

Never One Thing: Metanoia, Decision, Love, and Difference

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If “metanomics” is a new social science for a better age that has retrieved the power of speech, “metanoia” is something rather different and more personal. In metanoia we meet our second anthropological promise: that we possess the capacity for self change under the signs of love and death.

“Metanoia” is a word that is occasionally tossed around these days in evangelical Christian circles. It is found in the “Letter to the Hebrews” and is usually translated as “conversion.” Rosenstock-Huessy translated the term somewhat differently, and did so out of personal experience. In tracing his thinking on metanoia we will discover how he affirmed the second philosophical anthropological promise and how he once again made this line of thought serve the task of social criticism.

Decision

Of necessity we must begin biographically. Rosenstock-Huessy described his personal experience of metanoia in a 1946 letter to a friend. The events he described took place in the 1917 to 1919 period and primarily at the end of the war. “Metanoia,” he wrote in that letter, means “from dead works,” and he offered his reader a crucial distinction: faith is partly in God and the Spirit and partly in whether or not the institutions of the day are adequate to express this.ⁱ He said he never doubted God, but the institutions meant to carry out the work of the Spirit had unraveled before his eyes in 1918. He had a very promising academic career teaching German law at the University of Leipzig before the war. But not only was Germany defeated in the war, hardly anyone seemed to comprehend the weaknesses and faults in German life that brought the defeat, and the nation was obviously tipping toward a kind of chaos in which a few might prosper while the vast majority would suffer. He had an opportunity to go to Berlin to help write the new democratic constitution for Germany but could only see that as a process of political compromise meant to preserve the forms of life that brought the terrible war and humiliating

defeat. He had an opportunity to become an editor for a prominent liberal, Catholic journal of opinion, a regular and influential pulpit for trying to elevate the themes of contemporary discussion. And he could have gone back to Leipzig for a good salary.

Then it became clear to me that by accepting any one of these offers I would become a parasite of German defeat. The country was heading towards disrepute, defeat, poverty, and I would get on top of this corpse. I would shine either as undersecretary or a religious editor or as a university teacher. And I would have to wave a flag which had proved to be uninspired, unprophetic, and would make other people believe that I believed in its message when I did not.ⁱⁱ

He rejected all his good prospects and eventually took a job at Daimler-Benz, publishing the first factory newspaper in Germany, filling it with the kind of serious thinking that was the hallmark of his efforts in adult education. But of his metanoia experience he wrote:

Metanoia is not an act of will. It is the unwillingness to continue. This unwillingness is not an act but an experience. The words make no sense, the atmosphere is stifled. One chokes. One has no choice but to leave. But one does not know what is going to happen, one has no blue-print for action. The “decision” literally means what it means in Latin, the being-cut-off from one’s own routines in a paid and honored position. And the trust that this subzero situation is bound to create new ways of life is our faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

If the vehicles of the Spirit are sullied, it’s no use disobeying the verdict of history over them. I did probably not advance much in personal virtue by this about face towards the future, away from any visible institution. I did not become a saint. All I received was life. From then on, I had not to say anything which did not originate in my heart.^{iv}

We know there are people who “resign in protest,” many actually hoping to catch on with the same type of organization down the road, or even to come back to the same organization in a higher position later when vindicated. Rosenstock-Huessy was talking about something different here, something more radical and counter-cultural. He tried in his own life to depart from what was dead and uninspired to move toward at least the possibility of saying something honest and doing something vital. It is an obvious case of self-change. Not only did he resist the inertia of conventional thinking and a comfortable position, he declined the opportunity to become one of the privileged elite who helped to rationalize the German situation post-World War I. Rosenstock-Huessy became committed to “living” and “dead” as key critical terms in his moral analysis of all the human relationships and institutions he subsequently encountered. We

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especially observe him using this vocabulary when talking about economic systems and relationships.

