



Philosophical Theologies in South Africa

Genealogies, Traditions,
and Speculations

Khegan M. Delpont (Ed)



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Contents

Introduction: A Philosophical Theology of the Subaltern?	1
<i>Khagan M. Delport</i>	
Chapter 1: A Brief Genealogy of “Philosophical Theology” ...	15
<i>Khagan M. Delport</i>	
Chapter 2: The Equipose Between Faith and Reason in Roman Catholic Intellectual Tradition	33
<i>Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho</i>	
Chapter 3: Philosophical Theologies in South Africa: Genealogies and Traditions Pre- and Post-1994	67
<i>Khagan M. Delport</i>	
Chapter 4: Philosophical Theology and Semitics/ Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa	115
<i>Jaco Gericke</i>	
Chapter 5: Towards a Decolonial Philosophical Theology	145
<i>Johann-Albrecht Meylahn</i>	
Chapter 6: Is There an Event in Biko? A Deconstructive Reading of the Dialectic of Black Consciousness	165
<i>Silakhe Singata</i>	
Chapter 7: Black Theology and Radical Theology: The Case for a Critical Encounter	195
<i>Obakeng Africa</i>	

Chapter 8: Making Sense of the Two Versions of Secularism as Public Policy: A Perspective from Philosophical Theology	225
<i>Patrick Giddy</i>	
Chapter 9: The Body (Dis-)incarnate: Notes on a Subterranean Theological-Phenomenology	247
<i>Calvin D. Ullrich</i>	
Chapter 10: Wiredu's Empirical Metaphysics: The Political Nature of Becoming and Understanding	269
<i>Justin Sands</i>	
Chapter 11: The Subaltern Agenda of Martin Versfeld: The Ontological Argument from Below	293
<i>Ryan Haecker</i>	
Chapter 12: The Hidden Face of Christ: Chesterton and the Concealment of (Divine) Mirth	315
<i>Duncan Reyburn</i>	
Chapter 13: How Morality Comes to Be: On the Germ of Being and Normativity in the Action of Signs	333
<i>Arlyn Culwick</i>	
Bibliography	359



Introduction

A Philosophical Theology of the Subaltern?

Khegan M. Delport 

Navigating the shared and contested space of “philosophy” and “theology” is a struggle that has existed for almost as long as these disciplines have been practised. Since the first recorded usage of “theology” in the Platonic corpus, there have been debates about its relation to philosophical practice and wisdom. In the wake of Aristotle’s inclusion of “theology” within the encyclopaedia of theoretical philosophy, the Abrahamic traditions have sought to relate, distinguish, and separate the pathways of philosophy and theology. For Christian theology, these relationships became particularly fraught after the Condemnations of 1277, a watershed moment within the history of Christianity. These internal debates within religious traditions were further exacerbated by the *via moderna* of nominalism and later through the Enlightenment critique of religious authority. It is chiefly Immanuel Kant who is credited with the disposing of “natural theology” through a delimitation of finite reason, while simultaneously emphasising the primacy of practical reasoning as the appropriate domain for religious expression – even as this curtailment of speculative metaphysics did not prevent its continuation (e.g., G.W.F. Hegel and F.W.J. Schelling). Nonetheless, the post-Kantian scepticism towards “philosophical theology” continues among practitioners of philosophy of religion until the present day – both within the so-called analytic and Continental traditions. Amongst many professional philosophers of religion, “theology” is often considered suspect because of its supposed mystifying allusions to divine revelation, which transcend the ordinary processes of human inquiry. Since the humanities are supposed to study

objects that are phenomenologically and practically accessible, any reference to invisible or metaphysical objects is deemed beyond the bounds of rational inquiry – or so it is claimed. Moreover, critical theories (e.g., decolonial/postcolonial theory, feminism, critical race theory, and so on) have indeed raised penetrating questions regarding the legacy of philosophical theology, particularly in its Christian variety, as regards its purported claims to “universalism,” as well as its androcentric, racial and gendered proclivities. Its relatively homogenous social grouping – one that tends to be North Atlantic, “white,” and male – has been a point of critique.

It is within such a context that this volume finds itself. It stems from an invitation to discover how philosophy and theology have been, and continue to be, instituted and practiced within the South African context. The decision to focus on the *South African* context was made largely for pragmatic and circumstantial reasons. It arose out of a specific project to consider the ways in which theology and philosophy have been interrelated in South Africa within the pre- and post-1994 period – instigated through a larger initiative entitled *Doing Theology in South Africa*, spear-headed by Prof. Henco van der Westhuizen at the University of the Free State. This led to a two-day online conference hosted by Huguenot College (in Wellington, South Africa) in March 2022, with the title *Philosophical Theologies in South Africa: Texts, Traditions, and Institutions*. It has tried to gather, mostly from a pool of younger researchers and scholars, some of the work that is currently being done within the field, while also taking a look back and seeing what work had been done previously. It also arose, partly, because of the significant paucity of research on this question within the South African context, and from a desire to generate new research that would alleviate that gap somewhat. In stating this upfront, I am not disputing that a more ambitious attempt at tracing the way philosophy and theology have interacted within a broader pan-Africanist perspective is a desirable goal; it would have, however, exceeded the scope of the research parameters that stimulated the project to begin with. Opening up the scope to include an intellectual tracing of the relationships between

philosophy and theology beyond the borders of South Africa would have required a much more extensive, multi-volume treatment in order to do justice to the topic. Accordingly, the range of this volume is significantly more modest, and does not make any pretensions towards comprehensiveness, even as it does make some small contribution towards a local recounting of theoretical trajectories and traditions. In doing so, it joins recent trends to pluralise the field of the philosophy of religion from a global perspective, even as it leans extensively towards Christian traditions¹ – a fact entwined with the predominance of Christianity in Southern Africa.

As we will hopefully see in the contributions that follow, delineating a specific *South African* approach to questions of philosophy and theology is somewhat precarious. Within the postcolonial and hybrid context of stratified and entangled development, articulating anything like an essential “South African” approach is probably not sustainable. However, there might be some reasons for bringing a focus on South Africa, while simultaneously refusing untenable claims to historical “exceptionalism.” For one thing, due to South Africa’s late entry into democratic rule, certain philosophical and theological traditions, such as black consciousness and black theology, achieved popular reception in a distinctive way when compared to other African countries, in ways comparable to the United States during the Civil Rights movement and the era of Jim Crow laws. Even after the demise of legal apartheid, there is a sentiment – particularly among the so-called “born frees” – that the post-1994 period has not been a time of social and economic liberation, but rather a continuation of apartheid and disenfranchisement by other means. Economic precarity and poverty, by and large, continue to be disproportionately allocated along racial lines, and so – for many theologians and activists in South Africa – the tradition of black theology of liberation and decolonial theory continues to be a source of inspiration, in some distinction from other African countries that have

1 Cf. Yujin Nagasawa and Mohammad Saleh Zarepour (eds.), *Global Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion: From Religious Experience to the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

had longer periods of postcolonial independence, and do not experience the same level of economic and social stratification along racial lines. Thus, although the focus on South Africa in this specific volume was inspired for largely contingent and pragmatic reasons, there also may be some distinctiveness in such an account that warrants this delimitation.

With these limits in mind, however, this volume in general has attempted to throw the intellectual net wide. It has not set overly-restrictive parameters as regards method or approach. Rather, it has sought to gauge previous and contemporary work that has explicitly thematised the interrelation between philosophy and theology. The broad limitations adopted have been that contributions should either be by South Africans scholars working at the interface between philosophy and theology, or scholars who work at South African institutions, or should focus on the work of South African thinkers, past or present. The result is a relatively wide array of approaches and topics, ranging from descriptive and historical studies to more explicitly constructive and speculative accounts. The majority of contributors work within the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, characteristic of “Continental” philosophy; this is reflective of the trajectories within South African academia historically, at least since the establishment of higher education institutions in the country. However, the volume has not excluded more “analytical” approaches – as can be seen in some of the contributions. Topics covered include traditional questions regarding faith and reason, but also move into more recent approaches to appropriate philosophical theology for the analysis of biblical texts. Other contributions, characteristic of current trends in South Africa, have sought to bring philosophical theology into dialogue with decolonial traditions and black theology. Some have focused on phenomenological analysis after the theological turn, while other authors have sought to engage explicitly the domains of metaphysics through the writings of specific thinkers. Other themes covered include the question of secularity, what kind of “secularism” we inhabit, and whether such secularity is sustainable.

It is worth remarking upon, however, that while there was not a strictly circumscribed “theme” for the original conference or volume, except for the minimal delimitations already mentioned, there does appear to have emerged something like an “organic,” unplanned order to the contributions. One of the themes that has emerged is, if one may risk such language, the thematic of the *subaltern*: that is, the perspective *from below*. As we will see in several contributions, there is a focus on doing theology and philosophy from within *immanence*, out of the perspective of the *marginal*, within the *existential* or *empirical* context. We have references to doing theology from the *underground*, from our lived organicity. Even the explicitly metaphysical chapters have an emphasis on lived experience and sense-making, of the blending of the natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence, of thinking *religion* within the symbolisations of the *secular*. While such a convergence in themes is interesting and gives something of a character to the volume, one should probably not generalise this into a kind of *South African* approach or school; while it *may* suggest a developing subaltern option within the global discourse of philosophical theology, it is too soon to know whether this is the case or not.

As regards a summary of content, the first four chapters adopt a more descriptive tone concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology, on both a global and local scale. In the first chapter, Khegan Delpont attempts to briefly trace the origins of “philosophical theology.” He argues that the term is complicated by the fact that there have been shifts in usage throughout history regarding “theology” and “philosophy,” so that relating and distinguishing both of these practices have proved somewhat complicated. Moreover, the manner in which the term is used today is by no means univocal. However, he argues that philosophical theology can be traced to the introduction of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist currents into the Abrahamic traditions, a stream which conceived the relationship between “philosophy” and “theology” aporetically. Later, the traditions of theology and philosophy were separated into distinct disciplines, eventually creating the category of “natural theology,” which would often be equated with what today is

understood by “philosophical theology.” After the Enlightenment, “philosophical theology” was engaged more critically, and eventually led to a diversity of approaches to philosophical theology, some adopting a more post-Kantian approach of phenomenology and hermeneutics, while others have been deeply informed by analytic philosophy. It is the latter stream which is by far the most vocal proponent of philosophical theology within the current academic scene.

In the second chapter, Valentine Iheanacho gives an overview of the relationship between faith and reason within the Roman Catholic tradition. Here he seeks to trace this narrative from early Christianity, through the medieval period, to modern Catholicism – particularly in the post-Vatican II period. Echoing the themes of the first chapter, though in more detail, Iheanacho argues that the Roman Catholic teaching on faith and reason has been heavily influenced by Augustinian and Anselmian currents, chiefly exemplified in the figure of Thomas Aquinas. He also traces the conflicts and separations of faith and reason as they occurred after the 1277 Condemnations, as well as via the influence of nominalist traditions. The extremes of rationalism and fideism were both ultimately rejected by the Magisterium, and – particularly in the nineteenth century and thereafter – a series of official interventions by various popes and councils have attempted to ameliorate any necessary opposition between theology and philosophy.

The next chapter, by Delport, focuses specifically on the South African context. It seeks to trace something of the interactions between philosophy and theology that have existed within the context of South African academia. One problem it seeks to unpack is that since the context of analytic philosophy was largely absent from South African institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, any philosophical theology that has developed here – though with some notable exceptions – has largely adopted a somewhat different approach overall than is present in contemporary Anglo-American discussions. Under the sway of more “Continental” traditions, “Christian philosophy” has evidenced a much stronger leaning towards phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions – in both its

more “right-wing” and “left-wing” receptions in the pre-1994 period. Amongst the Catholic intellectual minority, one finds similar trends – though with a Thomistic flavour added to the mix. In the post-1994 period, one can find, broadly-speaking, four varieties of philosophical theology, namely: (1) Continental philosophical theology/philosophy of religion, which is the predominant stream within the South African context; (2) Reformational philosophy, which continues today even as it exhibits less of an influence in the current context than it did previously; (3) analytic theology/philosophy of religion, which was chiefly exemplified by figures like Vincent Brümmer, who echoed the approach of D.C.S Oosthuizen; and finally (4) African philosophical theology, which has attempted to bring the tools of philosophy, in both the analytic and Continental traditions, into conversation with African theology and philosophy. One could argue that most of these traditions – with the exception of Reformational philosophy – also find representation within the pages of the current volume as well.

