truths are no longer ones that we need to discover about humans as human, but rather the ones that we create for ourselves as individuals and as communities. It is now difficult to make anything of the idea that human beings might be united by some shared purpose or meaning that is essential to being human.

To get just the slightest glimpse of how this important story line has played out, let me take us back to the 17th century and to René Descartes. Living in a time of tremendous intellectual change and uncertainty Descartes looked to reason alone to find answers to his most basic questions. In doing so he not only viewed reason as the central method for discovering truth, he also established reason as being the very essence of what it means to be human. Building on his famous first principle, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes concluded that the thinking self is a substance, "the whole essence or

nature of which was to think."<sup>1</sup> In Descartes' view, thinking is what makes life worth living, and to succeed at thinking is to succeed at life. Once Locke and Newton had demonstrated such success and had also shown just how productive reason could be, many Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century came to share Descartes' convictions, first, that reason is the fundamental and essential characteristic that defines our humanness and, second, that to think well is to live well.

Well before the end of the 18th century, however, critics began rebelling against the idea that reason constitutes the essence of being human. Romantic writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and William Blake could not imagine granting first place to something so bland and passive as reason. "Oh you rationalists!" laments Goethe. "Passion! Drunkenness! Madness! ... He prizes my intelligence and my talents more than he does this heart, which is after all my sole pride, which is the only source of everything I have, of all my force, all my bliss, and all my misery. Oh, anyone can know

what I know - only I possess my heart."<sup>2</sup> Other romantics echo these sentiments. Whereas Descartes had declared that "all excess tends to be bad,"<sup>3</sup> William Blake lauds the path of excess and cites energy, not reason, as the source of action. "Energy is eternal delight,"<sup>4</sup> he writes, and "exuberance is beauty."<sup>5</sup> Blake portrays reason as the breeding ground of passivity, gives primacy to desire, and warns against allowing reason to restrain or usurp desire's place. In reaction against harsh reason, then, the Romantics urge us to see our emotional or passionate nature as essential, and they

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urge us to give primacy to feeling and desire rather than to our mere ability to think.

Other philosophers went in still other directions to find what is most essential to human existence. Early in the 19th century, Arthur Schopenhauer, asserted the primacy of the will over both intellect and passion. While largely accepting Kant's 18th century rationalist epistemology, Schopenhauer proposed that Kant's inaccessible "thing-in-itself" should be understood as the human will. Schopenhauer accepted the Platonic or Kantian dualism between intellect and will, but he privileged will over intellect rather than intellect over will. "For Schopenhauer, it is the will which orientates all other action and, as such, represents the core essence of the self."<sup>6</sup> As cognitive functions are manifestations of the will, so the will has primacy over our cognitive functions. It was Schopenhauer, not Nietzsche, who gave us the conception of the "will to life," and when he did so he proposed it as a candidate for what constitutes the very essence of being human.

Shortly after Schopenhauer wrote *The World as Will and Representation*, Ludwig Feuerbach tried to move the discussion forward by arguing that the human essence lies in neither reason, nor feeling, nor will alone but rather in the combination of the three. "What then, is the nature of man?" Feuerbach asks. "What constitutes the specific distinction, the proper humanity of man?" He answers, "Reason, Will, Affection." Repeatedly, Feuerbach argues that the trinity of "reason, love, force of will...are absolute perfections of being. To will, to love, to think, are the highest powers, [they] are the absolute nature of man as man, and the basis of his existence. Man exists to think, to love, to will. Now that which is the end, the ultimate aim, is also the true basis and principle of a being."<sup>7</sup> Like his predecessors Feuerbach assumed that there is an essence to being human and that it is also essential for us to know what it is.

Gradually, however, as people struggled to identify the essence of being human, the various contending views began to cancel each other out, and the very notion of a meaning-giving, human essence began to erode. Alasdair MacIntyre, a leading intellectual historian of our own day, argues that by sometime in the first half of the 19th century the handwriting was already on the wall. "The sum total of the effective criticism of each position by the

others," he writes, "turned out to be the failure of all,"<sup>8</sup> and with the failure of all, the very notion of a shared purpose or essential meaning for humans as human slipped away. Rather than come up with new and improved answers to questions such as "What constitutes the human essence?" or "What is the purpose of human existence?", important thinkers simply gave up the questions. Though it took a long time for this all to settle in, the very idea of an essence or meaning that is inherent to human existence gradually slipped away.