Living and Dead

“Behind every one thinkable problem of our social sciences we can trace this major preoccupation of distinguishing between the living and the dead elements of the social pattern,” Rosenstock-Huessy wrote.^v In his 1954 Dartmouth course “Comparative Religion” he theorized five kinds of life— mechanical, organic, conscious (economic), passionate, and political, expressed as power, rhythm, purpose-intelligence, love, and sacrifice.^{vi} To focus on one or two of these forms or “cycles” of life— and particularly to accept the reductive theses of those who are specialists in the mechanical, organic, and economic— was, in Rosenstock-Huessy’s way of thinking, a form of living death.

Is it really first thing that you weigh 150 pounds? That would be if physics rules the world. Or is it really important that economics rules the world? Gentlemen, you know very well that they don’t rule you. You would despise you if they would. But why can’t you see that in any one moment these two great powers of life and death are lying in ambush against you? The powers of death are the modern natural sciences. They are very good for dead things, but as soon as you say that you can learn for your life anything from them, they are poisonous...^{vii}

Do you meet with the event of your being created, or do you meet with the event of your being...—undone, by physics? One is, do you describe your fall, our gravity, your resistance, your tiredness, your laziness— as the main item in life? That you are full of weight, and dross, you see, and feces, and that you have to die. Is this the first thing? That you’re already dead, so to speak? Or is the first thing that, despite everything, you are called forth to create life?^{viii}

So, in this spirit, Rosenstock-Huessy tried to rouse his students and other listeners to life by chiding them about their “dead things”: their television sets and their price tags,^{ix} their dead numbers,^x and even their brains—the organs of death.^{xi} He warned his hearers about the American national religion of inducing people to buy things they do not want,^{xii} and about the *Who’s Who* mentality wherein a “standard of living” is substituted for actual life.^{xiii} His sympathy went out because, “Everyone knows that the wage-earner in the factory has no life.”^{xiv}

Rosenstock-Huessy found death triumphant in academia where what he often characterized as the “Greek mind” was dominant with its practices of cold analysis and systematic doubt. He also found that death was ascendant in commercial life where the marketing survey, the financier’s formulae, and the accountant’s scrutiny stripped innovation and commitment out of the processes of the economy. I think it would be a shame to regard this as an afterthought in Rosenstock-Huessy’s work. He was preoccupied with economic questions, experientially understood, from 1918 on. It palpably horrified him, as is evident in the closing pages of *The Christian Future or the Modern Mind Outrun*, that the young people who had sacrificed so much in World War II would come home to the very same set of indignities that had confronted his generation after the Great War— the bloodless suburb, the eviscerating corporation, the tomblike factory floor, all thoroughly conditioned by the threat of unemployment in decaying communities.

Death and dead things are not precisely the villains of Rosenstock-Huessy’s thought. He repudiated the death denying culture he found in the U.S., often urging his students to skip the funeral home, buy six boards and build their own coffins— his sign of facing up to death and loss.^{xv} We have already seen him using death constructively as a sort of “universal curriculum,” the instigator of serious thought and study. In this sense death is real, and it is neutral. The issue is, what stance do we take when we encounter dead things, especially when we find ourselves in lifeless institutions, as Rosenstock-Huessy did in 1918. Unsurprisingly, he attributed to speech the power to keep one alive or to bring one back to life.^{xvi} But why do not more people know this and practice this? Rosenstock-Huessy thought the answer to this question, and as close as we can get to the final answer to the economic problem, had something to do with love.

Love

Love, as the surpassing affection of family members, long-time community members, etc. is not now and never has been in short supply in the human community. It can be located easily enough in good times and in crises. To simply command one to love is,

