Against the "Selfish Gene": Covenant and relationality as a framework for public policy.

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“Wired” for cooperation… but slipped off our game

INTER-RELIGIOUS APPROACH:

Drawing on Jewish and Christian thinking as tikkun olam on this “complex religious landscape.”

All humanity is covenantally wired, and so reciprocal understanding—because it is in line with that covenantal wiring—is the most productive way to live.

Ephraim Meir’s work on “interreligious theology”: each explores her own beliefs and those of others to enhance our understanding of the world and ourselves.

This does not mean convergence or reconcilability but that irreconcilable faith stories and traditions do not void one tradition of worthy ideas that others can grasp and weave into their understanding.
THE INTER-RELIGIOUS APPROACH (Cont.)

• Levinas wrote, “the totality of the true is constituted from the contribution of multiple people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carrying the secret of the text.”

• Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney wrote, “If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.”

• The twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner called it “reciprocal inclusiveness.”
How we’ve slipped off our natural set-up of covenantal cooperation

• The concerns of this conference: fundamentalism and the “re-sacralization” of society in ways that undercut liberalism, tolerance, and inclusion, and…

• greed, poverty, and alienation and the societal polarization, rage, scapegoating, and unearthing of the “usual suspects” that they prod.

• These find a common denominator in excessive “separability.”
Separability and Situatedness

- **Separability**: the physical, mental, and legal ability to leave one’s setting and follow the ideas and opportunities of one’s choice--to separate from past and neighbor.
- **Separability**: associated with mobility, innovation, rights-based legal systems, and human and civil rights, which apply regardless of background and status.
- **Situatedness**: we develop our sense of self, character, values, goals, movements, language, worldview from our nexus of relations, from acculturation in family, culture, and community. In Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s words, “Life begins as life together.”
Separability and Situatedness: Advantages and Disadvantages

**Advantages:** Separability—flourishing of individual talent, change, innovation into new thoughts and life forms. Situatedness—values, support, affection and the possibility of doing more than we could alone.

But disconnected—as separated from each other—we come to grave difficulties.

**Disadvantages:** Situatedness alone—unchanging worldviews, unreflective communities, the group as “gigantic I,” oppressive control, conformity, prejudice, “old boys’ clubs.” Separability alone—self-absorption, an orientation towards the exit from common concerns and shared future, greed, poverty, abandonment, and the polarization, scapegoating, and violence that result.
Disadvantages of excessive separability: 18th century & now

Markets: need the mores of cooperation and fairness, the reciprocal bonds of civil society, and the practices of honesty, promise-keeping, justice, consideration for others, just reward for labor, etc. (Antonio Genovesi).

Capitalism, without mores of fairness and reciprocal cooperation, destroys communities, undermines the common good, makes workers dull, and vitiates morality. (Adam Smith)

Today: markets running society rather than society running markets; alienation, unconnected to values or purpose; a lack of networks, policies, and institutions to realize aims; fraught view of government: as the largest agent of common effort, government is suspect and so too its educational and economic programs. Government, the enforcer of common responsibilities (taxes, environmental regulation), is seen as the foe of freedom.
Excessive separability: The “immanent frame”

With the scientific and technological innovations: the “immanent frame” -- world as independent of a larger divine order (Charles Taylor)

One’s place within a divinely-created system was replaced by:
the thrill of detached autonomy
lordship over nature
fascination with the mind’s ability to turn unpredictable nature into an obedient tool.
Great benefits to survival, longevity, and standards of living followed.
Yet also a worldview of separation, exaggerated self-sufficiency, and disconnection from others.
Ethics becomes irrelevant

One has no reason to assume connection to world or others or to feel involved or responsible for them, as they too have no connection to you.

One attends to one’s separated self or one’s in-group.

Even if one were a person of good will, “good will”—on a separated worldview—would not necessarily include concern and responsibility towards others.
But we’re not “wired” for excessive separability: Our “set-up”

Existence is of God, the source of all that is. **God is the reason for existability:** “in all things God works intimately” (Aquinas). God breathed into Adam *nishmat cha’im*.

We are at once radically different from the source of existability, God. Yet the source of exist-ability must be “in” us in order for us to exist.

**This difference yet intimate relation is the way anything comes to be.**

The structure of existence is difference-*amid*-relation--or said another way, separability-*amid*-situatedness
Our “set-up” (cont.)

We are of God analogically, with different features but an undergirding of-a-kindness.

An incorporeal God—radically different from us-breathes nishmat cha’im, the spirit of life, into corporeal creatures.

We are b’tselem Elohim, in the image of--up close to--an imageless God from whom we are radically different.

God unfolds into all, explicatio, and all is enfolded in God, implicatio. (Nicholas of Cusa)

“Transcendence no longer hangs over man. He becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer.” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)
Difference-amid-relation as the structure of all existence renders humanity & society a matter of difference-amid-relation.

Even identical twins differ in character and approaches to life.

Yet “the individual is a fact of existence insofar as he steps into a living relation with other individuals.” (Martin Buber)
The “set-up” of our actions: Co-creatorship

Human action too is radically different from the “acts” of God, yet persons b’tselem Elohim, analogously, secondarily, within human capacity may make things of what exists in world.

