

# Inward? – or Upward and Outward?

## The Problem of Self-Primacy

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**T**HIS ARTICLE EXPLORES SELF-PRIMACY AS a key aspect of modern culture, examining its theological and philosophical meanings. It also examines how Christians can address this challenge through a hermeneutical approach grounded in Scripture and faith.

I write this because we live in a society that values individuality and encourages a persistent, contagious self-focus that influences everyone’s consciousness. As a result, modern culture is often called the “Me Generation.” I believe this tendency has become a core and defining part of our current “culture of death.” This inward focus rightly earns the label “self-primacy” and can be seen as a fundamental issue that contributes to the widespread sense of unbelief that spreads throughout our society. Although the idea of self-primacy involves different criteria, humans tend to prioritize their own interests and define personal priorities and aesthetics through individual preference, both of which are expressed through a hermeneutical process heavily dependent on personal judgment. In the end, this points to the direction modern humanity is heading.

While I’m addressing this issue theologically—describing our fallen human state as “poor, miserable sinners” and seeing Jesus’ death on the cross followed by His resurrection as the redeeming act that saves us—I do not plan to focus on that here. I also will not delve into psychological reasons why the human mind prefers its own self-interests over other influences as a guide and purpose in life. Further, this article defines the words “autonomous” and “free will” as follows: they refer to the countless everyday choices that do not affect spiritual status, such as whether to marry, attend college, buy a coat, help a person in need, or obey the speed limit—even when inwardly wanting to drive faster. These decisions are normally made freely. Theologically, true free will, which freely loves and obeys God, was lost after the fall, and only through Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit can people be freed to willingly and freely love God and serve their neighbor. Instead,

I want to argue that, at its core, all humans—non-Christian and Christian—are involved in a process of interpreting each moment of life, choosing between the options and values available to them, guided by a genuinely self-driven instinct in their own hearts and minds, even as other priorities also influence them. My aim is to explore how the freedom of our will interacts with a hermeneutical process through which the Christian mind interprets all of life. We experience this freedom of interpretation both in every conscious moment and on a larger scale, where our purpose and identity are shaped over many years through experience, creative choices, and moral and aesthetic influences.

## Reckoning with Self-Primacy

BUILDING ON THE CONCEPT OF SELF-PRIMACY, this section examines the role of autonomous free will in human decision-making. It explores whether autonomy is inherently good or bad and how Christians can navigate the moral implications of their choices within the framework of faith.

This hermeneutical framework gives the human will the opportunity to establish a changing context for itself and allows for an interpretative process that is flexible and can be adjusted according to human needs, desires, and interests within our broader autonomous state. We navigate each moment of our lives, making quick decisions along the way, often leading us down the path driven by our own desires. This is where my main argument comes into focus: I assert that humans prioritize their own self-primacy above all other values or religious beliefs they claim to follow. The possibility of free choice, with its range of options, echoes the temptation shown to Adam and Eve and remains with us every day. In each moment of our awareness, we interpret what we encounter to decide whether we will follow the tempting and compelling call of self-will with its autonomy or whether we will choose to obey God's commands.

The idea of self-primacy is a slippery slope. To better understand how we interpret our choices, actions, and priorities, some clarity is needed. James Sire, in his helpful book *The Universe Next Door*,<sup>1</sup> objectively examines eight worldviews within a Christian framework, focusing on each worldview's core beliefs and creating what could be called a "worldview playing field." Among the common mindsets he discusses, Postmodern Humanism sounds like a despairingly familiar rationale seen today in our world—reflected among friends, neighbors, media, entertainment, and news commentary. Similarly, some recent Christian theology has adopted a postmodern perspective that conforms to the culture it exists within. Postmodern Humanism emphasizes almost solely self-primacy and personal preferences, rather than adhering to any specific ideological or religious principle. It views individual

consciousness as the authority for decision-making, granting autonomy to live as one desires. While this idea may seem familiar or simply part of life, a genuine commitment to the Christian Cross and a life of faith sanctified by the Holy Spirit rejects self-primacy and personal preference as the main guiding forces. How one applies this view of free will defines their worldview choice.