generally, pointless. And we have an impressive collection of literary and philosophical studies on love and death, especially on the theme of attempting to transcend death erotically. But Rosenstock-Huessy made a remarkable claim about love and death, as usual reversing the field on the subject. He said: “Death...under the mask of love is natural man’s share. Love, under the mask of death is historical man’s share.”^{xvii} If we live, and cling to life, and love and cling to love, then when death comes to interrupt that life and love, the person who experiences life as a succession of natural events is inconsolable. To live as a child of nature (which, of course, is a culturally constructed position and not “natural” at all) is to submit to fate and tragedy. It is to howl and bay in pain instead of to speak and then to finally rationalize the outcome as the product of causal events, meaningless causal events. But to die as a child of history— and Rosenstock-Huessy believed this was the Christian contribution to global culture— is to put the end (the end of time, the end of one’s life) at the very beginning and to make life full of improbable, wondrous, heroic, ingenious things—things like love— in spite of death. To live in history as a creator of times is to renounce fate and to confront tragedy. Love under the mask of death is to take the power of love as one’s consolation. “The history of the human race,” Rosenstock-Huessy proclaimed, “is written on a single theme: How does love become stronger than death?”^{xviii}

And the answer to this historical question is that love erupts through speech in political deeds and economic relationships. Good economic relationships are situational and plural. In principle, they defy principle, he wrote in “Mad Economics and Polyglot Peace” in 1944:

Man is free to choose any old or new way in economics. Matter is undogmatic. You may have to have a dogma about God because otherwise Hitler may be enthroned as Christ as this literally was done in Germany by the German Christians, people with a soft brain. But under no circumstances can you have a dogma about money or wheat or the optimum size of a factory; if you try to have such a dogma, the people may have neither work nor bread.

The reader need hardly be told that the situation thirty years ago was topsy-turvy. Dogmas about God were pooh-poohed, but dogmas about economics were

taken to be infallible. When people put a wrong emphasis on the static and the dynamic elements of their judgment, they lose their judgment. The misplaced dogmatism led to the world wars. If we wish to conclude peace, the dogmas must be placed outside this material world of ours. An economic dogma is impossible because in economics, we consume every product of time. Everything may be right at one moment and wrong at another. If we try to handle economics dogmatically, the world falls on evil days.^{xix}

So the force of love is to determine what must be subsidized and what must be forced to compete, what is to be given and what is to be auctioned, what is to be preserved and what may be spent, what is private and what public, what innovations need to be pursued, what taxes are due, and who gets a say and by what mechanisms.

Ingredients of capitalistic, socialistic, feudal, communistic, monastic, paternal, mercantilistic procedures enter into a sound economy as well as features of a family economy, a type very much by itself. A navy, a family, a convent, a hospital, an artist, a factory represent this variety of economies conspicuously enough....That anybody should try to reduce these contradictory economies of our various stages and phases and occupations into the straightjacket of pure capitalism or pure communism or anything pure, has mystified me all my life.^{xx}

In the pure impurity of economic relationships, love erupts in ownership, self-discipline, education, charity, invention, standards, sacrifice, stewardship, defensiveness, display, and law. There is cruelty, secrecy, propaganda, violence, waste, intimidation, ruthlessness, espionage, shrewdness, and extortion in economics too. The only way these things can be prevented from a final victory is that the system of which they are a part is never made total or presumed to be final. And the system always remains open to amendment and supplementation by love.

As this is true in economics, I am fairly certain Rosenstock-Huessy would say it is true in politics too. He told his students in 1956, "All laws... are the remnants of love, if they are rightly built..."^{xxi} He probably should have added that all laws wrongly built are the remnants of fear. In these two statements we see the cultural-critical summation of our second philosophical anthropological promise: dignity is won in self-change. For we will seek to employ our political mechanisms, accept the burdens and disciplines of doing that, admit the need of our involvement, when we are motivated by love. This is no

promise of success. There is still the tragic horizon. But when we go to our laws in fear, expecting the *other* person to be disciplined and changed, our part in the matter basically denied, our contribution toted up jealously, we get the contempt that self-serving hypocrisy deserves.

At this late date in the development of our tradition of cultural criticism, every critical paradigm of wide respect and seeming staying power has taken the adolescent position that the adult world is a faulty set of compromises. This literature usually offers an essentially anarchic ideal as the contrast with the sometimes comical, often times vicious, but always inarticulate *status quo*. The answer to this critique is usually that the kids are wrong, and they will understand some day. Rosenstock-Huessy's novel position is that the kids are *right* until the elders can articulate the love remnant in the laws and institutions of society.