“Co-creatorship”: humanity may act secondarily, within human abilities, to further God’s vision in world: The example of Eve

Aquinas’s “secondary causality”

Al-Ash’ari and Al-Ghazali similarly held hold that humanity “performs” what God creates
Distinction-amid-relation: Support from Neurochemistry & psychology

The pathways of the brain are formed & changed by interaction with world & persons. “Whom a person becomes is a co-construction of genes, gene expression from environmental effects… and the ecological and cultural surroundings… There is no being without shared social relations.” (Narvaez)

Developmental psychology and attachment theory: the importance of relationship to what one means when one speaks of the self.

Daniel Stern identifies the “core self” and the “core self-with-another” in infants.

David Schnarch describes the adult as a “differentiated” self within a complex of relationships
Distinction-amid-relation: Support from evolutionary biology

Evolutionary biology: a “hyper-cooperative species” in which “reciprocal altruism” structures dyadic exchange, kin relations, large societal networks, and interactions among highly mobile persons and groups without long-term contact.

Benefits to hunter-gatherer societies (95 percent of our evolutionary history): improved hunting among cooperative rather than competitive clans & greater offspring survival as families helped each other with offspring.

Even amid present-day mobility and urban anonymity, generous acts prompt generous responses expansively, in network fashion.
Our biology is relational because the structure of physical existence is relational. Each sub-atomic particle is distinct, yet the trajectories of one is “guided by” interactions with the trajectories of others.

“We must accept the idea that reality is only interaction…All things are continually interacting with one another, and in doing so each bears the traces of that with which it has interacted” (Carlo Rovelli)

Einstein’s “spooky action at a distance”—relationship at the quantum level—is how things are.

“We are “embedded in a cooperating natural world.”
Distinction-*amid*-relation expressed in *brith*/covenant

Covenant: bond between *distinct* parties; each party gives for the sake of the other. There must be distinct parties to form *inter*-dependent relations.

However profound the covenant, it does not subsume the person, nor is the individual sacrifice-able for the group or for covenant itself, as seen in the Akedah:

1) Abraham obeys the sacrifice request but God doesn’t allow breach of covenantal care for Isaac
2) Abraham knows God will supply a substitute
3) Abraham obeys the *un*usual request to stop the sacrifice, which God doesn’t allow
4) Abraham fails covenant with God as he fails covenant with Isaac
Reciprocity of Covenant

Reciprocal covenants among equals > easily imagined
Asymmetric covenants among unequals > easily imagined

**Biblical innovation: free reciprocity among unequals**, between the divine and human and among persons of different worldly status.

Stipulative features might arise (as a parent stipulates that a child clean her room), but covenant is not stipulative in motive or purpose (one doesn’t have children so that they clean their rooms).

Unlike contract, which protects interests, covenant protects relationship
Covenant is irrevocable.
Spirit of the donor—dedication, allegiance—given to the recipient in the act of giving. Giving of one’s self/spirit makes the bond. God entrusts his spirit—nishmat cha’im—in Adam.

Covenant begins bi-laterally: God and Adam; God and Noah; God and each patriarch. But it doesn’t remain bi-lateral: Persons give to God by giving to other persons in need. Covenantal concern for others builds covenant with God, and covenant with God sustains persons in giving covenantally to others.
The inter-twinning of covenant with God & among persons: *Tselem Elohim, nishmat cha’im*

When we act covenantally towards others, we are in covenant with the spirit of God that is intimately within them. We act covenantally towards others & at the same time, towards God.

Covenant extends from bi-lateral to larger associations. Reciprocal gift becomes *gift exchange network*, where gift from *God to person* generates gift *from person to neighbor etc.* and may return to its origin only much later after many gifts have traveled through the giving loop, thus sustaining it.

*Modern societies, with airplanes, Skype, Twitter, etc., cannot claim impossible what was done in canoes.*
Intertwined covenants: With God, among persons

• The Ten Commandments—the first three pertain to person and God, the rest to persons
• Numbers 5:6: “Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty.”
• Amos, Proverbs denounce the hypocrisy of performing rituals while abandoning the afflicted, as if one could maintain bond with God without bond with the needy.
• Rashi reads Isaiah, “I cannot be God unless you are my witness” and Rashi glosses, “I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world.
Covenant in the Christian tradition

John 4:20 “For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” Lacking love of others, there can be no love of God.

But the love of God enables our love of others. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Irenaeus: “to love Him above all, and one’s neighbor… do reveal one and the same God.”

Augustine: the “relic” of God’s image in each person gives her the capacity to love covenantally as God loves.

Wegter-McNelly: “God becomes freely and lovingly entangled with the world through the divinely incarnating act of creation and”—echoing John and Rashi--”subsequently through humanly relating acts of blessing, justice, and compassion.”
Who is in the covenantal, gift-giving loop?

All the nations. “The Jewish covenant assumes that monotheism — the God of the covenant — must be accessible to all humanity, not just to Jews.” (Daniel Breslauer)

In Genesis, God speaks to non-Israelites and makes covenants with them because all persons are expected to know and perform the moral law.