The fourth chapter continues the descriptive thrust of the previous contributions. Jaco Gericke – who in many ways has spearheaded a niche in the interpretation of biblical texts via the traditions of philosophical theology – here attempts to gather an overview of the explicit and implicit themes of philosophical theology/philosophy of religion, particularly in relation to contemporary research on the Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages in South Africa. Some of the themes covered within the literature that is surveyed, especially from the pages of South African academic journals, include questions of conceptual analysis, epistemology, justified true belief, concepts of divinity, divine relations, and theodicy, all of which are mainstays within philosophical theology. These are approached from the tradition of analytic philosophy of religion (APR), even as Gericke also concludes that Continental traditions tend to enjoy predominance within a South African context.

The next chapter, by Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, initiates a transition within the development of the volume, commencing a section that brings Continental philosophy of religion into dialogue with discourses prevalent among the humanities in

South Africa, namely decolonial theory and black theology. It also presents a turn towards philosophies of immanence and radical theology. Specifically, following the Marxist theorist Robert Tally, Meylahn criticises recent trends within the humanities towards “surface” reading – under the banner of “post-theory” – which he contrasts with traditions of critical theory that situate cultural production within the context of global capital. He describes tendencies towards “use-value” and practical outcomes as being one way in which this post-theoretical outcome finds expression in theological faculties globally – but also within South Africa. The drive to make theology relevant for “ordinary” people is predicated on construing the proverbial “person-on-the-street” as a self-explanatory category, as if individual desires and situations were not already interpellated by a digital capitalist imaginary, already in the process of formation through technological assemblages. Rather than staying absorbed in surfaces, Meylahn argues that one needs to continue the impulse of critical theory and ask what lies behind texts and contexts. Everything appears within a specific context, a particular “light” or “clearing” – to use Meylahn’s Heideggerian prose – and we need to ask how such things come to be seen and known in these ways, rather than simply accepting things at face value. This same critical attitude should be applied to both theology and theory insofar as they, intentionally or unintentionally, colonise life-worlds in the name of divine mission (in the case of theology) or anything that does cohere, for instance, with democratic materialism (in the case of theory). In this context, for Meylahn, theology and philosophy can dialectically inform one another to mitigate the totalising trends of both.

Turning to an explicit treatment of black theology, Silakhe Singata in his chapter reads black consciousness through the lens of a postmodern eschatology. Through an interpretation of the seminal writings of Steve Biko, Singata brings to the fore the dialectical permutations of black consciousness, as described by Biko himself, uncovering the theological trajectories of Biko’s implicit Hegelianism, and thereafter drawing out its implicit eschatological imaginary. Finding this vision somewhat too teleological for his liking, he seeks to supplement Biko’s

eschatology with the radical theology of John Caputo, here specifically focusing on the temporal overtones of Derrida's *différance*, proposing a theology of the event that critiques a carapaced eschatology, in the name of the historical singularity of blackness that opens up alternative futurities beyond the world of anti-blackness.

In a very similar vein, Obakeng Africa in the next chapter brings black theology into conversation with radical theology. Focusing on some of the early development of black theology within the University Christian Movement (UCM), Afrika emphasises some of the tensions within nascent phases of black theology. Alluding to the importation of secular theology into the UCM – a trend chiefly associated with the earlier writings of Harvey Cox in the 1960s – Afrika shows how some figures received positively some of the emphasises of its proponents. In this light, Afrika makes an argument that some of the insights of secular theology can be continued in a different vein through radical theology, since both were concerned with the collapse of a theological metanarrative in the West, a trajectory that is continued through the tradition of black theology. Both secular and radical theology draw upon the death-of-God theology of the 1960s, even as radical theology takes this up in a very different key – something that Afrika believes could energise a rethinking of black theology within a contemporary context.

Continuing with the theme of secularity, Patrick Giddy puts forward a stimulating presentation of the different cultures of secularity we inhabit. In line with many historians and theorists of secularity, Giddy argues that the secular is predicated on theological and religious foundations, rather than implying the subtraction of religion as such. Specifically, he argues for two kinds of secularity, roughly characterised as “Protestant” and “Catholic” versions. He begins by seeking to unpack the dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment within the secular – in a manner not dissimilar to Karl Rahner and his teacher Augustine Shutte – focusing specifically on the way that subjectivity, existential participation, and intersubjectivity have been energised within modernity, and with it the question of self-transcendence. This is a key symbol for Giddy, something that

both kinds of secularism he will discuss struggle to enculturate. As regards the varieties of secularism, Giddy categorises Protestant, “Anglophone” secularity (Version B) as being the most predominant at present. It prioritises the individual and is characterised by principles of equality, fairness and justice. In this version, the role of public policy is, more or less, to leave people alone. The problem with this version of secularity is that it has difficulty with the question of motivation and maintenance of order when everyone is left to themselves – so to speak. Power and choice become voluntaristic, lacking an account of how we are formed into freedom and virtue. In Catholic, “Francophone” secularity (Version A), there is a stronger sense that it is the role of the state to impose a standardising order on the collective, minimising overly-disruptive forms of otherness, and thus forming subjects into citizens. The limitation with this version is that it has problems with facilitating freedom and self-transcendence, since it tends to work within a secularised vision of cosmic hierarchy that inhibits richer accounts of self-determination. Both of these secularisms, for Giddy, have problems with enculturating people into solidarity and spiritual growth, something which religious symbols of a non-finite power, community, and self-transcendence are able to ameliorate. Towards the end of the chapter, Giddy seeks to unpack these questions further in relation to Christological symbols and their connection to self-transcendence.

The chapter of Calvin Ullrich brings into focus traditions of phenomenology after the theological turn, particularly as this relates to the lived and organic body. He begins within an analysis of Edmund Husserl’s emphasis on *Leib* (“lived body”) as a pertinent contribution to the subsequent tradition of phenomenology. However, following the critique of Merleau-Ponty, Ullrich argues that Husserl’s egological focus detaches subjectivity too much from the organic basis of embodiment. He then moves onto Merleau-Ponty himself, who brought a much stronger focus on how our lived and fleshy embodiment shapes our perceptions of the world and environment. However, Merleau-Ponty’s account of fleshliness, for Ullrich, appears too unmoored from its organic placement, too abstract, and so cannot

be found in any specific body, because it is present everywhere. To supplement this limitation, he recommends the approach of Emmanuel Falque – a prominent figure within the so-called “theological turn” of phenomenology. Falque himself reads the later work of Merleau-Ponty over against some of the earlier tendencies present in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty attends to the lived wildness of the body in all its chaotic organicity. It is this reading of embodiment that Falque appropriates and includes within his own kenotic Christology. Hereby, Ullrich seeks to unpack the existential, elemental, and material preconditions for incarnation and the “spread” nature of Christ’s body.

The chapter of Justin Sands marks another shift within the volume towards more metaphysical and speculative terrains. He brings focus to the writings of Kwasi Wiredu and particularly his empirical metaphysics. According to Sands, Wiredu engages in a critique of “faith,” but he does so because of its supposed anti-rationality. This is done specifically to counter the colonialist framing of African religion and thought as being basically superstitious and anti-rational. Wiredu seeks to oppose these Eurocentric and implicitly racist sentiments. Drawing upon the Akan metaphysical approach, Wiredu resists a “top-down” model of deduction, and rather begins with a moral anthropology, building up towards a metaphysical vantage through critical reflection on experience – a metaphysics “from below,” one might say. In doing so, Wiredu aims to bypass the “Western” dualisms of transcendence and immanence, nature and supernature, secularity and religiosity, and puts forward a spatialised metaphysic that is thoroughly experiential, empirical and non-speculative. Moreover, he argues that Wiredu’s metaphysics, because it is thoroughly spatialised and metaphorically conceived through experiences of relational engagement, is always-already social and political.

Continuing the theme of a metaphysics from below, Ryan Haecker focuses on the Afrikaner and Catholic intellectual Marthinus (“Martin”) Versfeld. Recovering a neglected work of Catholic metaphysics, namely his early work entitled *The Perennial Order*, Haecker centralises his discussion on Versfeld’s

critical engagement with the ontological argument. He argues that Versfeld's "subaltern" inflection of the Anselmian tradition is grounded in his turn towards the particular, a move that is inspired by his reception of Thomistic existentialism, as found in the likes of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. Through *a posteriori* reflection, it moves from the realms of experience and the datum of "existence," from the specialised sciences of knowledge and motion, towards the irruption of the most generalised sense of being. This Thomistic and Aristotelian conceptualisation of being through an abstraction of the particular also contextualises Versfeld's philosophical forays into the domains of haptic and sensuous experience – as seen in some of his writings on cooking, mountain climbing, and so on.

The focus on a Catholic, sensuous disclosure of being is continued in the contribution of Duncan Reyburn. A scholar of G.K. Chesterton, Reyburn tries to unpack an implicit phenomenological metaphysics through an engagement with Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Would Be Thursday*. Influenced by media studies, Reyburn draws upon the theory of Marshall and Eric McLuhan to show the centrality of "formal causation" within the writings of Chesterton, that is, how the perception and intuition of form acts as a mediation of higher realities – here echoing the metaxology of William Desmond. For Chesterton, however, the truth of being is seen through a specific dispositional vantage of joy, laughter and hilarity, which are themselves ways of taking reality seriously. It seems that we are only able to see things as they are when our perceptual grasp of the world is attuned with a divine perspective, namely God's enjoyment of creation, and mediated to us by Christ's own mirth.

In the final chapter, by Arlyn Culwick, we once more have an empirical and experiential focus – though now articulated in the idiom of semiotics and analytic theology. Culwick here attempts to push back against one of the key insights of David Hume regarding the separation of the *is* from the *ought*. Adjacent to his critique of the necessary relation between cause and effect, Hume had argued there exists no real relation between states of affairs and moral judgements, that is, between descriptive and normative statements. Culwick, through the Thomistic tradition of semiotics,

chiefly following John of St. Thomas (John Poinsett), here attempts to articulate a metaphysical picture in which relations and signs are intrinsic features of the universe, for it is a definition of the universe that it has interrelated elements, otherwise such a universe and system would not arise or exist. In such a universe of related elements, real relations may be inferred between things so that *to be* is *to be something for something else*, thus acquiring *significance* – thereby undermining the fact-value distinction upon which the Humean picture is predicated. Thereafter, he goes on, using terminology gathered from Poinsett and Charles Peirce, to reflect upon the teleological directions of signs, and – through the operations of *determination* and *representation* – how they may direct and delimit the way things may be related to each other. However, since determination is only partial and not total, there remain potential and virtual effects between things that allow for them to enter into relations that are, as yet, undetermined and not actualised, but which may have real world impact under the right conditions. Modalities of actuality, potentiality, and virtuality are for Culwick “filtered” by systems as a result of the network of relations in which things come to be. Such “filtering” suggests that normative processes are not external to signifying relations themselves, and in fact form a part of systems. Culwick then goes on to argue how love and kenosis – the stripping away of potential relations so that things may enter into real relations – may form a continuation of these determining and representing structures that constitute our sign-making universe.

Overall, this volume hopes to make some contribution to the discussion on philosophy and theology in South Africa. It does not make pretensions to being a “programmatically” or “agenda-setting” contribution to the discussion on theology and philosophy in South Africa, even as it may be one of the first – if not *the* first – attempt to gauge the interrelations between theology and philosophy within the South African context. This volume does not assume any exceptionalist status for this recounting, but rather finds itself within a much larger pan-Africanist and global context. If it manages to stimulate more explicit conversation and research on this topic, to provoke further explorations beyond the landscape of Southern Africa, and

to make some minor contribution to the body of literature, it will have served its purpose.

A final note: by way of acknowledgement, the editor would like to thank Huguenot College for providing the platform for hosting the original conference, and especially Annette Potgieter, Nelus Niemandt, and André du Toit for the support they gave to the project in various ways. Thanks should also be given to *Communitas* – the Curatorium of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Western Cape – for providing a significant part of the funding that made this research possible. Here special thanks should go to Pieter van der Walt, Marthinus Havenga, and Frederick Marais. The editor would also like to thank all the contributors to the original conference and the current volume, some of whom agreed to make original contributions not included in the original conference. Lastly, recognition should be given to the Department of Systematic and Historical Theology at the University of Pretoria (especially Danie Veldsman), as well as the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung,² who funded the latter period of research in which this volume was compiled, edited, and brought to its completion at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, under Thomas Wabel, the chair of Evangelical Theology – who provided a welcoming space for this project to be brought to completion.