Rosenstock-Huessy's peroration to his class "Universal History" on 17 May 1956 provides the ideal summary of his position.

Gentlemen, my whole story has been one of incarnation. When we speak, gentlemen, we call things into life. You don't believe this. That is your poverty. The modern man has lost the simple faith that the spirit comes down to earth. But he does, all the time. You say it first, and then things are created. The Bible begins, "Let there be light, and there was light," And that's simply true, gentlemen. There is nothing else to be said about the whole history of mankind, that first love, and freedom, and imagination say it, and then we do our duty to have it come true. And that takes suffering; it takes martyrdom; it takes fathers; it takes monks; it takes kings; it takes crusaders; it takes explorers; it takes discoverers; it takes inventors; and now it takes founders of families. Can't you see this, or is it too difficult?

So your question shows that you are still— you do not see that all laws are the sedimentation of free creation. Anybody who has experienced love knows that it comes first; it's a new beginning. Just make use of your best experience in your own life. The highest experience cannot be used by the lower experience. If you ever in your life had a bright idea, or a new instinct, or a new change of heart, Sir, make this the cornerstone of your understanding of the universe and you will understand that the universe begins with creation. And it ends in incarnation,

because that's the experience of every potent and creative man in the world. But you look outside and try to deduce by your little brain, not by your experience of your heart how the world begins, and how it should be run. You'll never solve it, gentlemen. You'll remain a selfish, inarticulate animal. If the spirit moves you, you will see how simple things are, gentlemen. Love begins, and hope keeps you going, and faith. And in the end, your grandchildren will bless you.^{xxii}

Rosenstock-Huessy had a special contribution to make to our moral-critical apprehension of our cultural pluralism. He certainly recognized the American and South African racial laws and the consequent segregation and silencing of Africans and African Americans as a terrible injustice.^{xxiii} He told his students in 1956 that the laws of the "so-called" state of Mississippi were evil.^{xxiv} But his thinking was drawn more personally and more readily from the divisions of class, nation, and generation. In any case, he made a specific contribution to the understanding of difference.

Difference

It has become the American way to assert our differences as sovereign, impenetrable, phenomenal boundaries. It has become the American way to ridicule this way of thinking as tedious scrupulosity— impossible in its own epistemological terms— when differences so conceived are offered as a claim on the conscience of the putative majority and ruling class. It is as if our national dialogue on our plural identities has stalled on the following exchange:

"You can't understand me!"

"Damn right, you whiner!"

Rosenstock-Huessy saw difference differently. His 1935 Lowell Lectures in Boston were titled *The Multiformity of Man*. He acknowledged that human life all over the planet takes many forms. But he was not content to stop there. Multiformity is a feature of each social group and every individual. We contain a myriad of differences— cryptically identifiable as past, future, inner, and outer dimensions of our experience but, in reality, even richer than that. Remember, we are impure thinkers wracked with competing emotions, and that as human beings we are not so much individual thinkers as we are creatures "called" in one direction then in another.^{xxv} We live in many time lines

That means we must pay extra close attention to the formal processes, the formation, of the forms into which we pour our lives. Clearly, Rosenstock-Huessy believed that communities are made and the most important things that happen in them to change them occur in formal speech.^{xxvii} But our communities and lives must be multi-form in order to say and hear all the crucial things that go on in our midst. Rosenstock-Hussy cautioned that genuine life (the vital new realization) is formless, that our forms are the “deadest thing about us.”^{xxviii} But this only proves that we must be prepared to abandon the old forms in order to make new ones that call to others of a fresh inspiration that must be harnessed. It is not a rationale for informality or anti-formal anarchism.