However, before we use the term “self-primacy” carelessly, let’s clarify the balance between personal responsibility and obsessing over oneself, making oneself a little king. What do we really tell ourselves? What does it mean to believe we have the human right to do whatever we want? Our autonomy gives us the chance to be, do, say, and think whatever we feel. But what does that really mean? At every moment, we interpret our situation and make a choice—either guided by self-interest or by our faith. We also face outside influences: our friends, family, social networks, and other sources at any given time. To what extent should personal, autonomous will have the right to think and act freely? We are not robots created by God, but we also can’t simply do whatever feels right on the good and evil scale. Do we sense a purpose and obligation as believers serving a God who provides everything we have? Do we have the right to pursue any desire or follow any whim that strikes us? These are big, important questions. Yet, we shape this reality every day through who we are and how we use our time, interests, and energy. Consider the following:

- “Just be yourself”
- “Do your own thing”
- “Looking out for number one”
- “Own it—make it your own”
- “It’s a free country, I can do and say what I want”
- “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (now I’m treading on sacred ground!)

Each of these phrases is a commonly accepted maxim of personal freedom and rights, and based on anyone’s own autonomous will, it seems we should consider each of them legitimate and acceptable. Each phrase reflects a self-interpretation rooted in personal freedom and the right to have, do, and be what one wants.

But how do we interpret such autonomy within the framework of a Christian self-view? The faithful Christian looks to Scripture for guidance and to set the rule and norm by which we define our lives. Yet, how we read and understand Scripture can easily become a tenuous issue. To what extent do we accept the authority of Scripture? To what extent do we interpret Scripture as the writer wishes it to be understood? And most importantly, to what extent do the teachings and doctrines of Scripture guide us and establish a normative basis by which we measure our lives and moral condition? The answers lie in the idea that the text of Scripture creates a hermeneutical dynamic that shapes our understanding. Scripture first interprets us as being in a sinful and helpless state, where we are lost and “cannot free our-

selves.”<sup>2</sup> And so, the Word provides a God-ordained alternative through which our free will can engage in a dialogical exchange and ultimately build a relationship of meaningful understanding. In faith, we stay in this exchange and are guided by a hermeneutical circle, allowing us—guided by the Holy Spirit—to choose an appropriate response from the options available to our free will. This process helps us gain deeper insight into clarity, truth, and proper value in our choices and actions, leading us to a healthy and mature Christian awareness.

How might the dynamic of such a hermeneutic of self-interpretation arise from an open “discussion” with Scripture and acknowledge truth within an epistemology that offers a forum where meaning, value, and truth can be established? Here, we can envision a communicative dynamic more akin to a coach-player relationship than to the singular focus on authoritarian control and unwavering instructional commands that demand a specific, robotic response, leaving no room for a life of genuine self-guided freedom. All humans, and for this discussion, all Christians, live with a substantial degree of autonomy, allowing their behavior to become what they choose. Yet, at the same time, they are compelled by the redeeming and sanctifying salvation of our Lord Jesus to respond faithfully to the gift of grace, which we meekly comprehend through faith. Still, our sinful human tendencies seek the natural desire for self-primacy, as found throughout all of humanity. We have no choice but to interpret for ourselves what are matters of meaning and significance at every step. Let’s explore this concept of self-primacy from different perspectives.

## Autonomy: Good or Bad?

THUS, BUILDING ON THE CONCEPT OF SELF-PRIMACY, we must examine the role of autonomous free will in human decision-making, explore whether autonomy is inherently good or bad, and how Christians can navigate the moral implications of their choices within the framework of faith.

We should first examine the basis of where and how our personal interpretive process of consciousness functions within us, in relation to everything we experience in our being-ness<sup>3</sup> and how we manage each moment of our time consciousness.<sup>4</sup> We perceive each moment of time as it happens; we interpret what is meant in that instance, whether the words or actions of others or ourselves. We need to consider whether we are making a conscious choice or an assumption, whether our tentative interpretation is accurate, and to what extent. This interpretive consciousness is our constant reality, so deeply ingrained in our modern minds that we are often unaware of it. Within this flow of conscious interpretation, we continually make critical judgments about what we think, say, and do, reflecting our view of our autonomy and self-primacy at that moment. Sometimes, life moves so quick-

ly that it seems nearly impossible to control or influence our perspective on our self-primacy. Yet, our mind and memory maintain control over what our free will commands, allowing us to function with some level of direction, personal choice, and preferential tendencies. This is where our consciousness intersects with the moral order of our conscience.

Most of the time, each moment we exist, we live within a state of discrete, autonomous free will; it is here that we choose a course of action and a direction of thought or attitude. Usually, we have some control over our moral being and how we use it. Therefore, at every moment, we are in an interpretive state that connects us not only to everyone around us but also to God and his divine care and sustenance, since he gave us this autonomous free will initially. How we interpret each moment of our freedom significantly influences how we live, who we become, and the impact we have on others, as well as on our eternal status.