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Chapter 1

A Brief Genealogy of “Philosophical Theology”¹

Khegan M. Delport 

In this chapter, I hope to give a cursory “genealogy” of the origins of “philosophical theology”.² Indeed, since the phrase “philosophical theology” is not self-explanatory, and the historical relationship between both “theology” and “philosophy” is an entwined, albeit contested one, it seems beneficial to situate the discussion in this volume within this broader context before commencing with our more contextual focus. Indeed, the relationship between theology and philosophy as a historical and principled interaction is long and complex. Here, I make no claim to adequate comprehensiveness; rather, broad indications are given based on some of the scholarship available.³ As is widely known, early Christianity drew upon Greco-Roman philosophy in its apologetic and doctrinal development.⁴ Early Christianity absorbed an already Hellenised context of Second Temple Judaism, exemplified by the Septuagint and Philo of Alexandria.

- 1 A shortened version of this chapter also appeared as a section of “Philosophical Theology in South Africa?” *Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, no.3 (2022): 1–60. Parts of it however have been substantially revised for this book.
- 2 By “genealogy,” I am indicating some dependence on forms of historicism that impress the contingency of knowledge formations, that certain ways of thinking become possible through historical and linguistic configurations; see, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (London: Routledge, 1989).
- 3 See Jan Rohls, *Philosophie und Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).
- 4 The literature on this question is extensive, but a helpful account of the early Christian approach to philosophy can be found in Hubertus R. Drobner, “Christian Philosophy,” in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 672–690.

In the earliest stages of its development, Paul the Apostle taught an apocalyptic relativising of “the wisdom of the world” through the Christ-event.⁵ For him, the logic of cross and resurrection, and God’s election of “the weak things of the world” overturns the ancient standards of philosophical acumen through spiritual wisdom (1 Cor.1:17–2.16, cf. Col.2:8). Nonetheless, the critical consensus on the New Testament has established that Paul’s theology draws upon philosophical categories, including Jewish, Stoic, and Platonic traditions.⁶ We should add, especially after the seminal work of Pierre Hadot, that “philosophy” in late antiquity was much more expansive and holistic than our modern categories suggest. Ancient philosophy was understood as a comprehensive way of life,⁷ and so by proposing a distinct philosophical option, early Christians – when they appropriated the language of “philosophy” positively – were demanding nothing less than an alternative pattern of being-in-the-world, covering many things that would not traditionally be considered under “philosophy” by moderns.

Because of this, any hard categorical divisions of “philosophy” and “theology” should be approached carefully within pre-modern intellectual traditions; for as is well-known, Christianity by many was considered the *verissima philosophia* (Augustine)⁸ or τὴν ἀληθῆ φιλοσοφία (Clement of Alexandria).⁹ Some, like Tatian and Tertullian, were opposed to philosophy as such, due its pagan origins – hence the latter’s famous

5 See L. L. Welborn, *Paul’s Summons to Messianic Life: Political Theology and the Coming Awakening* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

6 Stanley K. Stowers, “The Apostle Paul,” in Graham Oppy and N.N. Trakakis (eds.), *Ancient Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2014), 145–157; Stowers, “Paul and the Terrain of Philosophy.” *Early Christianity* 6 (2015):141–156. Paul’s speech in the Areopagus also demonstrates something of his perceived engagement with ancient philosophers and pagan metaphysics (cf. Acts 17.16–34). The Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews are also widely recognised as drawing upon Hellenistic Judaism, Platonism, and Stoicism.

7 Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

8 *Against the Academics* 3.19.42.7.

9 *Stromateis* 2.11.48.1

query about what Athens had to do with Jerusalem; but their position would not ultimately win out, and even they ascribed “philosophy” to Christianity.¹⁰ In fact, the title of “philosophy” was by far the preferred option for early Christians, while “theology” could often be used pejoratively.¹¹ θεολογία was initially a pagan term that first appeared in Plato¹² and was later connected to philosophy by Aristotle,¹³ as well as within the Stoic division of philosophy.¹⁴ θεολογία is often spoken about as something below philosophy and as counterpoised to scientific knowledge. It initially was linked to those who spoke poetically about the gods or divine things. Augustine, in *De civitate dei*, drawing from Marius Varro, distinguished between three kinds of theology, namely the “mythical” theology of the poets (e.g., Hesiod, Homer), the “natural” or “physical” theology of the philosophers (e.g., Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Epicurus), and the “civil” or “political” theology of the city, that is, the worship of the pantheon as mediated by the priestly class.¹⁵ Of these options, it is the second one that Augustine considers most open to the title “theology,” while the other options were considered religiously and soteriologically insufficient. The theology of the philosophers provided a somewhat distinct option insofar as it engaged in a

- 10 See Tertullian’s (in)famous denunciation of philosophy in *The Prescription of Heretics* VII and *Apology* XLVI.
- 11 On this question in general, see the entries by Jean-Ives Lacoste on “Philosophy” and “Theology” in Jean-Ives Lacoste (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, Vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2005), 1234–1240; 1554–1562 resp.
- 12 *Republic* 379a
- 13 *Metaphysics* E 1025a19: “ὥστε τρεῖς ἂν εἶεν φιλοσοφίαι θεωρητικαί, μαθηματική, φυσική, θεολογική”; also cf. K 1064b3; W.D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924 (repr. 1970 [of 1953 corr. edn.])).
- 14 On Cleanthes division of philosophy, see *Diogenes Laërtius* 7.41.
- 15 *De civitate dei*, VI.5. Referencing Varro, he writes “Deinde illud quod le est, quod tria genera theologiae dicit esse, id est rationis quae de diis explicatur, eorumque unum mythicon appeflari, alterum physicon, tertium civile?” (VI.5.17–19). Later he substitutes “physical theology” for “natural theology”, again in relation to Varro’s contestation of the “fabulous” theology of the poets: “Loquebalur enim non de naturali theologia, non de civili, sed de fabulosa, quam libere a se putavit esse culpandam” (VI.5.7–9); *Sancti Aurelii uepiscopi de civitate dei, vol. 1: lib. I–xiii*, eds. Bernardus Dombart and Alfonsus Kalb (Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1993).

critique of pagan superstition. Augustine especially mentions Socrates and the Platonists as moving pagan philosophy towards a deeper concern for moral questions; it thus was singled out as the closest to Christianity and therefore the most profitable for dialogue.¹⁶ However, pagan philosophy was still restricted insofar as it remained within the worship of the pantheon and not the one God, even as they performed the amiable work of rationalising and demythologisation.¹⁷ In the end, the true philosopher for Augustine is the lover of God and divine wisdom, concerned with true worship, so that *verissima philosophia* is ultimately that way of life which leads the creature towards the love of divine truth.¹⁸

Philosophy and theology, in their Christian and pagan forms, were thus related and intermingled from early on. This is one reason why the phraseology of “Christian philosophy” or “philosophical theology” is fraught with hermeneutical challenges, especially when considering the complex attitude exhibited by early Christian thinkers towards both philosophy and theology – precisely because of their mutual pagan linkages. Much like other philosophical schools, Christian philosophy patterned itself as a way of life, complete with distinctive identity markers, spiritual practices, texts, and doctrines.¹⁹ In this regard, some do query whether early Christianity developed a thoroughgoing philosophical programme of its own (e.g., the Academy of Athens), particularly after the collapse of the School of Alexandria.²⁰ There was simply too much diversity to for it be organised within a unified philosophical school, as already recognised by Origen.²¹ The idea of a single “Christian philosophy” is therefore questionable. Others, like Pierre Hadot, have argued that Christianity undermined the ancient practice of philosophy,

16 *De civitate dei*, VIII.3–15.

17 *De civitate dei*, VII.5ff.

18 *De civitate dei*, VIII.1.

19 Johannes Zachhuber, “Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity: Some Reflections on Concepts and Terminologies,” in Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides and Ken Parry (eds.), *Eastern Christianity and Late Antique Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 52–77.

20 Winrich Löhr, “Christianity as Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives of an Ancient Intellectual Project.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 64.2 (2010): 160–188.

21 Cf. *Contra Celsum* III.12

exemplified by the closing of the Academy in 529 CE by Justinian, and further by the later intellectualising of philosophy during the medieval period. However, research also confirms that ideas addressed and appropriated by theologians in the early intellectual development of Christianity touched on analogous themes to pagan philosophers, thus strengthening the idea that they were engaging in a comparable intellectual project (with all due differences acknowledged).²²

In terms of phraseology, John Chrysostom is credited with coining the term “Christian philosophy” (Χριστιανικῆς φιλοσοφίας) in his *Homilia in Kalendas*, by which he intended a way of life in distinction from the pagan and Hellenic pattern.²³ Still, early Christian philosophers like Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen appropriated and thereby transformed pagan thought within their theological systems. With strong connections to the Stoics, they imagined philosophy as implying true knowledge, as being a union of the theoretical and the practical, and as a pathway to happiness.²⁴ For Justin, philosophy is “the knowledge of that which exists, and a clear understanding of the truth,” with happiness being its final orientation.²⁵ Famously, he believed that the σπέρματα αληθείας are given to all,²⁶ and that philosophy was given to human beings by God.²⁷ Again, Socrates is singled out as having anticipated Christianity through a recognition of the Logos, and thus Christ himself.²⁸ Origen defined philosophy

22 George Karamanolis, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

23 John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Kalendas* (PG 48:956). For this, see H.M. Schmidinger, “Philosophie, christliche,” in Karlfried Gründer (ed.), *Philosophie in der Geschichte ihres Begriffs: Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), 8868–87. On the idea of Christian philosophy as a *vita philosophica*, see Jean-Yves Lacoste, *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, trans. W. Chris Hackett (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 1–29.

24 Karamanolis, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*, 48–59.

25 *Dialogue with Trypho* 3.5. Translation taken from St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

26 *First Apology* 44.10

27 *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.1ff.

28 *Second Apology* 10.8

as that which “professes to possess the truth” and that this “knowledge of realities instructs us how we ought to live.”²⁹ He envisaged Christian philosophy as a spiritual understanding of scripture, including the law, the prophets, and the gospels;³⁰ for him, “anyone who constructs a Christian philosophy will need to argue the truth of his doctrines with proofs of all kinds, taken both from the divine scriptures and from rational arguments.”³¹ He suggested parallel developments amongst the Hebrews and the Greeks regarding the divisions of knowledge into ethics, physics, and epoptics, mirrored in the biblical curricula of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, respectively dealing with morals, the natural world, and theology – with “logic” interwoven through all of the disciplines.³² Clement, for his part, envisaged Greek philosophy as a fruit of divine providence which anticipated the truth of Christianity by leading the Greeks into righteousness. He defines philosophy as “a form of the practice of wisdom” insofar as “wisdom is the scientific understanding of things divine, things human, and their causes.” As such, it is a practice which is subordinate to “wisdom,” which exercises “authority” over it. Much like the history of Israel and the Mosaic law, philosophy was a guardian for the Greeks as the law was for the Hebrews. For Clement, there might be only one path to truth, but there are many tributaries flowing into one eternal river of divine wisdom.³³ All these thinkers, however, considered pagan philosophy to be inadequate and inferior to Christian teaching – being dependent on Moses and the prophets who preceded them – and that Christianity therefore provided a more reliable form of philosophy than its Greco-Roman alternatives. In response to this, pagan philosophers, especially Neoplatonists such as Plotinus, Proclus, and Iamblichus, were in turn influenced by Christianity, and sought to provide a sophisticated pagan

29 *Contra Celsum* III.12. Translation taken from Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

30 *Contra Celsum* 1.9.

31 *Contra Celsum* IV.9

32 *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue 3.1

33 *Stromateis* 1.5.28–32. Translation from Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis: Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

alternative by way of an elaborate metaphysics, Platonic theology, and ritual theurgy.³⁴ These traditions were in turn taken up in the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Cappadocians, and thereafter disseminated into the medieval period via Boethius, John Scotus Eriugena and Thomas Aquinas. It is through Christian Neoplatonism that the scriptural mysteries of symbols and revelation were merged with orders of scientific knowledge and demonstration, so that both theology and philosophy were now thematically joined; theology now becomes a reasoned reflection that deciphers the divine reasons hidden within the symbols of holy scripture, approaching a “theological science” in the spirit of Aristotle.³⁵

Detailing the medieval understandings of the relationship between philosophy and theology is simply beyond what can be achieved here. But one can mention that revisionist historians of medieval philosophy like John Inglis have questioned whether the major thinkers of this epoch – such as Aquinas, Scotus, or Ockham – should even be classified as philosophers, thus destabilising a genealogy that imposes divisions between reason and revelation that were not necessarily pertinent for all medieval theologians.³⁶ In general, philosophy was used as an aid to theology, apologetics, and the exegesis of scripture, even as it was subordinated to sacred doctrine – under the medieval regime of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.³⁷ In distinction from early Christianity and the monastic context, philosophy as a discipline gradually came to be distinguished from theology within the burgeoning medieval university, understood more as intellectual technique than a way

34 See Kevin Corrigan, “Pagan and Christian Philosophy: Plotinus, Iamblichus and Christian Philosophical Practice,” in Mark Edwards (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2021), 293–312.