One of the first to unpack the anti-essentialist outcome of modern thought, and who did so as powerfully as anyone ever has, was Friedrich Nietzsche, in whom "the argument shifts from the ground up."<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche put the kibosh on the very idea of a purpose that has been given to human existence or a meaning that is inherent to being human. Although he gave primacy to the will over the intellect or the heart, Nietzsche did not propose that the will gives meaning or purpose to life. To the contrary, the will is simply what emerges as most fascinating and central once the old questions about meaning and purpose have been set aside. Nietzsche dropped such questions and encouraged others to do the same. He recognized that at the end of modernity, there are no meaning-giving essences and we would do well to drop the quest to find them.

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Nietzsche made this point in more than one way but did so most famously by talking about the death of God and the twilight of the idols. Rejecting theism of every sort, and recognizing that modern attempts to identify a human essence or purpose without God had only been self-deceptive ways of trying to get from other sources what only religion can give, Nietzsche urged his contemporaries to face up to the idea that there is no source that is capable of giving humans purpose or inherent meaning. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche asks, "What alone can *our* teaching be?" He answers:

"That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*... *No one* is accountable for existing at all... He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is *not* the subject of an attempt to attain to an 'ideal of man' or an 'ideal of happiness' or an 'ideal of morality' - it is absurd to want to *hand over* his nature to

some purpose or other. *We invented the concept 'purpose': in reality purpose is lacking.*"<sup>10</sup>

Purpose, as Nietzsche understands it, is a human invention, not something that is rooted in some meaning-giving reality – not God or society, not humanity or man, not happiness or morality.

Note especially that while Nietzsche was certainly eager to free us from God, he was also intent on freeing us from all the substitutes and idols that people have always wanted to put in God's place. Nietzsche understood that such idols are no more capable of infusing life with meaning than the dead God whose place they take. That is why Nietzsche and his heirs have always worked hard to "prevent us from inventing God-surrogates"<sup>11</sup> such as reason, nature, humanity, the thing-in-itself, scientific method, society, natural selection, the author, the text, and so on in order to try to get from them what a dead God can no longer give.

As Nietzsche recognized, he came before his time, but his time did come a century later, and no one demonstrates this fact more powerfully than the French thinker Michel Foucault. Like Nietzsche, Foucault understood that the "death of God" means not only that God is gone but also that everything that the modern world had wanted to put in God's place had disappeared as well. This includes not only the notion of purpose, as Nietzsche had argued, but also the notion of Humanity or, to use Foucault's term: "Man." Listen to how Foucault builds on Nietzsche and expresses our time in thought. "In our day," Foucault writes, "and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning-point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man.... Is it not the last man who announces that he has killed God, thus situating his language, his thought, his laughter in the space of that already dead God?" Foucault recognizes that the only way to make something of the very notion of "Man" is for there to be a God who infuses Man's existence with meaning. Ironically, then, in disposing of God, Man removes the source of his own meaning and robs himself of the significance of his own act. "Rather than the death of God – or, rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it – what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer."<sup>12</sup> Again, Foucault notes,

"Nietzsche discovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second [God] is synonymous with the disappearance of the first [man]." Foucault then concludes, "It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance."

Foucault celebrated this void and found in it a freedom and a space "in which it is once again possible to think,"<sup>13</sup> but make no mistake about it, Foucault's place of freedom is still a void. Granted, it is a void in which possibilities abound and in which the exploration of these possibilities is affirmed and celebrated, but while everything is possible, nothing is necessary. In other words, nothing is essential. There is no truth that we need to know about ourselves as humans, no purpose given, no meaning inherent in our being. Everything is possible because meanings and purposes are ours to invent without limit. There is no

meaning-giving essence, no truths that are essential for us to know. There are only the meanings and purposes we give ourselves and the truths that we create for ourselves both as individuals and as communities.

The void that Foucault celebrated thirty years ago defines the space in which higher education has had to function in recent decades and in which our culture broadly has found itself for the past twenty-five years.