I realize this raises a question: Is autonomy good or bad? The clear truth is that it can be either, although we should really say that it is neither inherently good nor bad. But the issue isn't simply having or exercising an autonomous free will in our consciousness as we move through time because we actually don't have much choice about it. It's one of the fundamental traits of our human nature that we operate within a state of autonomy. Ultimately, the real question is what we choose to do with it, how we respond to the opportunity of autonomous freedom, and, specifically, how we interpret the circumstances, language, and significance involved—factors that surround each moment in our consciousness. Our autonomous free will is the very place where we navigate the delicate hermeneutical balance between good and evil in our choices with each breath of our existence. We do so out of necessity and often urgency because we also recognize that our time in life is limited, and our finiteness establishes a boundary that prevents us from knowing the infinite within this current temporal existence.<sup>5</sup>

Our autonomous will must confront our natural tendency toward self-primacy. It seems ingrained in us that we need to “look out for number one.” Caring for and prioritizing our self-primacy comes naturally within autonomous free will, and, actually, deferring from our self-primacy and giving priority to someone or something else—especially if it conflicts with our own desires—can be quite challenging. However, any Christian should recognize that this is exactly what our Lord Jesus commissions us to do, especially in his example of the difficulty all humans would face in laying down their lives for another.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, self-primacy deserves its fair share of recognition. We are created as beings who *need* to care for ourselves, who must look out for and protect ourselves, and who bear responsibility for our own actions. A healthy control, along with the usefulness of our self-primacy, can lead us to accomplish significant good in this world: *genuine*

good that produces positive, influential, and constructive outcomes, not only for ourselves in our self-interest, but also benefiting others and potentially many people and situations. We must acknowledge that completely neglecting our self-primacy would be foolish, irresponsible, and unproductive. However, most humans realize this fairly quickly, and the balance often shifts in the opposite direction, creating a large imbalance in favor of the myriad desires rooted in our own self-interests.

Thus, self-primacy has a rightful place in life and can also be viewed as problematic. However, it is important to recognize how self-primacy can be managed in a controlled manner that keeps our autonomy aligned with the best way to handle the freedom inherent in any situation. The process of internal interpretation within the human mind can be understood as a circular relationship between the whole and its parts in any situation. This ultimately results in what Paul Ricoeur called the *Auslegung* or explication,<sup>7</sup> a resolution that emerges from the interpretive dialogic process leading to the completion of hermeneutical understanding. Theodore George specifically clarifies that such interpretive work leads to a “new understanding” and is not based on “already securely founded beliefs”:

In hermeneutics, the emphasis is on the “circularity” of understanding.... Central to hermeneutics, this concept is not only highly disputed but has also been developed in a number of distinct manners. Broadly, however, the concept of the hermeneutical circle signifies that, in interpretive experience, a new understanding is achieved not on the basis of already securely founded beliefs. Instead, a new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have.<sup>8</sup>

Christian understanding, however, must recognize that Scripture first interprets us, and then, in turn, our autonomous will understands God’s command. As a result, we abandon the human desire for self-primacy and, guided by the Spirit, discover—or clarify—a new understanding. This understanding causes our will to act accordingly. Here, we see the completion of the hermeneutic circle in which we, as Christian beings, respond as we ought, ultimately leading to the establishment of a meaningful understanding of God’s will for us.

Our autonomous will can be best described as a neutral zone, but only before each moment of our time consciousness. Once we act, respond, or initiate, we then move in a direction—either upward or downward, either good or bad. This hermeneutic moment spans from an objective potentiality to a subjective action or judgment, where the epistemic result is recorded and exerts a lasting influence on our ontological existence. In this instant, our autonomous action or judgment becomes reality, even if it is only part of our simple perception, and whether or not our self-primacy has been served.

## The Subtlety of Capitalism

ONE OF THE MOST TANGIBLE WAYS SELF-PRIMACY manifests in modern culture is through financial decision-making within a capitalist framework. Here, we explore how Christians can navigate the moral challenges of spending and prioritize their values in ways that align with their faith.

Our autonomous free will engages in the hermeneutical process and interprets essential real-life situations—often carrying significant meaning and powerful consequences—as in making judgments and decisions about how we spend our money and set our priorities and values for those expenses. These personal battles, especially for someone living in the Western culture, are typically fought on the battleground of capitalism: that ideological framework of opportunity that offers any autonomous human will a range of freedoms—namely, the ability to gain personal or professional financial success through sale or effort and to build or purchase an unlimited materialistic kingdom.