35 Olivier Boulnois, “The Concept of Theology,” in Alexander J.B. Hampton and John Peter Kenney (eds.), *Christian Platonism: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 101–121.

36 John Inglis, “Philosophical Autonomy and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 5.1 (1997): 21–53.

37 Malcolm De Mowbray, “Philosophy as Handmaid of Theology: Biblical Exegesis in the Service of Scholarship.” *Traditio* 59 (2004): 1–37.

of living.³⁸ Famously, Thomas Aquinas argued for the distinction of metaphysics and theology: on the one side, philosophical metaphysics began with the knowledge of creatures and thereafter moved towards God (e.g., *kalām*, the Five Ways), from the *ens commune* to the *Ipsium Esse subistens* – a gesture framed overall by the principle of analogy and the *via negativa*. On the other side, sacred doctrine moved from the knowledge of God towards the creature (e.g., revelation, the sacred scriptures). Aquinas himself was influenced by Neo-Platonist currents of a Proclean and Pseudo-Dionysian theory of “intensive being,”³⁹ mediated also by Arabic sources⁴⁰ (e.g., Ibn-Rushd,⁴¹ *Liber de Causis*⁴²), as seen in his accounts of ontological participation and causality:⁴³

the philosopher takes his argument from the proper causes of things; the believer, from the first cause...the teaching of philosophy, which considers creatures in themselves and leads us from them to the knowledge of God, the first consideration is about creatures; the last, of God. But in the teaching of faith, which considers creatures only in their relation to God, the consideration of God comes first, that

38 Cf. Lacoste, “Philosophy,” 1234–1238.

39 Fran O’Rourke, “Virtus Essendi: Intensive Being in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas.” *Dionysius* 15 (1991): 31–80. Aquinas had read the Latin translation of the *Elements* by William of Moerbeke ; Carlos Steel, “William of Moerbeke, translator of Proclus,” in Stephen Gersh (ed.), *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 247–263.

40 Richard C. Taylor, “Aquinas, the *Plotiniana Arabica*, and the Metaphysics of Being and Actuality.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 59.2 (1998): 217–239.

41 Olivier Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot (XIIIe –XIVe siècle)*. Épiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 328–339.

42 For a summary of the Proclean trajectory of this text, see Cristina D’Ancona, ‘The *Liber de Causis*,’ in Stephen Gersh (ed.), *Interpreting Proclus: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 137–161. Also see Werner Beierwaltes, “Der Kommentar zum ‚Liber de Causis‘ als Neuplatonisches Element in der Philosophie des Thomas von Aquin.” *Philosophische Rundschau* 11.3–4 (1963): 192–215.

43 See Edward Booth, O.P., *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 267.

of creatures afterwards. And thus the doctrine of faith is more perfect, as being more like the knowledge possessed by God, who, in knowing Himself, immediately knows other things (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II.4).⁴⁴

For Aquinas, overall, the divine science may be divided into a *duplex* in which *sacra doctrina* deals with the revelation of sacred scripture while metaphysics or *theologia philosophica* focuses on effects of God in creation. It is centred on being *qua* being (*ens in quantam ens*), and not God as such, insofar as it seeks to relate that which is caused to its transcendent cause. Both of these, however, are subalternated by Aquinas to an eschatological knowledge of the beatific vision (*scientia beatorum*) which is the supernatural end of all created beings.⁴⁵

Later, after the Parisian Condemnations of 1277,⁴⁶ this *duplex* was widened so that reason could actually now be separated from faith. The Thomistic distinction between theology and metaphysics, in contrast to the Boethian tradition,⁴⁷ would eventually lead to the creation of an independent science of metaphysics and ontology, especially after Duns Scotus.⁴⁸ It was

44 Translation taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two: Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

45 On this, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8–29. Also see Marion, “On the Foundation of the Distinction Between Theology and Philosophy.” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 13.1–3 (2009): 47–76.

46 The scholarship on this is vast, but see Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 387–410; John F. Wippel, “The Parisian Condemnations of 1270 and 1277,” in Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 65–73.

47 Andreas Speer, “The Hidden Heritage: Boethian Metaphysics and Its Medieval Tradition.” *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 5 (2005): 163–181.

48 Olivier Boulnois, ‘Quand commence l’ontothéologie? Aristote, Thomas d’Aquin et Duns Scot’. *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995): 85–108; Boulnois, *Être et représentation: Une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l’époque de Duns Scot (XIIIe –XIVe siècle)*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999); Boulnois, *Métaphysique rebelles: genèse et structures d’une science au Moyen Age*. Épipiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France,

within the Scotist tradition, especially in Francis of Marchia, that we see the first distinction of general and special metaphysics,⁴⁹ and in Nicolas Bonet we see the “invention” of *theologia naturalis* as subordinate to and separate from metaphysics – here understood as the science of being and non-being.⁵⁰ In late scholasticism, this was combined with nominalism and accounts of “pure nature” which argued that the created world could be comprehended without a gesture towards the supernatural.⁵¹ The influence this had on post-Baroque and Enlightenment philosophy has been traced by intellectual historians,⁵² establishing that the grounds of secularity are to be found in this period.⁵³ Martin Luther, for his part, reacted against the Aristotelianism of his monastic training, and also absorbed the nominalism and *via moderna* percolating in the medieval

2013); Ludger Honnefelder, ‘Der zweite Anfang der Metaphysik. Voraussetzungen, Ansätze und Folgen der Wiederbegründung der Metaphysik im 13./14. Jahrhundert,’ in J. P. Beckmann, L. Honnefelder, G. Schrimpf, G. Wieland (eds.), *Philosophie im Mittelalter: Entwicklungslinien und Paradigmen* (Meiner: Hamburg 1987), 165–186; Honnefelder, *Scientia transcendens. Die formale Bestimmung der Seiendheit und Realität in der Metaphysik des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* (Duns Scotus – Suarez – Wolff – Kant – Peirce). «Paradeigmata 9» (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990); Honnefelder, ‘Metaphysics as a Discipline: From the “Transcendental Philosophy of the Ancients” to Kant’s Notion of Transcendental Philosophy’, in R. L. Friedman and L. O. Nielsen (eds.), *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory 1400–1700*. The New Synthese Historical Library 53 (Kluwer, Dordrecht–Boston–London, 2003), 53–74.

- 49 Sabine Folger-Fanfara, “Franziskus von Marchia: Die erste Unterscheidung einer Allgemeinen und einer Besonderen Metaphysik.” *Documenti E Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 16 (2005):461–513.
- 50 Boulnois, *Métaphysique rebelles*, 313–341
- 51 Of course, a thesis made famous by Henri de Lubac. Also see Jacob Schmutz, “The Medieval Doctrine of Causality and the Theology of Pure Nature (13th to 17th Century),” in Serge Thomas-Bonino (ed.), *Supernatural: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought* (Florida: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2009), 203–250.
- 52 See Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 53 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

schools.⁵⁴ He still allowed for a Christian use of philosophy, even as he made a definitive distinction between them. Protestant *Schulmetaphysik* would develop this separation, particularly after the systematisation of metaphysics found in Francisco Suárez (important for Kant's and Heidegger's characterisations of metaphysical science).⁵⁵ This tendency promoted even further the separation of general from special metaphysics, cementing the division of philosophical metaphysics and theology, and leading to the separation of them, in contrast to their more "aporetic" relation held within the tradition of θεολογική φιλοσοφία⁵⁶ and

54 On this, see the sections "Theology and Philosophy" and "Luther, Aristotle, and Nominalism" in Robert Stern, "Martin Luther." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020); <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/luther/>.

55 See Jean-François Courtine. *Suarez et le système de la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); Oliva Blanchette, "Suárez and the Latent Essentialism of Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology." *The Review of Metaphysics* 53.1 (1999): 3–19; Giannina Burlando, "Suarez and Heidegger on the transcendental moment in the *cognitio transcendentalis*," in R.H. Pich (ed.), *New Essays on Metaphysics as Scientia Transcendens*. Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Medieval Philosophy (Porto Alegre: Louvain-la-Neuve, 2007), 343–362; Courtine, "Suárez, Heidegger, and Contemporary Metaphysics," in Victor M. Salas and Robert L. Fastiggi (eds.), *A Companion to Francisco Suárez*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 53 (Leiden and Boston : Brill, 2015), 72–90; Costantino Esposito, "Heidegger, Suárez e la storia dell'ontologia." *Quaestio: Journal of the History of Metaphysics* 1 (2001): 407–430; Esposito, "The Hidden Influence of Suárez on Kant's Transcendental Conception of 'Being', 'Essence' and 'Existence'," in Lukás Novák (ed.), *Suárez's Metaphysics in its Historical and Systematic Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 117–134; Esposito, "Suárez and the Baroque Matrix of Modern Thought," in *A Companion to Francisco Suárez*, 124–47; Jorge J. E. Gracia, "The Ontological Status of the Transcendental Attributes of Being in Scholasticism and Modernity: Suarez and Kant," in Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer (eds.), *Was Ist Philosophie Im Mittelalter? Qu'est-ce que la philosophie au Moyen Age? What Is Philosophy in the Middle Ages? Akten Des X. Internationalen Kongresses für Mittelalterliche Philosophie Der Société Internationale pour l'étude de la philosophie médiévale*, 25. bis 30. August 1997 in Erfurt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 213–225.

56 The exact phrase θεολογική φιλοσοφία ("theological philosophy") seems to have been first used by Maximus the Confessor in *Ambigua ad Joannem* 37.5.6, which he places – following the Evagrian tradition – in the last of the triad of the practical, natural, and theological philosophy. Also cf. *Quaestiones et dubia*.192.13.

the Boethian conception of *scientia divina* as the object of first philosophy.⁵⁷ It was particularly Kant's account of the antinomies of natural theology and the delimitation of reason that contributed to a decline in traditional "philosophical theology" in the post-Enlightenment period,⁵⁸ even as it experienced revivals and continued development in its Thomistic and analytic varieties.

"Philosophical theology" is a more recent coinage, occurring largely in the post-Reformation period, predicated on the formal division between metaphysics and theology. It is therefore not really surprising that the development of such language, including that of "natural theology,"⁵⁹ is something of a post-medieval phenomenon.⁶⁰ Ingolf Dalferth, from a

57 Ernst Vollrath, 'Die Gliederung der Metaphysik in eine Metaphysica generalis und eine Metaphysica specialis'. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 16.2 (1962): 258–284.

58 See his famous section in the Transcendental Dialectic on the antinomies of reason; cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A405 / 432 – A 567 / B 595

59 In the Boethian tradition of metaphysics, stemming from the aporetic ontology of Aristotle, the relation between "metaphysics" and "physics" was much more porous. It is, of course, well known that the title of *Metaphysics* was added by the students of Aristotle, and the precise significance of the prefix "meta-" is the subject of significant debate among historians of philosophy; see Anton-Hermann Chroust, "The Origin of 'Metaphysics.'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 14.4 (1961): 601–616; Hans Reiner, "The Emergence and Original Meaning of the Name 'Metaphysics'." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13.2 (1990): 23–53 ; Jean-François Courtine, *Inventio analogiae: Métaphysique et ontothéologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 45–107.

60 I have been unable to find a reference to "philosophical theology" predating the seventeenth century. A notable early usage can be found in Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part* (London: 1678), 541, in which he pairs philosophical theology with "natural theology." This was anticipated in other works like that of Seth Ward, a Bishop of Exeter and Salisbury, in a series of sermons published earlier in 1672. Other references can be found in John Smith's *Christian Religion's Appeal from the Groundless Prejudices of the Sceptick to the Bar of Common Reason* (London, 1675), 110 and Anthony a Wood's biographical commentary on the deist Thomas Hariot in *Athenae Oxonienses, First Volume* (London, 1691), 390. Moreover, there seems to be not much invocation of *Philosophische Theologie* before the eighteenth century in German literature. Kant makes reference to it in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) as well as to "rational theology" in his *Lectures on the*

specifically Reformed perspective, has typologised several options drawn from this history, ranging from dogmatic philosophical theology – concerned with the proofs for divine existence and so on – to modern trends of the hermeneutical philosophy of religions, concerned less with metaphysical deduction and more with the descriptive and orientating task of thinking through the normative grammar of theological language and the hermeneutics of lived religion.⁶¹ Dalferth, for his part, believes that the project of traditional philosophical theology has been undermined by the critical work of Hume and Kant. However, this is not a consensus position, and reflects something of the influence of Eberhard Jüngel and his critique of theological metaphysics in general. The critical standing of Kant vis-à-vis metaphysics no longer has guaranteed purchase even within the Continental tradition, as seen in recent developments in speculative realism (e.g., Markus Gabriel, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, etc.). Moreover, numerous works of recent philosophical theology tend to demonstrate that the task of more traditional philosophical theology is alive and well among both analytic philosophers – and even among more Continental varieties.⁶²

By and large, today, one could say that “philosophical theology” in the North Atlantic, largely, does not follow a strictly hermeneutical approach in a post-Kantian or Heideggerian

Philosophical Doctrine of Religion (1817). In French, the phrase *théologie philosophique* appears even less during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but can be found in the nineteenth century, such as in the so-called Vignaud pamphlets, like E. M. Bailly’s *L’existence de dieu et liberté morale* (Paris: 1824), 480 (on Malebranche); Madame De Staël, *De L’Allemagne* (Paris: 1845), 525 (in reference to Schleiermacher); Felix Ravaisson’s *Essai Sur la Métaphysique D’Aristote, Volume 2* (Paris: 1846), 373 (on Neoplatonism), and Eduard Reuss, *Histoire de la théologie chrétienne au siècle apostolique, Volume 2* (Paris: 1860), 430 (on the metaphysics of divine being), amongst others.