Rosenstock-Huessy believed absolutely in the unity of the human race from the very first speaker to the very last. He thought this was both cold fact and teleological project.^{xxix} But he *deplored* the category slippage that stupidly held there is a *uniformity* of humankind.^{xxx} He liked to play at “social mathematics” wherein three shifts might equal a single working day, or two people might marry to become one thing.^{xxxi} Social mathematics always defies regular mathematics and the laws of physics in its ability to synergize human energy into impossible multiplications of ingenuity, improbable divisions of self-control, and amazing reductions of complex motives along the lines of stated and felt purpose.

But perhaps the most incredible mathematics of all, according to Rosenstock-Huessy, is lived by the individual. We say my ethnic heritage is w, my sexuality is x, my religion is y, or my profession is z. I see the world a certain way. You appear odd and hostile. You cannot change me. And this is very often the position of people who identify themselves with large, prosperous majorities as well as people who identify themselves with much smaller, victimized minorities.

One Thing More

Fair enough. Indeed, it would be a horrible thing to ask one to have a “metanoia” style of radical change when her or his life consists not of dead works but of vital ones.

However, in accord with anthropological reality and as a social critical praxis, might we reasonably ask you to be *one thing more*? Indeed, you can be Scotch-Irish, a good member of the Nazarene Church, a Republican precinct captain, a master electrician, a holder of the NRA “Expert Marksman” badge, AND the first to welcome—the first true friend—to the first African-American family who moves onto your block. Why not? We can obviously be one thing more. All of us can be one more thing in addition to what we already are. We can make one more friend, take one more course, earn one more belt, visit one new place, cross one old boundary, read one new book, confront one old fear, admire one new hero, and amend one cherished principle. It is an arithmetic thing.

Rosenstock-Huessy wrote in *Planetary Service* that we all need to be contradicted, we all need to be put in the difficult position of hearing “counter-calls.”^{xxxii} Take a boy from a place some outsiders caustically deride as “Klan Town,” a gritty Northern state factory town with an absence of diversity so stark it calls attention to itself. He is raised to look down on racism but mostly on good government Republicanism, with a genetic touch of Presbyterian righteousness about independent people and a score of conservative political and patriotic pieties. He goes to another state for college and encounters in the flesh a tradition of prairie populism that constructs things differently, throwing suspicion on many authorities he had taken for granted. He does not stop being the boy of his youth, but he is changed by addition. He goes to live in a really cosmopolitan place where people chatter in languages from around the globe, and even the evening meal smells different from every doorway. He is pressed to see that his own life is implicated in far away events, and he again changes, if only by addition. Over and over again the man’s life is evidence for Rosenstock-Huessy’s personal slogan: *respondeo etsi mutabor*: I respond though I will be changed. And so his life progresses, in some important sense really progresses, by addition; and the accumulated weight of these little additions is finally not a difference in quantity but a difference in quality.^{xxxiii} Twenty-five years after leaving home, perhaps the boy from Klan Town is actually asked to teach a course in African American discourse! Can this be? We *know* it happens. Rosenstock-Huessy would urge us to step up and say so, to say that our differences are best realized when we become different from what we have been and different from the low expectations we

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ourselves and most social theorists have for us; for in acknowledging this possibility we
accept responsibility for the development and expression of our differences as a way of
gaining dignity for our lives.^{xxxiv}

As the adamant moralist and social critic Rosenstock-Huessy spun his unique point of view over tribes and empires, marriage and childrearing, education and politics, science and commerce, war and revolution. Rosenstock-Huessy was conservative in seeing forgotten genius in the old ways and radical in his willingness to change everything. He loved peace and slow, deliberate change; but he also honored warriors and “founders” who have the courage to strike out fresh. He was very serious about the twin possibilities, always present, of social crisis and human advancement. He was straight forward about putting the teacher at the crux of creation. A scold and prophet, Rosenstock-Huessy fought every reductionism and challenged us to retain a basic anthropological optimism that the human animal “... never is one thing,” but “...is and remains one thing plus something else.”^{xxxv}

Notes

ⁱ Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “Metanoia: To Think Anew,” *I Am an Impure Thinker* (Norwich, VT: Argo, 1970) 182-83.