This is not an easy place in which to live, and it is certainly not an easy place in which to think about what it means to be human. Because God-surrogates such as Man, Humanity, and human nature have been sounded out, and essential meanings have been ruled out, scholars have had to imagine other ways of theorizing the human. Some have reasserted a humanism based in natural science. Many have explored crucial aspects of human experience by rooting their thought in the body along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. Others have looked to the experiences of human interaction: to the experience of "the other," to the social construction of human reality, or to communitarian and communitarian theories. Many other scholars have simply ignored their cultural context and gotten on with their work, not realizing the extent to which Nietzsche and his heirs frame the work they do and the lives they lead. As we think about the eclipse and reappearance of the human in higher education, therefore, we must not kid ourselves. We face a formidable challenge.

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than is often realized.

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Let me conclude by suggesting that we face this challenge by focusing on points of shared experience that might lead us to more satisfying ways of discussing the human and of theorizing about being human. Specifically, we would do well to focus on the shared experiences of human interaction: the experience of the other, the ways that human actions create the human reality, the experience of communicated meaning, etc. In order to do this, we do not need to start a new conversation, we need only participate in the conversation that is underway both locally and throughout the halls of higher education. Where that conversation focuses on human interaction, it may well prove fruitful whether it comes to us from existentialists or feminists, from reflections on human sexuality or on communicated meaning, from psychoanalytic theory or communitarian theory. I am no expert on any of these lines of inquiry or schools of thought, but I would assert that theorists of any sort who draw our attention to human interaction are drawing our attention to the right place.

Having drawn our attention to these realities, however, the question then becomes: Does focusing on social construction, on the encounter with the other, or on the experience of communicated meaning give us the answer we have been looking for as to how to understand the human or does it only clarify our questions about what it means to be human? The realities of human interaction are striking, provocative, and often very moving, but do they give us a way of understanding ourselves as human? For instance, does Jean-Paul Sartre's reflection on the existential reality of human responsibility give us a satisfying way of understanding the human condition or does it leave us looking for a more satisfying, larger framework? Sartre does a remarkable and thought-provoking job of focusing our attention on the human reality, but in the end, he may do more to clarify the question than he does to give us a satisfying way of understanding our humanness.<sup>14</sup>

Vaclav Havel, by contrast, starts with a similar focus on the existential reality of "human responsibility for the world," but he recognizes the place for a larger framework for understanding this reality. In commenting on Emmanuel Levinas' *Humanism and the Other*, Havel notes that when Levinas "taught that the sense of responsibility for the world is born in us with a look into the face of a fellow-being," he was "guided by the spirit of the oldest European traditions, apparently most of all by the Jewish traditions."<sup>15</sup> In making this comment Havel sets a good example. First, he enters and extends the conversation that focuses on human experience. Second, he agrees with Levinas that it is the interaction of humans with humans that is worth puzzling over.

Third, he does not so much see an answer in these interactions as he sees a question that seeks a larger framework of understanding. Fourth, when Havel looks for the larger ideas that are adequate for understanding these striking human realities, he finds those ideas in Levinas' Jewish tradition.

We do well to note that in rooting Levinas' thought in ancient Jewish tradition Havel brings us full circle to where Descartes and his Enlightenment heirs began. The *philosophes* of the 18th century largely formed their humanist project from the theological framework that they had inherited from Jewish and Christian theology. When they abandoned the theology, however, their project came unglued and eventually fell prey to the penetrating criticism of Nietzsche and his heirs. Perhaps the theological framework is more important than is often realized. Perhaps it does more work than it often gets credit for. Perhaps we need to let Havel take us back to where Enlightenment humanism took a wrong turn so that we can reconsider the possibility that the Jewish and Christian traditions, which root our humanity in the image of God, continue to offer a compelling way to understand our humanity. Not only do these traditions focus our attention on the sort of human experiences that are worth puzzling over, they also offer riches for understanding the human that we may never exhaust.

Richard V. Horner is Executive Director of the Christian Study Center.

#### Notes

1. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, (Penguin, 1968), 18.
2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, (Frederick Ungar, 1957), 63, 97.
3. Descartes, 19.
4. William Blake, "The Voice of the Devil" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, line 11.
5. Blake, "Proverbs of Hell" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, line 64.
6. David Deane, *Nietzsche and Theology*, (Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 53.
7. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, (Prometheus Books, 1989), 3.
8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 47-48.
9. Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (MIT Press, 1987), 85.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, (Penguin, 1968), 65.
11. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54.
12. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (Vintage Books, 1973), 383.
13. Foucault, 342.
14. See Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "Existentialism and Humanism."
15. Vaclav Havel, back cover of Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism and the Other* (University of Illinois Press, 2005).