What role does self-primacy play in this context? How should we allocate our money—toward ourselves or toward someone or something else? Since we naturally do both, what should the balance between them be? Of course, our needs and our responsibility to pay for what we should, especially for others in our lives, as is appropriate, play a vital role and are indeed a priority. However, these monetary expenses serve both our self-primacy and satisfy our responsibility to others. Consequently, it appears that the risk of unchecked self-primacy within capitalist freedom is more related to optional or voluntary expenses that are not among our responsibilities. While many people’s idea of “money to burn” is just wishful thinking, we sometimes have the opportunity to voluntarily spend money on whatever we desire. How, then, do we interpret and decide which expense to prioritize? Aside from addressing genuine responsibilities such as debt or ideological commitments, capitalism offers us the opportunity to spend money on whatever our autonomous will desires, bartering the financial values we hold in exchange for some form of satisfaction.

This hermeneutic of determining priority or preference ultimately becomes subjective. Likewise, it seems remarkably subtle. How much does it matter if we buy this item or that, even if it’s not something we need but rather just something we want? And at what point does randomness or apathy overtake the idea of holding a preference for something? But the subtlety matters when establishing meaningful action, where, in light of a given Christian determination or some ethical judgment, we are obligated to regard a certain priority one way or another. In other situations, no difference can be had, and the choice we make is simply a matter of personal preference. We can call such a close-call judgment a nuance. The concept of nuance carries with it a delicate balance of style, perhaps of need or requirement, or perhaps

not. The idea of nuance is also so subjective that it becomes a matter of describing the fine distinction between very similar things. A simple yet useful real-world example is the PMS<sup>9</sup> color system: in its most basic form, it includes 256 color variations that separate all the shades of the color palette into their slightly different (nuanced) distinctions and is commonly used in both commercial and artistic realms.

The same applies with regard to our self-primacy and how we spend our money. What we choose to spend on, along with the subtle details of how much, why, and for whom, all operate on a sliding scale of interpreting value and priorities. This may be the one area of hermeneutical endeavor where humans pay closer attention to the specifics of their choices, especially if they are being responsible or being particularly thrifty. However, when viewed on a larger scale, we see that the entire system of capitalism—with its constant flow of commerce and the economic balance it creates—grows or shrinks, ultimately offering opportunities for profit or loss and potentially leading to great satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the autonomous will. Each financial situation provides us with a similar range of opportunities and emphasizes the importance of interpretive skill, where nuance can flourish.

The autonomous free will we exercise in managing our wealth should be viewed by Christians as both an opportunity to act responsibly and to enjoy and engage with the gifts of God's creation. Even the moral order of Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment encouraged financial growth in a positivistic and possibly pietistic way, aiming to improve our world. However, the evaluative process that arises in our personal financial decision-making places a burden on our tendency toward self-primacy and causes us to interpret each nuance of expenditure within a hermeneutical circle that weighs and calculates the responsibilities of our priorities against our own preferences and desires, as well as the influences of any immediate circumstances involved. It seems clear, then, that any Christian should carefully consider their financial options; and since we have the freedom to act as God permits, we must recognize that voluntary choices and preferences in how we handle our money become moral judgments. These judgments can hold a willing and believing heart both accountable and faithful.

## Radical Ideological Free Will

OUR DISCUSSION OF AUTONOMY AND SELF-PRIMACY leads us to consider how radical philosophies, such as Marxism and nihilism, have shaped cultural attitudes toward self-primacy. Below, we analyze these ideologies and their rejection of divine authority, offering insights into the dangers of excessive self-focus.

Therefore, I examine self-primacy through the lens of radical philosophies, with both Karl Marx's socialist framework and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism offering

valuable insights. These philosophical traditions emphasize self-primacy and dismiss any hermeneutical productivity that might result from interpretive reading of Scripture or from others on a moral level. Here, the scope for autonomous free will is limited to one place: the self itself.