61 See Ingolf Dalferth, “Philosophical Theology,” in David Ford and Rachel Muers (eds.), *Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (3rd ed., Blackwell, 2005), 305–321.

62 For one example, see the plea for a qualified “rationalist” philosophical theology in Vittorio Hösle, “The Idea of a Rationalistic Philosophy of Religion and Its Challenges,” in *God as Reason: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 1–23.

fashion, being concerned, that is, with “the conditions of the possibility of every ontological investigation.”⁶³ Analytical philosophy is clearly the preferred avenue for work done in philosophical theology in the twentieth century, as a survey of the literature shows, with its assumption of theological realism and a focus on linguistic meaning and the semantic clarification of metaphysical doctrine.⁶⁴ The noted analytic philosopher of religion and Reformed epistemologist Alvin Plantinga has defined philosophical theology as “a matter of thinking about the central doctrines of the Christian faith from a philosophical perspective,” that is, about “employing the resources of philosophy to deepen our grasp and understanding of them.”⁶⁵ The South African philosophical theologian Vincent Brümmer, also placed within the analytic tradition, argued that philosophical theology is “an analysis of internal conceptual problems in systematic theology,”⁶⁶ which tries “to determine which conceptual forms can be accepted without contradiction.”⁶⁷ Continental philosophy, in recent times, has been more wary of metaphysical argumentation and so has tended towards more hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches, bracketing out traditional metaphysics. This might be linked to their distinctive genealogies, which diverge after Locke and Kant, with the former seeking to ground religion in a common rational basis, while the

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- 63 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh and Dennis J. Schmidt (New York: SUNY, 2010), 35. On the Continental philosophy of religion in general, see Merold Westphal, “Continental Philosophy of Religion,” in William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 472–493.
- 64 For a statement of this position, see Richard Swinburne, “The Value and Christian Roots of Analytical Philosophy of Religion,” in Harriet A. Harris & Christopher J. Insole (eds.), *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: The Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 33–45; William Hasker, “Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 421–446.
- 65 Alvin Plantinga, quoted in Brian Hebblethwaite, *Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 14.
- 66 Vincent Brümmer, “Meanders in My Thinking: A Brief Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 10.
- 67 Brümmer, “Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,” in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 448.

latter delimits reason as a mode of access to the transcendent.⁶⁸ This does not mean that metaphysics as themes of discussion have been avoided within Continental philosophy; rather – at least until recently (e.g., speculative realism) – it has tended to mostly avoid full-throated metaphysical speculation. However, the theological turn within phenomenology in recent times (e.g., Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Falque, etc.) has changed this situation somewhat, even as it has sometimes been wary of the terminology of “metaphysics,” despite more speculative trajectories being included within it (e.g., Michel Henry).⁶⁹

In this light, with the theological turn in phenomenology and the post-critical return to metaphysics after speculative realism, it seems untenable to assign “philosophical theology” only to analytical theologians and philosophers. Within North America and Great Britain, the analytic approach is the preferred method among philosophical theologians and tends to predominate the academic discussion on the topic. However, other schools with a decidedly more Continental flair, such as Radical Orthodoxy (e.g., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, etc.), have been enormously influential in the last two decades, producing a contemporary alternative to the APR. Seeking to critique the very foundations of modern philosophy, in both its analytical and Continental guises, this approach seeks to deconstruct any idea of a purely secular recounting of philosophy and the social sciences.⁷⁰ This has not proved uncontroversial, but it remains

68 Nicholas Wolterstorff, “How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition of Philosophy,” in Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (eds.), *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155–168; “Analytic Philosophy of Religion: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Inquiring About God: Selected Essays, Volume 1*, edited by Terrence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17–34.

69 See Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

70 See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy*:

a live option within the current discussion on philosophical theology – including South Africa. Indeed, criticisms of “philosophical theology” have indeed not been absent in general – both externally and internally. Some philosophers of religion have argued that “philosophical theology” is largely an apologetic enterprise to rationalise beliefs that have been decided on other grounds. But the proposed “secularity” of philosophy of religion has itself been questioned as relying on trajectories that are theological and colonialist in nature.⁷¹ Some feminist theologians, from within the tradition of philosophical theology and philosophy of religion, have also criticised philosophical theology, particularly in its analytic variety, for its subtle and sometimes explicit chauvinist framing, as seen (for example) in its account of the free will and divine determination according to “masculinist” ideals of autonomy and non-dependence – a point argued explicitly by Sarah Coakley, amongst others.⁷²

This chapter has followed some of the very broad trajectories of the history of philosophical theology. In general, we have seen linguistic shifts and changes in the deployment of both “philosophy” and “theology”. Broadly speaking, one can see “philosophical theology” as stemming from the infusion of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist elements into the Abrahamic traditions. However, the exact terminology of “philosophical theology” is a later coinage, often used as a circumlocution for what came to be called “natural theology.” In the wake of Kant and Hume, some have claimed the demise of traditional

A New Theology (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

- 71 For example, Purushottama Bilimoria, “What Is the ‘Subaltern’ of the Philosophy of Religion?” in Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine (eds.), *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* (Cham: Springer, 2009), 9–33; An Yountae, *The Coloniality of the Secular: Race, Religion, and Poetics of World-Making* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).
- 72 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); 98–105; Coakley, “Feminism,” in C. Taliaferro, P. Draper and P. L. Quinn (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 689–694.

metaphysics, instigating the turn to phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions. However, others have continued in the vein of a more classical metaphysics, though now often imbued with a post-Heideggerian inflexion.⁷³ Moreover, philosophical theology has continued to be practised extensively within APR or so-called analytic theology. While not being without controversy and scepticism, philosophical theology continues to be a vibrant field. The question remains as to whether this reception has been extended beyond Anglo-American and Continental traditions, and into the global South – the focus of the current volume. What form this will take is still unfolding.

73 See, for example, the twentieth-century revival of post-Heideggerian Thomism, particularly among Catholic theologians (e.g., Erich Przywara, Ferdinand Ulrich).



Chapter 2

The Equipose Between Faith and Reason in Roman Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho 

Introduction

Two *causes célèbres* in early modern times that pitched ecclesiastical authorities against reason and science were those that involved Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). While Galileo was spared the tortures and horrendous burning at the stake by the dreadful Roman Inquisition, Giordano Bruno, regrettably, was not that fortunate. He was burned alive at Campo de' Fori in Rome for his intellectual audacity.¹ With his last breath, Bruno maintained his innocence in defence of philosophical and religious tolerance. In receiving the death sentence, he held his dignity high by addressing his tormentors: “Perhaps your fear in passing judgment on me is greater than mine in receiving it.”² At issue in both cases was the inability of premodern theology to decouple itself from Aristotelian metaphysics and cosmology, whereby ecclesiastical intellectuals failed to understand Galileo’s admonition:

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend

- 1 G. Aquilecchia, “Giordano Bruno.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* viewed 2 October 2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giordano-Bruno>.
- 2 As reported by Gaspar Schlopp of Breslau in Dorothea Waley Singer, *Bruno: His Life and Thought* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 179.

the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it.³

Sadly, but true, the unfortunate cases of Giordano Bruno and Galileo effectively “left the Church with the stigma of obscurantism and the stigma of a force which opposes freedom of scientific inquiry.”⁴ However, a painstaking investigation of the rapport between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, or Christianity and science shows a history of uneasy coexistence, which did not always mean outright conflict and irreconcilable differences. One notable example is St. Augustine’s attitude to the question of faith and reason. He is commonly recognised as the luminary in the intellectual tradition of the Western Church. It could even be said that other philosophical and theological systems or traditions within Roman Catholicism are but footnotes to the intellectual bequeathment of the Bishop of Hippo.

Regarding the subtle compatibility of faith and reason, the Augustinian notion is that Christians begin in faith and proceed afterward to understanding.⁵ His classical thesis is this: “We begin in faith, and are made perfect in sight.”⁶ In this sense, “faith precedes reason” since according to Augustine, *nisi credideritis, non intelligetis* – “unless you believe, you will not understand.”⁷ Moreover, faith and reason are conceived as complementary, since the natural desire in believers to understand their faith is not judged as a futile venture or even an irreligious adventure. As laid down by St. Augustine, and followed by his intellectual successors, faith moves the human will to make an assent of

3 Cited in A. van Helden, ‘Galileo’, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, viewed 2 October 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galileo-Galilei>.

4 F. Lawrence, “Athens and Jerusalem: The Contemporary Problematic of Faith and Reason.” *Gregorianum* 80. 2 (1999): 223–244 (231)

5 R.E. Cushman, “Faith and Reason in the Thought of St. Augustine.” *Church History* 19.4 (1950): 271–294 (284).

6 Cited in Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” 278.

7 Cited in Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” 271.

belief, and equally serves reason. Faith does not supplant reason in its natural desire to know the truth because reason is that by which the nature of human beings is preeminently fulfilled.⁸ Therefore, in the Augustinian conceptual optics: “Understanding is the reward of faith.”⁹

Amidst the theological cum methodical debate of their milieu, a contemporary of St. Augustine in the East, St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395) cautioned the rationalist Eunomius against confusing theology with the science of nature. Arguing that *theologeîn* was different from *physiologeîn*, Gregory paraphrased Zeno the philosopher, to admonish Enuomius: “One cannot then encompass the unembraceable nature of God in the palm of a child’s hand.”¹⁰ The tension between theology and philosophy was not absent in the Medieval Ages – generally considered as having achieved the most outstanding synthesis between faith and reason. In protesting the overbearingness of philosophy and its intrusion into theology, St. Bonaventure associated philosophy with “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”¹¹ A certain tendency or thought system that Etienne Gilson has cumulatively identified as “spiritual families” at one time or another appears to exemplify an attitude of tension between faith and reason that has persisted throughout the long history of Christianity.¹² That notwithstanding, it is helpful to remember that early church councils employed metaphysics and its language in order to give verbal expression to the church’s faith. They intended to demonstrate the veracity and reasonability of the Christian

8 Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” 274; 276.

9 E. Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2020), 15.

10 Cited in J. Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The 1988 Erasmus Lecture” (1988), viewed 9 May 2023 from <https://josephcardinalratzinger.blogspot.com/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis-1988.html>.

11 T.S. Quinn, “Infides et Unratio: Modern Philosophy and the Papal Encyclical,” in D.R. Foster & J.W. Koterski (eds.), *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought* (Washington, DC., The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 177–192 (190).