Yoram Hazony: the Bible should be read “as a philosophical argument for the importance of Israel’s covenant with God not only for the Jews but also for ‘all the nations of the earth.’ . . . [The biblical author] wished to persuade his readers that there exists a law whose force is of a universal nature, because it derives from the way the world itself was made.”
The gift-giving loop: All the nations

God’s covenant with Abraham: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”

--an idea illustrated in Abraham’s family. Though the covenant continues through Isaac, Ishmael also becomes a great nation and flourishes.

Covenant with Isaac: “through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed”

--in Isaac’s family. Though the covenant is continued through Jacob, his brother Esau too founds a great family and is the hero of the brothers’ reconciliation story

Covenant with Jacob, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring”
The expansive reach of the covenantal loop

The three central commandments of Judaism: love God, love neighbor, and love the stranger, the non-Israelite. Ezekiel grants strangers even land rights.

The enemy: must be approached with a peace settlement before the commencement of war. Even the enslaving Egyptians “may enter the assembly of the Lord” after three generations.

Siphra on Leviticus: “I the Lord your God have brought you out of Egypt on the condition that you accept the commandments against usury.”
Covenant, in sum

Humanity, made *b’tselem Elohim* is given relational, covenantal Being and so we have the capacity, *dmuth Elohim*, to respond to God and others covenantally.

This covenantal capacity to respond to others is what it means to be “response-able” (Catherine Keller).

Richard Kearney, echoing Rashi: “This is a *deus capax* who in turn calls out to the *homo capax* of history … each moment we confront the face of the other, welcome the stranger.”
Covenant as distinction-amid-relation: Applications to policy and practice

The covenantal process of reciprocal consideration-worthiness.

Reciprocal consideration-worthiness: the concerns of the other are taken to be as worthy of consideration as one’s own, to be accounted for in practice and policy as one’s own are.

a “regulatory principle,” what we do not achieve but towards which we strive in the process of trying to fulfill covenant with God and others. Without reaching it, it nonetheless orients behavior, decision, priorities, and policy.

We may return to it after breaches, as covenant is irrevocable.
Reciprocal Consideration Worthiness

• Adam Smith: in markets as in all of society, he wrote, each should "endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer.”

• In a worldview different from today’s separability and competition, Smith’s idea might appear realistic as it goes with the grain of our covenantal set-up.

• Worldviews change: monarchies were considered the most stable, moral form of government. Today, we put our hopes in representative democracy.
Why is the other side for the other side?

Reciprocal consideration-worthiness reveals two things:

- common needs and goals
- differences, which need be approached by asking “why the other side is for the other side” (Joel Hunter).

Reciprocal consideration worthiness might begin with near others, but given the mobility of persons, goods, microbes, and ideas, arenas of inter-dependent impact reach across the globe.

With reciprocal impact comes reciprocal responsibility.
A political program grounded in the covenantal structure of existence

Neurobiologist Darcia Narvaez: worldview—a sense of our set-up—comes first and forms a basis for practice and policy.

A convenantal worldview:
- changes relations within the market, prioritizing responsibility for different, distinct others.
- Alters political and economic transactions by configuring them within mutual regard and common goals and projects for a future also understood as shared.
Covenantally-minded proposals

- greater public-private investment in education, job training & re-training
- inclusion of stakeholders in government and business decision-making
- corporate responsibility for externalities (pollution) & for use of resources
- re-development of regions “left behind” by technological change, increased productivity, and globalization.

If you so not think these are good ideas, others will be better.
Not only economic but socio-political benefits

Economic abandonment yields duress, fear, and anger
> pushes people to seek explanations for their duress among “the usual suspects”
> explanations for why they are wronged and right to fight back.
> pushes people to seek solace and help in the group “gigantic I”
> seek solutions in wiping or throwing “the usual suspects” out.

The rise of right-wing populism, riddled with racism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, in the US and Europe.
The tragic: Blaming the usual suspects will not solve present duress

Deporting immigrants, for instance, will not solve economic ills: immigrants create firms and jobs, annually add $35 billion to the economy by the third generation, pay $223 billion in yearly taxes negative impact on those at the very bottom of the economic ladder (teenagers who have dropped out of high school).

As it does not relieve duress, blaming the usual suspects worsens conditions for the blamers—whose stress is not relieved--& for the “usual suspects” whom they blame.
“We have lost our minds”

The separability worldview—separating into one’s self-interest or into one’s “gigantic I”—will not address current problems because we are not created for such separation.

The neuro-biologist’s observation: habits of thought and action create facilitated pathways that predispose us to continuing these repeated habits—be they pathways of suspicion, competition, anger, or covenantal consideration.
This is why, when I read Adam Smith about imagining for yourself every little suffering of the other, it seems about as relevant as the buggy whip.

“We have no sense,” Nancy Abrams & Joel Primack write, “of how we and our fellow humans fit into the big picture… Without a big picture we are very small people.

The challenge: we have lost the big picture of our covenantal set-up.

But we are wired that way: given the gift of co-creatorship and the dmuth Elohim, we have the moral capacity, to carry it out.