For Marx, the “self” uniquely manifests as a whole society and culture. Although this exists outside the individual’s personal identity, Marx’s socialism finds an ideological goal within the singularity of an entire culture. Every person in it must conform to that culture’s rules, just like everyone else. Therefore, the entire culture functions as, and essentially becomes, a single “self.” Any moral or religious values attached to it are only defined by and judged within its collective identity. Theological historian James C. Livingston highlights the inseparable bond that Marx emphasizes within the necessity of a social culture and its conflicts for establishing any religion. He writes,

For Marx the nature of a religion can be learned by examining the concrete social conditions that produced it. Therefore, there is no single essence of religion such as Schleiermacher’s reduction of religion to the feeling of absolute dependence. Religion is always a cultural product, and thus each religion reflects the unique social conflicts of its particular culture. Remove the social conflicts, and you remove the religious illusions required by the conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

This is truly engagement solely in self-primacy rooted in a comprehensive ideology, along with its religious or moral conditions, and as such, it is the immediate denial of the opportunity to surrender one’s free will to God or any other moral or religious authority. Marx himself writes:

*Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside of the world. Man is *the world of man*, the state, the society. This state, this society, produce religion, *a reversed world-consciousness* because they are *a reversed world*....<sup>11</sup>

Here, we see that Marx defines autonomous free will only in the inclusive plural, making his rejection or dismissal of the existence of God obvious. Although socialism has largely failed in the past, this “self-only” view shows that an excessive focus on self-primacy—as the embodiment of an entire collective culture—is, in reality, a denial of genuine freedom for each individual involved, as well as a denial of the vast richness of a loving God. Any hermeneutical exchange requires another agent with whom an *Auslegung* can be established, enabling the resulting explication to produce a meaningful exchange or definition. However, those trapped in a radical socialist environment like socialism have no choice but to be slaves to the ideology.

This problem clearly exists with nihilism as well, and Friedrich Nietzsche's distinct rejection of any God emphasizes the same issue for autonomous free will as socialism does. If God is dead and we have killed him, then self-primacy becomes our only choice. However, without a God, this self-primacy ultimately leads to despair. Although we cannot fully understand Nietzsche's mindset before his death—the fact that he spent the last 10-plus years of his life in insanity<sup>12</sup>—suggests that such intense focus on one's own superiority and the dominance of autonomous self-primacy may have become problematic.

The focus of Nietzsche's philosophical vision was on the humanist ideal of the *Übermensch*. His goal was to achieve the highest quality of being and meaning possible for any human. This is self-primacy taken to an extreme. When autonomous free will views itself as the ultimate arbiter in a nihilistic realm where no other considerations or ideological perspectives matter at all, the result is a relentless self-focus that completely destroys the possibility of meaningful hermeneutical exchange in a dialogical manner. Only one view of the self-primacy of our being is relevant here. This fragmented state of the nihilist mindset is reflected in an intriguing footnote by James C. Livingston concerning Nietzsche's choice of the title *Übermensch*. Livingston writes: "Since the term 'Superman' may connote something supernatural and has come to be identified with Nazi racial theories and with a comic book character, it is preferable to translate Nietzsche's term *Übermensch* as 'Overman' or superior individual."<sup>13</sup>

The idea of an "Overman" or *Übermensch* effectively elevates human self-primacy to a divine level, much as Marx's socialism turns the supposed goodwill of society and culture into a deity. To make this concept understandable to the modern world, both Marx and Nietzsche had to deny the existence of a separate, divine God. By removing the idea of a divine power or authority, they paved the way for the god of self-primacy. Ironically, their philosophical views fully supported the denial of God, despite both being raised as Christians—Nietzsche was even raised a Lutheran! Over time, their interpretive reasoning led them to transform their own autonomous free will into a deity of their own making. This radical departure from traditional thought on the reality of God results in a lack of shared interpretive exchange and leaves their philosophy without the fulfillment of a hermeneutical circle. If we view our human condition as one of inevitable decline, just like all the other elements in life—something even the Buddha observed—and acknowledge that we are constantly decaying, then the conscious choice that no other option exists besides our own self-primacy results in a futile and deadly flaw. Self-primacy alone seems ill-equipped to protect its own best interests. From this perspective, both Marx and Nietzsche illustrate the danger of complete submission to self-primacy, marked by the absence of spiritual hermeneutical exchange.

## Inward? – or Upward and Outward?

HAVING EXPLORED THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND theological dimensions of self-primacy, we shift focus to the will and practical Christian living. We examine how believers can balance inward self-care with the upward call to love God and the outward responsibility to love others, as outlined in Scripture.

