

The Priority of the Other

Thinking and Living Beyond the Self

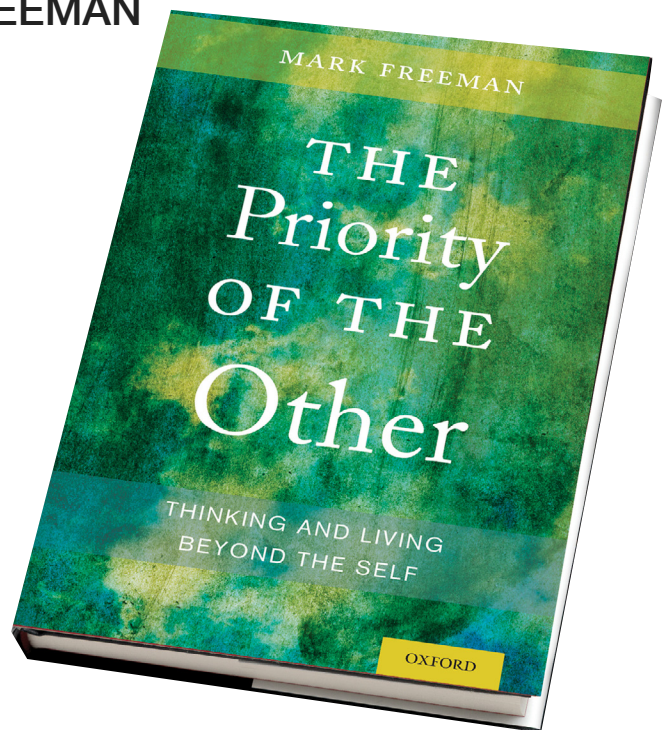
MARK FREEMAN

Contemporary psychology - as well as our own self-understanding - remains largely ego-centric in focus, with the self being seen as the primary source of meaning and value. According to Mark Freeman, this perspective is belied by much of our experience. Working from this basic premise, he proposes that we adopt a more "ex-centric" perspective, one that affirms the priority of the Other in shaping human experience. In doing so, he offers nothing less than a radical reorientation of our most basic ways of making sense of the human condition.

In speaking of the "Other," Freeman refers not only to other people, but also to those non-human "others" - for instance, nature, art, God - that take us beyond the ego and bring us closer to the world. In speaking of the Other's priority, he insists that there is much in life that "comes before us." By thinking and living the priority of the Other, we can therefore become better attuned to both the world beyond us and the world within.

At the heart of Freeman's perspective are two fundamental ideas. The first is that the Other is the primary source of meaning, inspiration, and existential nourishment. The second is that it is the primary source of our ethical energies, and that being responsive and responsible to the world beyond us is a defining feature of our humanity. There is a tragic side to Freeman's story, however. Enraptured though we may be by the Other, we frequently encounter it in a state of distraction and fail to receive the nourishment and inspiration it can provide. And responsive and responsible though we may be, it is perilously easy to retreat inward, to the needy ego. The challenge, therefore, is to break the spell of the "ordinary oblivion" that characterizes much of everyday life. *The Priority of the Other* can help us rise to the occasion.

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