ⁱⁱ Rosenstock-Huessy, “Metanoia: To Think Anew,” *I Am an Impure Thinker* 187.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosenstock-Huessy, “Metanoia: To Think Anew,” *I Am an Impure Thinker* 189.

^{iv} Rosenstock-Huessy, “Metanoia: To Think Anew,” *I Am an Impure Thinker* 188.

^v Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “In Defense of the Grammatical Method,” *Speech and Reality* (Norwich: Argo, 1970) 21.

^{vi} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lectures 10 and 11, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” (N.p.: Hans R. Huessy, 1988).

- ^{vii} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 11, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” 25.
- ^{viii} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 11, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” 27-28.
- ^{ix} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 1, “St. Augustine By the Sea— 1962,” (N.p.: Hans R. Huessy, 1990) 13.
- ^x Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 1, “St. Augustine By the Sea— 1962,” 8; lecture 2, “St. Augustine By the Sea— 1962,” 1.
- ^{xi} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 24, “Cross of Reality— 1953,” (N.p.: Hans R. Huessy, 1990) 17; lecture 7, “Circulation of Thought— 1954,” (N.p.: Hans R. Huessy, 1988) 1.
- ^{xii} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 8, “Hinge of Generations— 1953,” (N.p.: Hans R. Huessy, 1990) 9.
- ^{xiii} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 15, “Cross of Reality— 1953,” 6.
- ^{xiv} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 11, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” 2.
- ^{xv} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 5, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” 15; lecture 7, “Comparative Religion— 1954,” 34.
- ^{xvi} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 1, “St. Augustine By the Sea— 1962,” 7-8; *The Origin of Speech* (Norwich: Argo, 1981) 20-23, 30-31.
- ^{xvii} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 24, “Cross of Reality— 1953,” 9.
- ^{xviii} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Soziologie*, Bd. II (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958) 759.
- ^{xix} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “Mad Economics and Polyglot Peace,” unpublished essay, 1946, 18.
- ^{xx} Rosenstock-Huessy, “Mad Economics and Polyglot Peace,” 17.
- ^{xxi} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 9, “Universal History— 1956,” 34.
- ^{xxii} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 9, “Universal History— 1956,” 34-35.
- ^{xxiii} For example, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 1, “St. Augustine By the Sea— 1962”; *The Christian Future or the Modern Mind Outrun* 52.
- ^{xxiv} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 7, “Universal History— 1956,” 14.
- ^{xxv} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “Modern Man’s Disintegration and the Egyptian Ka,” *I Am an Impure Thinker* 49.
- ^{xxvi} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “Articulated Speech,” *Speech and Reality* 64.
- ^{xxvii} Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Origin of Speech* 2-10.
- ^{xxviii} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “Man Must Teach,” *Rosenstock-Huessy Papers*, vol. 1, (Norwich: Argo, 1981) 29.
- ^{xxix} Rosenstock-Huessy, lecture 6, “Universal History— 1956,” 22.
- ^{xxx} Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Multiformity of Man* iv.
- ^{xxxi} Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Multiformity of Man* 70.

^{xxxii} Rosenstock-Huessy, *Planetary Service: A Way Into the Third Millennium*, trans. Mark Huessy and Freya von Moltke (1965; Norwich: Argo, 1978) 65.

^{xxxiii} Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution: The Autobiography of Western Man* (1938; Norwich: Argo, 1969) 6.

^{xxxiv}“The picture of man, under the hegemony of meta-logic, theology, was that man was an abject sinner, in his individuality. The picture of man, under natural philosophy, was that he was everybody else’s equal. The vision of the social teacher is metanomical! He knows that the economics of society differentiate us incessantly; the variety of mankind is perplexing. By metanomics he reclaims man’s power to identify himself with others despite these differences.” Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, “In Defense of the Grammatical Method,” *Speech and Reality* 42.

^{xxxv} Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Multiformity of Man* 71.