Our current “culture of death” arises from an Enlightenment influence that has turned inward and been bewitched by our solitary transcendental ego, as described by Immanuel Kant. Therefore, my essay title asks: “inward or upward and outward”? To illustrate how our human interpretive understanding develops with an will that reflects a Christian way of living, let us first remember that the entire Law can be summarized into two simple, familiar commandments: “‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>14</sup> Loving the Lord is upward, and loving our neighbor is outward. Neither is inward, although we must acknowledge that inward attention is, to some extent, necessary and a vital responsibility. Two specific philosophers can be cited to help address this issue within self-primacy, each providing a path that any Christian can follow to recognize the necessary distinctions in this pursuit and ultimately avoid overemphasizing the self. Each example will also show how one of these two aspects of the Law is honored and fulfilled.

Johann Georg Hamann played a passionate and outspoken role in the “Counter-Enlightenment” movement of the 18th century, addressing one of the key issues in the tendency toward self-primacy. As James C. Livingston explains, Hamann’s conviction of faith sees the foolishness in overemphasizing human reason and gets to the heart of the issue:

Hamann reads the Enlightenment devotion to reason as *the* modern form of idolatry [where he says to Kant, et al.]: “The object of your reflections and devotion is not God, but a mere word-image, like your universal human reason....” Hamann’s attack on the pretensions of rationalism is a crucial element in his ... understanding of religious faith.”<sup>15</sup>

Taking a somewhat unconventional cue from David Hume, Hamann recognized that the human mind must see itself as humble and proper, rather than elevating reason—which often dominates—to the level of absolute authority. This positioning of human reason in relation to (and in opposition to) God’s divine authority is clearly shown as inappropriate in Hamann’s downplaying of self-primacy, where he instead clarifies the correct way to frame the human mind before the Lord God. According to Livingston,

Hume correctly insisted that reason has a way of dissolving our common-sense view of the self and the world and brings us to ignorance....

Hamann saw in ignorance a real and positive point of departure for faith. And for Hamann faith was intimately tied to the Christian virtue of humility. Our consciousness of the limits of reason engages our whole person, which issues in a new and vital awareness of our existential plight and thereby opens the way for an active faith. . . . For while faith lies *beyond* reason, in the sense that faith comes to an awareness that our real existence is not merely an affair of *ratio*, it nevertheless engages our whole person. Just as faith needs reason, so reason also needs faith; they are . . . dialectically related.<sup>16</sup>

Hamann's viewpoint underscores a key critique of prioritizing rationality as the most important part of our thinking. It suggests that when we focus on reason as our main interpretive tool and overlook the faith elements needed to complete a hermeneutic circle of understanding, we are not truly loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Instead, we are raising our self-primacy—particularly, relying on our reason—above everything else. Hamann highlights an appropriate way to view our self-concept but also makes it clear that, because we live in a state of human freedom, we should not completely dismiss reason. As Oswald Bayer explains,

Humans live out their freedom and use their reason in criticism and politics. The perversion of their use of reason does not indicate the need for flight from it, but for its liberation and renewal. But even renewed reason situates the human at a distance from the environment and always includes behavior that makes of nature an object . . . an inclination now more and more on the increase, even in theology and church.<sup>17</sup>

How a Christian should understand and interpret everything they know and hear reflects Hamann's view that the Lord God should be recognized in all things, both in our work and our faith.

Hamann also criticizes this same mis-priority when discussing Johann Gottfried Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, where he emphasizes a crucial distinction in the nature of language's origin. According to Oswald Bayer, Herder sees the origin of language as entirely given by human freedom, but Hamann considers it much more as part of a uniquely *created* nature from God, which humans share in; therefore, they participate together in language.

If Herder's thought experiment is concerned with setting the human "in the of condition of awareness which is one's very own"—the human is to be what he is—if the human must still discover "what is natural to him," and "is himself the purpose and goal of his endeavor," then Hamann sees such circular relation to self burst apart by the fact that the human is addressed, and in such fashion that the address that *creates him* is mediated in world-

ly, in human fashion. As creature the human is addressed by the Creator through the creature, initially through one's parents, through those whose care speaking becomes as easy "as a child's game." The word draws near to the human. In the word of address which is God, "with this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as close and easy, as a child's game...."<sup>18</sup>

Hamann asserts that, as *created* beings, language must originate with God and be given to us for the essential purpose of fellowship with God, which He (God) establishes within us—and not with any other creatures! Therefore, they must be seen as beginning together, especially as the "master-key" element and the foundation of all our knowledge. Bayer elaborates:

The question as to whether language is of divine or human origin rends asunder what inseparably belongs together.... The absolute beginning and goal are given here and now, at a center, in the midst, in which divinity and humanity unite and the Creator comes so close to us that a more fervent "union, fellowship, and communion," a more intimate *communicatio* of God and the human, God and world, cannot be conceived. "This *communication* of divine and human *idiomatum* is a fundamental law and the master-key of all our knowledge."<sup>19</sup>