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## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

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### FALL 2008 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

*The following are program highlights for  
this fall at the Christian Study Center*

#### Monday Class

#### "The Eclipse and Re-appearance of the Human in Higher Education"

Instructors: University of Florida Faculty and Christian Study Center

*Mondays, 7:30pm, Sept 8 - Nov 3*

(will not meet Oct 6)

#### Director's Class

#### "Culture of Possibilities"

Instructor: **Richard Horner**, Executive Director, Christian Study Center

*Mondays, period 5 (11:45) throughout the semester*

(this lunchtime class is especially for undergraduates)

#### Reading Group

#### "Christianity, Culture, & the Human"

(books: T.M. Moore, *Culture Matters* and Vigen Guroian, *Rallying the Really Human Things*)

Facilitators: **John Sommerville**, Emeritus Prof. of History - UF, and

**Todd Best**, Director of Programs, Christian Study Center

*Fridays, 11:45am, Sept 19, Oct 3, 17, Nov 7, 21*

#### Graduate Roundtable

Facilitators: **Todd Best**, Director of Programs and

**Jay Langdale**, Dept. of History - UF

*Fridays, 1:00pm, Sept. 12, 26, Oct. 10, 31, Nov. 14*

#### Forum on Religion and Scholarship

#### "Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion and History"

*September 16: Susanna Elm (Berkeley)*

*October 6: Carlos Eire (Yale)*

*November 12: David Nirenberg (University of Chicago)*

*December 1: David Ruderman (University of Pennsylvania)*

series website: <http://www.history.ufl.edu/faithful.html>

(a co-sponsorship with UF's Department of History,

Center for Jewish Studies, and others)

For details on any of the above or for schedule changes,  
please visit our website at [christianstudycenter.org](http://christianstudycenter.org).

## REVIEW ESSAY

*Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future.*

BY BILL MCKIBBEN. TIMES BOOKS,  
2007. 261 PAGES.

*Sarah Hamersma*

*Deep Economy* is in a sense two books in one. Throughout the book, author Bill McKibben argues a two-part thesis: The current approach to economic growth is unsustainable, and it is also undesirable. McKibben generally takes an impressively practical approach in arguing this thesis, and he is particularly persuasive in establishing the lack of sustainability in the resource-draining American lifestyle and the absurdity of the idea that it could be replicated around the world. The argument that we will be happier consuming less – that further economic growth is undesirable – is the harder argument to make, and accordingly the more difficult to find fully convincing. However, overall the book is a worthwhile read that provides alternative frameworks as we consider lifestyle changes that will ease the (inevitable) transition to living with less.

McKibben begins the book by acknowledging that indeed “more is better” for those who are desperately poor, but that researchers have found increasing income fails to improve self-reported quality of life once one has sufficient income to meet one’s needs. This helps set the stage for his audience of readers – those in rich Western cultures, and especially Americans.

The first main argument of the book, in Chapter One, is that the modern notion of economic growth is just that: modern. McKibben states that “Harnessing the ‘base’ motive of self-interest to promote the common good is perhaps the most important social invention mankind has achieved.” (p. 10). This certainly makes one wonder whether this is really an “invention.” Perhaps McKibben is referring to Adam Smith’s explanation of how a group of self-interested merchants can trade with each other to everyone’s gain – however, Smith was not suggesting how markets *should* work (i.e. a social invention), but rather he was describing a remarkable feature of markets themselves, which have existed in some form for much of human history. That said, McKibben cites a remarkable statement from President Franklin Delano

Roosevelt that the role of government was no longer to promote growth but to administer the resources already available (p. 7). Clearly this does not reflect the modern approach to managing the U.S. economy, but it is a concept that McKibben wishes to reclaim.