12 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 6.

belief, since it is aligned with the reality of the deepest yearning of humanity.¹³

This research does not pretend to be exhaustive in its object of study. It aims to articulate the marriage of convenience between faith and reason in Roman Catholic intellectual tradition. This will be done with the aid of literature reviews that highlight the thoughts of selected scholars regarding the subject of research. Firstly, it will look at the place of philosophy in ancient Christianity, which from the outset established the parity and disparity between faith and reason in Christian intellectual tradition. It will equally examine some interventions of the Catholic Church's Magisterium on the intrinsic connectivity between faith and reason. The Magisterium occupies an indispensable place in Catholic intellectual tradition. It understands its role as the defence of the Christian faith. As such, the interest of the Catholic Church in the question of theology and philosophy, or faith and reason, is geared toward promoting a philosophy compatible with Christian revelation. Those terms are employed interchangeably throughout this research. Essentially, concerning the Magisterium in terms of its role in the debate, it sees itself as duty-bound to intervene because, in the words of Joseph Ratzinger: "Theology is born when the arbitrary judgement of reason encounters a limit, in that we discover something which we have not excogitated ourselves but which has been revealed to us."¹⁴

Philosophy and Early Christianity

One monument that best illustrates the important place of reason in Christianity is Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens* in the Vatican Apostolic Palace. *The School of Athens*, painted between 1509 and 1511, is one of the high points of Renaissance art. In his masterstrokes, Raphael brings together the "Who's Who"

13 J. M. McDermott, "Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason." *Angelicum* 86.3 (2009): 565–588.

14 J. Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding its Role in the light of Present Controversy* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1995), 8.

of ancient Greek civilisation by portraying the best of the best of Greek thinkers in antiquity.¹⁵ It is the immortalisation of the intellectual achievements of several ancient Greek philosophers, mathematicians and scientists. Tasos Kokkinidis surmises that the intention of Raphael was, amongst other things, “to pay his deepest tribute to the greatest philosophers in history, several of whom had tried throughout their lives to discover the prime mover, or cause, in the universe, a branch of thought called the ‘knowledge of the first causes’.”¹⁶

Raphael puts into artform what ancient and medieval Christian thinkers had debated and written about in recognition of their pagan forebearers. He brings to life the towering figure of Socrates, considered the founder of Western Philosophy, and Pythagoras with his mathematical theory and his teaching about the “transmigration of souls.” Euclid, the “father of geometry” is accounted for, as also is Ptolemy, the great mathematician and astronomer whose treatise had an overwhelming influence on Western science for most of the Middle Ages. Two ancient Greek philosophers of wisdom, Diogenes (founder of Cynic philosophy) and Heraclitus, the philosopher of flux, are vividly depicted. Above all these luminaries, Raphael, in the most important part of his artwork, brings in the imposing personalities of Plato and Aristotle as the jewels and crowns of learning in antiquity.¹⁷ Both men represented two different schools of philosophy and their thoughts dominated the intellectual environment of Christianity from the earliest Christian centuries. They influenced the Church Fathers and their Christian intellectual successors.

Christianity never totally disdained reason from its earliest encounter with Greek thought and culture. It only shattered Greek rationalism that arose from a chain of mythopoetic thought that sought to liberate the human mind from a pervasively personal

15 T. Kokkinidis, “The Greek Philosophers ‘Hiding’ in Raphael’s School of Athens.” *Greek Reporter*, viewed 1 August 2023 from <https://greekreporter.com/2023/08/01/ancient-greek-philosophers-raphael-school-of-athens/>.

16 Kokkinidis, “The Greek Philosophers.”

17 Kokkinidis, “The Greek Philosophers.”

web and replace it with broad areas of objective thought.¹⁸ Early Christianity, in many ways, accepted as a given some of the findings and conclusions of ancient Greek philosophers and scientists about the universe, human beings, and the questions of life and death. For instance, about Platonic theistic submissions, St. Augustine wrote: "It is evident that none come nearer to us than the Platonists. Their gold and silver were dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad."¹⁹ He admonished Christians to appropriate the "gold and silver" of the philosophers and to "devote to their proper use in the preaching of the gospel."²⁰ In the historical sense, early Christian concern about the relationship between faith and reason, or theology and philosophy, was never an abstract question. As Joseph Ratzinger masterfully demonstrates, that concern made possible the first appearances of the images of Christ in classical Christian art. It birthed the first plastic expression of faith in art form.²¹

The iconography of earliest Christian art principally involves three figures: the shepherd, the *orans*, and the philosopher.²² Of all three, as naturally expected, the figure of the philosopher became very prominent in Christian intellectual circles. The preferred model was the image of the Cynic, the itinerant preacher of philosophy who was not so much concerned about hypotheses but rather busied himself with winning the possession of life by overcoming death.²³ This figure of the Cynic philosopher was adopted and substituted by the Christians. The place of the Cynic was taken over by the Christian philosopher who, instead of carrying a book of philosophy by one of the renowned ancient philosophers, now carried the Gospel of Christ in his hands. He learnt therein not so much from words, but from facts and deeds, of Christ as the perfect and true Philosopher who imparted to him the knowledge of the mystery of death. Regarding the mystery of death as the ultimate existential question that faces

18 M. Polanyi, "Faith and Reason." *The Journal of Religion* 41.4 (1961): 237–247.

19 Cited in Cushman, "Faith and Reason," 275.

20 Cushman, "Faith and Reason," 275.

21 Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 15.

22 Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 13.

23 Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 14.

human beings, early Christian thinkers understood Christ as the *Philosopher par excellence* because he is the man who overcomes death and gives new meaning to human life.²⁴

Besides the agonising question of death, early Christianity boldly identified the Christian God with the God of the philosophers as against the multiple gods of the various religions of their milieu. By jettisoning the whole cosmos of the many ancient religions around them, early Christians made their choice and explained their faith in this manner: “When we say God, we do not mean or worship any of this; we mean only Being itself; what the philosophers have expounded as the ground of all being, as the God above all powers – that alone is our God.”²⁵ Theirs was a choice favouring the *Logos* (Reason) against myth (fable). According to Ratzinger, one of patristic theology’s greatest insights is this audacious assertion of Tertullian: “Christ called himself the truth, not custom.”²⁶ Naturally and logically, the human mind yearns for the truth and desires to know it. Once again, as with the philosopher figure, a transformation also took place with the Christian appropriation of the God of philosophers. By conceiving God as the God to whom they could pray, early Christians removed the God of philosophers from the purely academic realm. He became for them the God of faith who is both immanent and transcendent. He is no longer conceived as the external mathematics of the universe but *agape* – “the power of creative love.”²⁷ There ensued from this transformation two outstanding points: (a) while the God of philosophers is mainly self-centred as pure thought contemplating itself, the Christian God of faith is understood through the prism of a category of relationship; (b) as pure thought, the divinity of the God of philosophers is predicated upon thought alone as divine essence, whereas the God of faith is known as thought and love. By so doing, Christians placed truth and love side by side as constituting one unique reality that pertains to the same God.²⁸

24 Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 14.

25 J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004), 138.

26 Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 141.

27 Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 143.

28 Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 148.

Historically, Christianity from the outset attracted converts from broad social and intellectual backgrounds. As a religion committed to sacred writings, it soon discovered the need for literate people. However, it was not until the second century that Christianity developed its own distinct and significant intellectual tradition beginning with Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–165). The Christian apologetics, begun by Justin, was continued by other Christian intellectuals such as Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.²⁹ Despite their peculiar differences and characteristics, each of them was familiar with Greek philosophy in its various brands such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Pythagoreanism. They judged philosophy, especially Platonism, to be compatible with Christian doctrine.³⁰ Given the preponderance of Greek thought and its influence in the New Testament and early Christianity, Ilaria Ramelli sustains the view that it is impossible to conceive of a “pure” and unadulterated Christianity. She argues that with the Hellenisation of the New Testament, Christianity itself, as a natural consequence, was equally Hellenised before it became a religion for all nations and all cultures.³¹ The Christian intelligentsia of Alexandria in the second and third centuries gave credence to the indispensable role of Greek philosophy in their faith formation. This much is evident in one of Origen’s letters, where he sought to defend himself against his detractors, who chided him for his interest in philosophy. Origen (c. AD 185–254) makes references to Pantaenus (died c. AD 200) and Heraclas (died c. AD 248).³² Both men were revered Alexandrian Christians and contemporaries of Origen. Pantaenus was versed in Greek disciplines and philosophy, especially Stoicism. Clement of Alexandria succeeded him as head of the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, and also considered him his teacher and the “best of the Christian masters”.³³ Clement relished Greek

29 D.C. Lindberg, “Science and the Early Christian Church.” *Isis* 74.4 (1983): 509–530 (513).

30 “Science and the Early Christian Church,” 514.

31 I.L.E. Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism’.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63.3 (2009): 217–263 (217).

32 “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism,” 218.

33 “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism,” 214.

philosophy in his conviction that the truth is one because, as he understood it, every truth “wherever it may be encountered” is ultimately God’s truth.³⁴ This position of Clement is embossed in his *Stromateis* with this assertion: “Barbarian and Greek philosophy have torn off a piece of the eternal truth . . . from the theology of the Logos who eternally is. And he who brings together again the divided parts and makes them one, mark well, shall without danger of error look upon the perfect Logos.”³⁵ As for Heraclas, he first studied philosophy before Christian doctrine. He was a junior colleague of Origen and later became his successor as head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Heraclas, who later became Alexandria’s bishop, was not only a Christian philosopher. He was dressed as a philosopher with his philosophical garb and studied the “books of the Greeks.”³⁶ In all these allusions, Origen intended to insert himself in a line of reputable contemporaries who were both Christians and philosophers simultaneously. He wanted to exculpate himself from the false accusation of being a Christian in philosophical disguise.

On the contrary, as far as Origen was concerned, it was perfectly possible and consistent to be both a Christian and a philosopher just like Pantaenus, Heraclas, and others of his contemporaries. He was equally driven by the desire “to examine both the heretics’ opinions and what the philosophers claimed to say concerning the truth.” Moreover, as Origen conceived it, philosophy as the search for truth also “renders those who practice it noble, venerable, and glorious.”³⁷ The comments on Origen and his methodology by Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. AD 213–270) who himself was a student of Origen, reveal the versatility, liberality, and mastery of the Alexandrian scholar regarding multiple sources of philosophical discipline and learning in general:

He required us to study philosophy by reading all the existing writings of the ancients, both philosophers and religious poets, taking every care not to put aside or reject

34 “Science and the Early Christian Church,” 514.

35 Cited in Lindberg, “Science and the Early Christian Church,” 514.

36 “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism,” 219.

37 “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism,” 218; 220.

any . . . apart from the writings of the atheists. . . He selected everything that was useful and true in each philosopher and set it before us, but condemned what was false. . . For us, there was nothing forbidden, nothing hidden, nothing inaccessible. We were allowed to learn every doctrine, non-Greek and Greek, both spiritual and secular, both divine and human; with the utmost freedom we went into everything and examined it thoroughly, taking our fill of and enjoying the pleasures of the soul.³⁸

Not every Christian intellectual of antiquity was as enthusiastic about philosophy as Origen and his likes. Apart from Tertullian, who most eloquently scorned philosophy among Christian intellectuals, another person who regarded Greek philosophy with contempt was Tatian (c. AD 120–180), the Assyrian compiler of the *Diatessaron* (harmony of the four gospels). His desire to find a “true philosophy” led him through many schools of philosophy until his conversion to Christianity.³⁹ In his repudiation of classical Greek learning, found in his *Address to the Greeks*, Tatian directed a series of vitriolic attacks against Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans. He detested what he perceived as their intellectual pride: “What noble thing have you produced by your pursuit of philosophy?... Obeying the commands of God, and following the law of the Father of immortality, we reject everything which rests upon human opinion.”⁴⁰ Ironically, after his separation from the early church, a similar accusation of pride was brought against Tatian, whom St. Irenaeus portrayed as “excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he composed his own peculiar type of doctrine” (*Against Heresies* 1.28.1).

The disapproval of philosophy by some Christian intellectuals in their unwavering conviction in the “self-sufficiency of Christian Revelation” is not limited to early

38 Cited in Lindberg, “Science and the Early Christian Church,” 514.

39 W. Petersen, “Tatian,” in S.P. Brock et al. (eds.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, viewed 10 August 2023 from <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Tatian>.

40 Cited in Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 10–11

Christian intellectuals of the second and third centuries. According to Gilson, they are present “in all the significant periods of the history of Christian thought.”⁴¹ The author of *Didascalia apostolorum* in the third century admonished his fellow Christians to: “Shun all heathen books. Of what concern to you are strange ideas or laws or pseudo-prophets which often lead inexperienced men into error? What is lacking to you in God’s word, that you should turn to that heathen nonsense?”⁴² In the first half of the fifth century, John Cassian (died c. 435), credited for introducing Eastern monastic traditions into the West, promoted sanctity as a surer means to knowledge. While subtly deriding “worldly” learning, Cassian, in his *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium remediis*, lauds the personality of Abba Theodore who was “endowed with the greatest holiness and knowledge.”⁴³

In the judgment of Cassian, the saintly Eastern monk did not achieve that feat “from a zeal for reading or from worldly learning but from the purity of heart alone, since he could hardly either understand or speak more than a few words of Greek.”⁴⁴ Even the later Augustine, in his *Retractions*, emphasised sanctity and the grace of enlightenment over liberal arts. The older Augustine came to assert that there is no true wisdom that does not lead to sanctity. Typical of Augustinian perception, he conceded that the unlettered, compared with philosophers, excelled in wisdom and sanctity of life, which the liberal arts were incapable of giving to the learned.⁴⁵ The ensuing disparagement of secular learning, especially philosophy and dialectics in late antiquity, was occasioned by dialectical inconclusions that many Christian intellectuals abhorred for their propensity to cause dissension and misdirection rather than lead to the truth. This was certainly the context in which, for instance, the Council of Ephesus (431) set itself against any possible theological innovations.⁴⁶ St. Gregory Nazianzus, in the preceding century,

41 Reason and Revelation, 8.

42 Cited in Lindberg, “Science and the Early Christian Church,” 515.

43 J. Dietrich, “Boethius’s Reading of the ‘beati Augustini scriptis’ in the *Opuscula sacra*.” *Carmina Philosophiae* 21 (2012): 43–65 (51–52).