To Herder and others who claim that the origin of language is exclusively human, Hamann affirms his belief that God must be recognized as the originator of everything that makes us human, especially language, since it serves as the means of dialogue between God and man. His reference includes Immanuel Kant's concept of the transcendental ego, which is based on and requires the necessity of our conscious self-primacy in any human judgment. It is clear that a focus on self-primacy in society has become much more common in the more than 300 years since the Enlightenment began shaping our culture, emphasizing this individual personal interpretive process. Hamann observed and recognized this flaw in thinking even as it was developing. Instead, we can envision a hermeneutical dialogue with the Creator that can rightfully be understood as loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Bayer provides a clear overview of how Hamann's "Counter-Enlightenment" critique opposes Kant, even during his lifetime. In doing so, Hamann describes this valuable hermeneutical exchange between God and the believing human, using the terms "dependence" and "autonomy" to refer to these two origins of language, which most directly influence our freedom of thought and perception.

From these propositions, belonging to the most remarkable set forth by Hamann, it is clear in what way Hamann deals with the Enlightenment and here especially with Kant, as a contemporary, but as a *contemporary in dissent*. For Hamann, dependence and autonomy do not exclude each

other but include each other. By virtue of the granted freedom the human moves beyond mere receptivity and mere spontaneity. The human is neither a mere listener nor a mere speaker, neither merely one who obeys nor one who commands, but always and in every case both, though according to the situation, with a different accent. The human's freedom is a game together with others between gift and appropriation, reception and transmission. The human does not have in hand the beginning and end of this game, but remains a learner.<sup>20</sup>

Hamann's playful term that our freedom is a "game" reflects his belief that language has both divine and human origins. This faith-based reasoning supports his view that God, whom we are to love with all our heart, mind, and strength, is the reigning authority and divine Lord for all humans. In this sense, it demonstrates his commitment to keeping the Law. Here, Hamann presents the idea of a Christian autonomous free will that looks *upward* to God, even when it addresses itself inwardly as is sometimes necessary and responsible. More importantly, it is understood through the Word, the *logos*, in God's revealed will via interpretive faith, where we can respond in the same language as God and are led by the will of God to live faithfully. This forms the hermeneutic circle of Christian faith.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas offers a very practical, easy-to-understand metaphor for Christian mentality and spiritual practice. Levinas shifts focus to an external orientation of the autonomous free will and, in doing so, captures the essence of "loving your neighbor as yourself." Here, we see the *outward* turn from ourselves, with any sense of self-primacy being set aside. He encourages believers to always see the "face of the Other," suggesting that our waking reality is shaped by an ongoing awareness of "the face" of others around us and how we can serve or do justice for them.<sup>21</sup> Levinas practically ignores the idea of self-primacy, though the responsibilities that come with it are a natural part of being human, helping us recognize others' needs when the situation calls for it.

Levinas envisioned a circular and reciprocal exchange where human intention exists in the "Other" and then returns to the agent-being as a moral obligation in the situation. In this process, the agent-being is called upon (perhaps we might say "beholden") to respond to, accommodate, account for, and most importantly, be responsible for an ethical interaction and its outcome. Levinas' vision truly inspires empathetic intersubjectivity with others, extending the "welcome of the face" to everyone we meet and presupposing an ethical scope in all daily Christian life. Seeing the Face of the Infinite God in the face of another should prompt a genuine ethical response toward both others and God. Such reflection should be meaningful and motivating for Christians when addressing any needs identified as part of the ethicality and responsibility required in the situation. Levinas' focus

on human intentionality highlights the immanent concerns “faced” by humans every day; it is a crucial motivator that forms a strong foundation for the self in Christian moral life and the vital area where our interests and responsibilities must go beyond ourselves.