McKibben spends the rest of the chapter arguing that growth is producing inequality, that it is physically unsustainable, and that it is no longer making us happy. The argument of unsustainability is strongest. After providing statistics on the miraculous characteristics of oil compared to ethanol, followed by estimates of the energy needs of China as it continues to develop, McKibben shows the hollowness of the notion that “people are creative and will come up with something to replace oil.” Oil has natural, remarkable, inimitable characteristics and so conservation simply must be a key part of our plans for the future. McKibben notes that “getting the prices right” may help make this happen – for instance, the price of a gallon of gasoline should cover all costs generated by that gallon of gas, including pollution and the permanent loss of that gallon for future uses. While he sees this as one small part of the solution, trained economists would suggest that correct pricing would go a long way toward curbing consumption.

In his second chapter, McKibben begins to emphasize the value of local communities in developing sustainable economies by sharing his experience of eating locally for a year. The chapter offers the many positive aspects of eating food that is grown nearby, including saved energy, better community relationships, and tastier produce. Thankfully, though, he also acknowledges some of the complicated issues that arise. First, large-scale agriculture is able to produce food more cheaply – Americans currently spend about 11 percent of their income on food, down from about one-third of income just 50 years ago. Second, consumers are able to consume a wider variety of foods from different climates in the current system; for instance, McKibben did not eat a banana during his year of eating locally (but enjoyed one when his year was over). He does a sensible job of suggesting that while we need not give up all transported food, an orientation toward more local food consumption is a community-building, energy-saving, healthy endeavor.

The third and fourth chapters of *Deep Economy* contain McKibben’s argument that American hyper-individualism has proven empty, and that building stronger communities is not only necessary but, in

*Continued on Page 7*

*Hamersma Continued From Page 6*

fact, will also make us happier. While the benefits from additional money are small, we are just scratching the surface of the enhanced quality of life that could develop if we, say, spend less time commuting alone and more time in community gardens. In a sense, McKibben is arguing that we do not realize what will make us happy, and so our current choices fall short. This is a central (though less explicit) argument woven throughout the book – that people are mistaken in their preferences and priorities. Though this is hard to swallow from an economist’s viewpoint, it is easier to see through a Christian lens. As fallen people, our choices often fail to coincide with living abundantly, and McKibben provides some suggestions for moving in that direction.

The final chapter of *Deep Economy* brings us back to sustainability. McKibben opens with a description of the giant “International Trade City” in China, where factories display wares for bulk purchase by retailers worldwide. It is a stunning picture that helps bolster his point that the extensive use of fossil fuels in production and transport simply cannot last; the fundamental scarcity of the earth’s resources will soon loom large. He then discusses several healthier development options (such as micro-lending) as evidence that there are other paths available.

McKibben closes with a call for a change in perspective and behavior, even if gradual. He concludes that development should “look to the local far more than to the global. It should concentrate on creating and sustaining strong communities, not creating a culture of economic individualism...It should not aim at growth but at durability” (p. 197). Though these sound very visionary, there are examples of how it might work throughout the book. Moreover, McKibben gives us the impetus to think seriously about these things by reminding us that change is not optional – it is ecologically necessary. To sum up his argument: we need to transition to less consumption...but we can (and should) do this in a way that adds genuine quality to life rather than detracting from it.

*Sarah Hamersma is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Florida where her specializations include public economics, labor economics, and applied microeconomics. She is also the faculty advisor for the Pascal Society, a student organization of the Christian Study Center.*

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## INSIDE THIS EDITION

**Essay: "Being Human in a Post-Humanist World" by Richard V. Horner, p. 1.**

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**Review Essay: *Deep Economy* by Sarah Hamersma, p. 6.**

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## FALL CALENDAR

**Monday Class - "The Eclipse and Re-appearance of the Human in the University"**

Instructors from UF and beyond  
Mondays at 7:30pm, Sept 8 - Nov 3 (will not meet Oct 6)

**Director's Class - "Culture of Possibilities"**

Instructor: Richard Horner. Especially for undergraduate students.  
Wednesdays, 11:45am (period 5)

**Reading Group - "Christianity, Culture, & the Human"**

Facilitators: John Sommerville and Todd Best  
Fridays, 11:45am, Sept 19, Oct 3, 17, Nov 7, 21

**Forum on Religion and Scholarship - "Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion and History"**

September 16: Susanna Elm (Berkeley)

(a co-sponsorship with UF's  
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October 6: Carlos Eire (Yale)

Center for Jewish Studies, and others)

November 12: David Nirenberg (University of Chicago)

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