44 Cited in Dietrich, “Boethius’s Reading,” 51.

45 “Boethius’s Reading,” 46, 48.

46 “Boethius’s Reading,” 51.

insisted in his *Five Theological Orations* that not all aspects of theology should be subjected to inquiry and debate. Given the nature and subject matter of the discipline, theological discussion was to be “reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences and certain limits must be observed by those who engaged in it after the ‘purification of body and soul’.”⁴⁷ That notwithstanding, the Church Fathers from Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria through the Cappadocian Fathers to Augustine, are praised for their originality in embracing the unlimited dynamism of reason, and for their ingenuity in infusing it with a richness drawn from Christian revelation.⁴⁸

Philosophy as *Ancilla Theologiae* and Disputes

Drawing from Plato and pre-Christian philosophers, St. Augustine admits that “the supreme God visits the mind of the wise with an intelligible and ineffable presence.”⁴⁹ This underpins the belief that truth is one since its source is God, even though faith precedes reason. The great Italian medieval poet, Dante Alighieri (1264–1321), in his magnum opus *The Divine Comedy*, genially weaves together the comingling of Greek philosophy and Christian theology in the Middle Ages. One of the great insights of medieval intellectual attainment is the notion that grace does not destroy nature but instead perfects it. Employing the figures of Virgil and Beatrice, Dante poetically forges a harmony between faith and reason as well as grace and nature. Virgil, the author of *Aeneid*, is the symbol of reason and representative of human knowledge. He guides Dante through *Inferno* up to the entrance of Purgatorio before yielding his place to Beatrice. He afterwards becomes a fellow pilgrim with Dante. For her part, Beatrice is a simple young lady who acts as an embodiment of grace. She takes over from Virgil and assists Dante in completing his pilgrimage from Purgatorio to Paradiso, the heavenly ascent.⁵⁰ The implication

47 “Boethius’s Reading,” 54.

48 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 199.

49 Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” 275.

50 J.W. Koterski, “The Challenge to Metaphysics,” in D.R. Foster & J.W. Koterski (eds.), *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought*, 22–36 (Washington, DC., The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 22–36 (22).

here is that theological knowledge comes to the aid of human knowledge, which remains incomplete and unable to attain divine mysteries which can only be infused in the human mind by divine grace. It poetically underscores the medieval belief that reason without faith would lose its way in the ascent to divine realities.⁵¹

Pre-eminently, it shows that early and medieval Christianity did not overlook the great strides of the men of antiquity, but rather built upon their foundation. This much is evidently demonstrated by Dante when he arrives with Beatrice at the fourth heaven, which is the heavenly sphere of the sun and the dwelling place of the wise. It is there in the fourth heaven that Dante locates the brilliant circle of the esteemed twelve of great wisdom and learning: Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, Gratian, Peter Lombard, Solomon, Dionysius the Areopagite, Paulus Orosius, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, Bede the Venerable, Richard of St. Victor, and Siger of Brabant.⁵² Apart from Solomon, the rest of the men were Christian intelligentsia who were steeped in Greek philosophy. As Augustine's appreciation of the Platonists' *logos* was a propaedeutic to his Christian faith,⁵³ so too, Aristotelian metaphysics, or another philosophical school of thought, was helpful to the men in the circle of the wise in their understanding and articulation of the Christian faith. According to Fred Lawrence, "the theological distinction between nature and grace at work in Augustine's writings needed the 12th century entry of Aristotle's philosophical writings into the Latin West he had dominated to become fully explanatory."⁵⁴

As already observed, the Church Fathers identified Christianity with the God of the philosophers. They were convinced that the divine Logos is the guarantor of the rationality of the universe, which in turn points towards Himself.⁵⁵ Through this prism, there was a broad understanding in the Patristic

51 Koterski, "The Challenge to Metaphysics," 23; A. Tikkanen, "The Divine Comedy," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, viewed 8 August 2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Divine-Comedy>.

52 A. A. Maurer, "The State of Historical Research in Siger of Brabant." *Speculum* 31.1 (1956): 49–56 (49).

53 Lawrence, "Athens and Jerusalem," 227.

54 "Athens and Jerusalem," 227.

55 McDermott, "Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason," 569.

and Medieval eras about the existence of some form of unity between faith and reason. It is a presupposition that has generally remained central and relevant to Western intellectual tradition. It was an operative staple in Western Theology from the time of Augustine in the fourth century to St. Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, respectively.⁵⁶ In the context of the medieval world, the question about the nature of that unity assumed a centrality that became heightened when Western Christendom learned more of the achievements of Greek, Jewish, and Islamic philosophers.⁵⁷ Early in the thirteenth century, medieval universities grappled with the difficult question of the relationship between theology, philosophy, and the arts. That thorny question prodded itself to encompass the reasonableness of faith, which was crucial in medieval debates on nature and grace as well as faith and reason.⁵⁸

The stage was prepared by St. Augustine, to whom any theologian or philosopher of repute in the West referred between the fifth and fifteenth centuries.⁵⁹ Three issues occupied the central stage in the medieval intellectual scene, in regard to which theologians and philosophers appealed to the authority of the North African Church Father. Generally considered as “the manifest of unity of occidental theology,” Augustine represented “the breadth and depth of theology and orthodoxy of theology” in the West.⁶⁰ The issues that loomed large on the intellectual scene were: (1) the notion of creation; (2) the existence of a Providential God; and (3) the immortality of the individual soul. The

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- 56 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 192; A. Dulles, “Faith and Reason: From Vatican I to John Paul II,” in D.R. Foster & J.W. Koterski (eds.), *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 193–208 (193).
 - 57 M. Sweeney, “The Medievalism of Fides et ratio,” in D.R. Foster & J.W. Koterski (eds.), *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought*, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 163–176 (164).
 - 58 D. Legge, “Reasonable Belief: The Contribution of Aquinas and his Dominican Followers on the Act of Faith and its Reasonableness.” *Angelicum* 93.2 (2016): 315–330.
 - 59 M. Wriedt, “Luther and Augustine – Revisited,” in J.H. Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 39–45 (40).
 - 60 Wriedt, “Luther and Augustine – Revisited,” 40.

intellectuals never questioned the veracity of those fundamental Christian doctrines. Their divergences rather bordered on generating rational explications for those doctrines.⁶¹ In doing so by means of natural reason, St. Augustine had declared reason to be an ancillary to faith. Also, in sketching a broad balance between faith and reason at the dawn of Christian rationalism, he opined that faith, through the light of revelation, helps reason to attain better knowledge of certain doctrines by opening new paths to reason. In the explanation of Michael Polanyi, this was the heart of medieval scholasticism since “the entire movement of scholastic philosophy from Boethius to William of Ockham was but a variation on this theme.”⁶²

The works of Boethius lend credence to the above assertion. For instance, in the preface to his *De Trinitate*, he attempted to assure himself of his faith in Augustinian thought by inviting Symmachus to judge “whether the seeds of argument sown in my mind by St. Augustine’s writings have borne fruit.”⁶³ As explicated by Raoul Carton, a similar intention is operative in *De consolacione philosophiae*, where Boethius seeks wisdom that is compatible with the Christian faith.⁶⁴ He writes of the subjugation of fortune and misfortune to Divine Providence – “summum bonum” (highest good) that “strongly and sweetly” has the entire universe in its hands and puts all things in their proper place.⁶⁵ He does this after the example of Augustine, as outlined in the *Cassiciacum* dialogues. *De consolacion philosophiae* is the crown of Boethius’s philosophical thoughts. It was the most popular book in the Middle Ages, besides the Bible.⁶⁶ Alongside other works of Boethius, it functioned as a relief from Aristotelian logic and exerted much influence in the medieval intellectual clime. Cassiodorus (c. 490–c. 585) included the works of Boethius on the

61 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 190.

62 Polanyi, “Faith and Reason,” 238–239.

63 Dietrich, “Boethius’s Reading,” 43.

64 Dietrich, “Boethius’s Reading,” 43.

65 J. Shiel, “Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, viewed 15 August 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anicius-Manlius-Severinus-Boethius>.

66 C. Trueman, “Boethius: The Philosopher Theologian” (2006), viewed 7 August 2023 from <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/boethius-philosopher-theologian>.

liberal arts in the library of the monastery, which he established in Vivarium.⁶⁷

Boethius's adaptation of some Greek works into Latin, including Euclid's *Geometry*, aided in the evolution of the quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) that was studied in medieval universities, together with the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic). His thoughts influenced the training of medieval clergy and the education that was available in cloister and court schools.⁶⁸ His domination of the medieval academic clime was wide-ranging. Boethius's translations of the works of some Greek philosophers into Latin gave Western Europe access to those classical works. It is believed that until the twelfth century, Boethius was the only way to access Aristotle's thoughts, in which he was unintentionally portrayed more as a logician and less as a metaphysician. This portrayal of Aristotle would precipitate the great crisis that ensued in the twelfth and thirteen centuries, when many of his writings became accessible in the West through the works of the Arab philosopher Ibn Rush (1126–1198), better known in the Latin West as Averroës. Medieval Christian scholars progressively became aware that some positions of Aristotle on certain questions, like the eternity of the world and the immortality of the soul, were at variance with Christian revelation. The complex undertaking to accommodate Aristotelian metaphysics within the Christian frame of thought called forth the genius of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁶⁹ At the same time, it also repeatedly provoked condemnations from ecclesiastical authorities in 1210, 1215, 1270, and 1277 regarding certain philosophical propositions that were controverted and judged to be in opposition to the Christian faith.⁷⁰ That fact notwithstanding, medieval Christian intellectuals updated the Aristotelian tradition by Christianising it.⁷¹ They rejected certain aspects of Aristotelian

67 Shiel, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius."

68 Shiel, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius"; Trueman, "Boethius."

69 Trueman, "Boethius."

70 See R. van Nieuwenhove, "Neoplatonism, *Regiratio* and Trinitarian Theology. A Look at Ruusbroec." *Hermathena* 169 (2000): 169–188; Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 45–46.

71 Aviva Rothman (ed.), *The Dawn of Modern Cosmology: From Copernicus to Newtown* (London: Penguin Books, 2023), xvii.

philosophy and incorporated some elements of his worldview into their own theological conceptions. The result of that fusion and blending conception of nature as one of God's "two books". The second book was the Scripture which enabled especially philosophers of nature to read, understand, and appreciate God and his workings in the cosmos.⁷²

According to Etienne Gilson some form of "philosophical rationalism" was already in the embryonic stage in medieval times. Its features were made visible in Spain through the writings of Ibn Rushd. His "philosophical rationalism" was a strong pushback against the theologism of his fellow contemporary Islamic scholars. Often known as "the Commentator", Ibn Rushd bequeathed the ideal of a purely rational philosophy to his Latin disciples, collectively referred to as Averroists.⁷³ They included Siger of Brabant (1240–c. 1281/84), Boethius Dacia (fl. 13th century), and Jean de Jandun (c. 1286–1328). Their most distinctive feature appears to be "their inclination to pursue philosophical arguments to their logical conclusion, regardless of Church doctrine".⁷⁴ It was for this reason that the Averroists were considered to have punched above their weight concerning the Christian faith, with the possibility of philosophic rationalism that tended to position itself as a counter-ideology.⁷⁵ Averroism functioned as a bulwark of philosophy against theological and institutional encroachments which led its adherents, especially the extremists among them, to postulate that reason and philosophy were superior to faith and faith-based knowledge.⁷⁶ This postulation was an inference from the conclusions of Averroës with recourse to Aristotelianism. It did not matter whether those conclusions differed from the Christian revelation. The core teaching of Averroës is sketched out in his treatise, *The Agreement of Religion and Philosophy*, described by Etienne Gilson

72 Rothman, *The Dawn of Modern Cosmology*, xvii.

73 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 29.

74 Fouad Ben Ahmed and Robert Pasnau, "Ibn Rushd [Averroës]" (2021), in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 23 July 2024 from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ibn-rushd/>.