For Levinas it is precisely in the free ethical response to the other in the world that our selfhood emerges. The absolutely other (God) does not at all limit our freedom, it calls it to responsibility, founds it and justifies it. The “same” is a term that Levinas uses to refer to our intellectual thought systems that are disrupted and destabilized in the encounter with the Other. The Other, precisely because it is other and absolutely alterior, stands outside of our own self-same system “here below.” This relationship with the other puts into question the spontaneity of one’s destiny allowing for human change, resiliency and organic growth throughout life. This dynamic, the dynamic of revelation, is not a harsh one. The phenomenological method brings us closer to the things themselves by positing direct experience of the other as prior to comprehension and language.<sup>22</sup>

If we consider that all “faces” are similarly constructed and that they also all (mostly) participate in the same compulsive intersubjectivity of moral responsibility in this world, then the method used here to avoid overemphasizing self-primacy points to an ideal that involves awareness of and responsibility toward the Other. This is especially driven by the experience of being drawn into a “directedness” that has been perceived from others (or perhaps even from the absolute Other Himself). We might say this is a mirror image of *Gegebenheit*. Therefore, recognizing such “otherness” and giving it proper Christian consideration and response becomes the best way to interpret “loving our neighbor as ourselves.”

## Conclusion

AS CHRISTIANS, WE HAVE A DIALOGICAL AND familial relationship with God, similar to how a son or daughter interacts with a father or mother, receiving loving guidance, advice, judgment, and critical formation in understanding life. How we interpret each moment, situation, judgment, and decision in our autonomous state appeals to the wisdom and guidance of a loving God as revealed in Scripture. From God, we are given freedom in Christ, but within this autonomous free will, we are permitted to choose what is right according to God’s will. In this way, our interpretation of each decision in our life can align with that freedom to follow God’s will, which He reveals to us every moment of each day. This freedom does not emphasize self-primacy, even though it is available to us and sometimes necessary; rather, our autonomous free will can rely on the interactive and interpretive fellowship found

through Scripture and in communion with the divine Lord, right here in our lives and language. The way we engage with the Word to interpret ourselves first, then the entire world and those around us, is key to fostering a culture of life and finding a path to escape this “culture of death.”

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## Notes

1. James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). This highly readable volume presents a straightforward and predominantly conservative perspective on contemporary thought.
2. “Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness,” *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, et al., 1978), 56.
3. Compare Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 286-290ff. Martin Heidegger’s conceptual program of *Dasein* in his seminal work *Being and Time* provides an extended discussion of the ontological status of the human as a “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and the necessary limitations caused by our finitude. Although the autonomy of our free will occurs within our being, we are always mindful that our being-ness (*Dasein*: “being there” in the world) is a temporary state and thus lends a sense of urgency to any judgement about life that we make. Heidegger makes quite clear that it is at this most foundational level where our conscious interpretations function to influence our personal decisions.
4. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 109-123ff. Edmund Husserl’s philosophical concept of phenomenology foresaw an effective use of the human experience of “time consciousness,” those ongoing moments of existence which we live through and in which we encounter our reality each step of the way through our lives. Because each moment is only an instant of time, and because these moments of time continually stream into our grasp and pass through into our memory, such interpretive read of our reality and the judgements we make for ourselves as we encounter them are the place, the “frame,” where our autonomy engages in its hermeneutical activity. Although Husserl’s entire program of the *epoché* where anything outside of our minds is bracketed away is less helpful for this discussion, the moment of our “time consciousness” as it houses our interpretative process allows a vital place for our autonomy to function.
5. The concept of “finitude” comes from a Heideggerian view of the limits of our life, casting a shadow of a cold, harsh reality where we often forget or ignore our deep longing for infinite existence.
6. See specifically John 15:13: “No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends.” *Evangelical Heritage Version* (EHV) 2019 Wartburg Project,

- Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 593ff.
7. Compare Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 593ff.
  8. Theodore George. "Hermeneutics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), §1.3. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/hermeneutics/>. Accessed December 10, 2025.
  9. This is the standard acronym for the Pantone [color] Matching System, commonly used for paint or ink.
  10. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, Volume 1: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 231.
  11. *Ibid.*, 230 [italics in original].
  12. *Ibid.*, 399.
  13. *Ibid.*, footnote, right column.
  14. See reference in Luke 10:25-28, among others.
  15. Livingston, *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 71-72 [italics in original]; internal quote taken from Hamann's "The Letter H By Itself."
  16. *Ibid.*, 72 [italics in original].
  17. Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 109.
  18. *Ibid.*, 104 [italics mine]; quotations within cited from various Herder and Hamann writings.
  19. *Ibid.*, 105 [italics in original]; quotations within cited from various Herder and Hamann writings.
  20. *Ibid.*, 111; [italics mine, pointing out the reference to the monograph title and Bayer's descriptive phrase for Hamann as a rather vocal intellectual objector to Enlightenment thinking even in its earlier stages].
  21. Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 517.
  22. George Drazenovich. "Towards a Levinasian Understanding of Christian Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Other." *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 40.

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