75 Irving L. Horowitz, "Averroism and the Politics of Philosophy." *The Journal of Politics* 22.4 (1960): 698–727 (723).

76 "Averroism and the Politics of Philosophy," 720.

as “a landmark in the history of Western civilization.”⁷⁷ Although the doctrinal position of Averroës remains complex and somewhat fluid, the basic premise is that absolute truth, established and demonstrated by pure reason, is possible only in philosophy. His assignment of primacy to reason over faith constituted a big problem for his Christian disciples, whose adherence to Christianity assured them that Christian revelation holds the ultimate, supreme and absolute truth. Despite the apparent disagreement between their Christian faith and philosophical positions, they never discarded either. Instead, they strenuously laboured to find a possible conciliation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy. It was in such endeavours that they incurred the wrath of ecclesiastical authorities and the eventual condemnation of their position, commonly known as the doctrine of twofold truth or double truth: one truth in philosophy (reason) and another truth in theology (faith).⁷⁸ A papal decree of 1341 instructed the arts faculty at Paris to adhere to “the science of Aristotle and his commentator Averroes, and other ancient commentators and interpreters of Aristotle, except in cases that run counter to the faith”.⁷⁹

Such a position stood in stark contrast to the Augustinian legacy bequeathed to medieval scholars which became, *de facto*, the traditional viewpoint in maintaining a delicate balance between faith and reason. As one of the outstanding Christian thinkers of the eleventh century, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), in his interpretation of the thought of St. Augustine, gave it a slightly different hue with his *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand). St. Anselm intended to restate what Augustine had admirably taught in the fourth century about the supremacy of faith over reason. The received Augustinian

77 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 29.

78 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 41; E. Sten, “Boethius of Dacia” (2020), in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 16 August 2023 from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/boethius-dacia/>; A.A. Maurer, “Boetius of Dacia (c.13th Century)” (1967), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 16 August 2023 from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/boetius-dacia-c-13th-century>.

79 Cited in Ben Ahmed and Pasnau, “Ibn Rushd [Averroes]”.

viewpoint remained substantially the same, albeit in the different clime of the eleventh century, when logic was the standard science. Through logical demonstrations, Anselm and his contemporaries laboured to achieve a rational understanding of Christian faith that was not opposed to reason, even though faith occupied a higher plane than reason.⁸⁰ Until the arrival of St. Bonaventure, the medieval schoolmen did not envisage a hermetic division or separation of philosophy from theology. Philosophy was conceived as only limited to knowledge that can be gained from reason without necessarily the aid of revelation.⁸¹ For his part, St. Thomas Aquinas predicated his intellectual labours upon the concern to show that faith and reason complemented each other in the search for knowledge. His stance was that faith is both reasonable and supernatural because even at the natural level, “the act of believing is to think with assent.”⁸² In his commentary on Boethius’s *De Trinitate*, Aquinas concurred that God is the source of both faith and reason, which are necessary requites for the attainment of the ultimate end by human beings.⁸³ The clearest of Aquinas’s syntheses of the compatibility between faith and reason is found in his *Preaeambula fidei*. He affirms that the preambles of faith are presuppositions of truth that need reason to be proven as truth.⁸⁴

As Dominic Legge surmised, Aquinas’s clarity on the reasonableness of belief is his enduring contribution to medieval reflections on the relationship between faith and reason. The classic approach of St. Thomas Aquinas to the complementarity of faith and reason came to influence mainline Catholic theology and its stance that philosophy is a helpmate to theology. The former is contemporarily understood as independent in its natural and proper domain.⁸⁵ This does not obliterate the fact that other medieval thinkers, such as Alexander of Hales, St. Albert the Great, and even St. Bonaventure, all made a distinction “between the

80 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 19–21.

81 McDermott, “Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason,” 573.

82 Legge, “Reasonable Belief,” 318.

83 “Reasonable Belief,” 318.

84 “Reasonable Belief,” 318.

85 “Reasonable Belief,” 318.

order of what *we believe* and the order of what *we know*.”⁸⁶ What seemed to have been a big issue for some of the contemporaries of Aquinas was their inability to treat philosophical problems as philosophers, and theological questions as theologians. This intellectual quagmire meant, as Gilson has demonstrated, that some theologians sought “to theologize in philosophy” and some philosophers, in turn, sought “to philosophize in theology.”⁸⁷

Typical of the Thomistic way of conciliation, while faith is not to be understood as a principle of philosophical knowledge, faith remains a sure guide to rational truth against possible philosophical errors.⁸⁸ Aquinas describes reason as a “handmaid of theology.”⁸⁹ His affirmation is that reason, although weakened by sin, can still attain metaphysical and ethical truths through its proper ability. Following this Thomistic wisdom, it means “there is in principle no theological necessity for reason and nature to gain their rightful autonomy by turning the distinctions between theology, philosophy, and science into separations.”⁹⁰ Their conciliation and complementarity require a discernible domain of nature upon which faith builds and perfects. Their unity is accounted for by their identical origin in God, whereby their difference is compared to the difference between God and the created nature of existence.⁹¹ As brilliantly articulated by Aquinas, “faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection presupposes something that can be perfected” (ST. 1.2.2.ad. 1).⁹² With reason functioning as a handmaid of theology, Aquinas makes this bold assertion: “Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason” (ST. 1.1.8).⁹³

86 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 49.

87 *Reason and Revelation*, 51.

88 *Reason and Revelation*, 59.

89 D.R. Janz, “Whore or Handmaid? – Luther and Aquinas on the Function of Reason in Theology,” in J.H. Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2011), 47–52 (47).

90 Lawrence, “Athens and Jerusalem,” 228.

91 Sweeney, “The Medievalism of Fides et ratio,” 170.

92 Cited in M. Albl, *Reason, Faith, and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology* (Anselm Academic, Winonna, 2009), 49.

93 Albl, *Reason, Faith, and Tradition*, 49.

The harmonious conciliation, first elaborated by St. Anselm in the eleventh century and perfected through the great insight of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, was never without controversies. The perceived theological problems in the reception of Aristotelian philosophy brought about at least two outstanding ways of conceiving the relationship between faith and reason, theology and philosophy in Catholic intellectual tradition in medieval times. At one end of the spectrum was the Thomist/Dominican conception, and at the other was the Bonaventure/Franciscan conception. This followed the wider availability of Aristotelianism in medieval universities, especially after the ascendancy of Averroism. In reaction to the incursion of Aristotelian philosophy into Christian thought to the detriment of Augustinianism, Bonaventure likened philosophical pursuit to the Genesis story about the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He saw the efforts of philosophers as “a most miserable miracle” in which they sought to change wine into water and bread into stones. For this reason, he chided philosophy, at least in its Aristotelian brand, and thus declared: “It is a very great abomination that the most beautiful daughter of the king (namely wisdom) is offered to us as a bride, and we prefer to fornicate with a base servant-maid and resort to a prostitute.” In response, Aquinas absolved philosophers of any blame. The position of Aquinas is that “those who use the works of the philosophers in Sacred Doctrine, by bringing them into the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, but rather change water into wine.”⁹⁴

It is pertinent to note that the use of Aristotle was occasionally condemned by church authorities, notably his denial of the freedom of the will, his teaching about the eternity of the world, and the denial of God’s foreknowledge and providence. Those Aristotelian ambiguities led to the suspicion of the orthodoxy of St. Thomas and even elicited the condemnation of twelve ascribed propositions of his thought in 1277 by Etienne Tempier, the archbishop of Paris. Those propositions were similarly proscribed in the same year on 18 March at the University of Oxford by the archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Kilwardby,

94 For this paragraph and citations, see Nieuwenhove, “Neoplatonism, *Regiratio* and Trinitarian Theology.”

possibly on the orders of the pope. The same prescriptions were reaffirmed in 1286 by John Peckham.⁹⁵ Apart from his canonisation in 1323, Aquinas was further rehabilitated on April 11, 1567, when Pope Pius V (1566–1572) proclaimed him “Doctor of the Church.” His stardom became firmly cemented in the Roman Catholic intellectual hall of fame during the modernism crisis towards the end of the nineteenth century, when he was put forward as an irreproachable model and champion of orthodoxy.⁹⁶

Alongside Bonaventure and Aquinas, John Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1280–c. 1349) were the four great thinkers of High Scholasticism.⁹⁷ While the controversy about the thoughts of Aquinas lasted, Duns Scotus and especially Ockham became his ardent critics. The affirmation has it that “Aquinas perfected the great ‘medieval synthesis’ of faith and reason, and Ockham destroyed that ‘synthesis’.”⁹⁸ This was achieved by his doctrine of nominalism, conceived as “via moderna,” in opposition to scholastic realism, classified as “via antiqua.”⁹⁹ Following in the footsteps of Bonaventure in doubting the possibility of reason to attain divine knowledge without the help of faith, Scotus and Ockham, albeit in opposition to each other, took issue with Aquinas’s doctrine of faith. Scotus was so preoccupied with the rationality of faith that he deprived it of its supernatural character. Employing what he calls “acquired faith,” he taught that it is possible to believe the Gospel through natural faith without necessarily resorting to the help of supernatural grace.¹⁰⁰

95 Legge, “Reasonable Belief,” 323; Nieuwenhove, “Neoplatonism, *Regiratio* and Trinitarian Theology.”

96 M.-D. Chenu, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, viewed 18 September 2023 from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Thomas-Aquinas/Last-years-at-Naples>.

97 J. Hause, “John Duns Scotus,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 20 September 2023 from <https://iep.utm.edu/john-duns-scotus/>.

98 S. Kaye, “William of Ockham (Occam, c. 1280–c. 1349),” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 20 September 2023 from <https://iep.utm.edu/ockham/>.

99 D.M. Hockenbery, “Introduction,” in J.H. Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 1–10 (4).

100 Legge, “Reasonable Belief,” 324.

Scotus prepared the ground for Ockham, who became his bitter opponent and took an opposing stance. Ockham may be described as a *fideist* for his stance that belief in God is a question of faith and not knowledge. Another Franciscan confrere who influenced him was Peter John Olivi (1248–1298). While disproving theology as a science, he rejected any possible proof of the existence of God.¹⁰¹ His destruction of medieval “synthesis” was so radical that the extremity of his conclusion may be construed as, “that absolutely nothing could be proved about God in the light of natural reason, not even his existence.”¹⁰² Armed with dialectical probabilities like Averroës before him and yet unlike the Arab philosopher in his rationalism, Ockham became almost omnipresent in European universities in the late Middle Ages. That era progressively witnessed the wrecking of scholastic philosophy and theology, quickening “the final divorce of reason and Revelation.”¹⁰³ Despite the overwhelming influence of Ockham, a counterweight to him and to Scotus was Tommaso de Vio [Cardinal Cajetan] (1468–1543). He stood at the threshold between medieval theological tradition (especially in its Dominican variance) and the modern period. He made his mark with his criticisms, which were principally directed against Scotus. Where Duns Scotus had downplayed the supernatural dimension of faith with his rationalistic explanation, Cajetan stressed the supernaturality of faith as its constitutive dimension.¹⁰⁴

Divergences and Contentions in the Modern Era

One constant referent in the intellectual tradition of the great medieval theologians and that of the early church fathers is the affirmation that faith, due to its belonging to the divine, remains superior to all natural knowledge.¹⁰⁵ The Catholic position asserts that faith’s motive is God’s authority, not human reason. It insists that faith is an act of the intellect. On this basis, it maintains that reason can discover the truths which are proposed by faith.

101 Kaye, “William of Ockham.”

102 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 61.

103 Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 61.

104 Legge, “Reasonable Belief,” 329.

105 J. D. Horgan, “Newman on Faith and Reason.” *An Irish Quarterly Review* 42.166 (1953):132–150 (132).

Following thereof, Catholic tradition recognises five attributes of faith: (a) reasonability, (b) supernaturality, (c) certainty, (d) free, and (e) meritorious.¹⁰⁶ It balances the understanding that mutual illumination and support exist between faith and reason.¹⁰⁷ Hitherto observed, someone like St. Bonaventure, and others in his Franciscan tradition, feared that reason, especially Aristotelianism, might swallow up faith, which is the bedrock of theology. According to Joseph Ratzinger, the separation of philosophy from theology begun by the Seraphic Doctor became radicalised by Martin Luther (1483–1546) with his *sola scriptura*, which kick-started the process of de-Hellenising theology.¹⁰⁸

This is hardly surprising, since Luther's intellectual development was rooted in Ockham's nominalist tradition. Christine Helmer holds that the historical Luther is in reality "more medieval, more Catholic, more mystical and more philosophical astute."¹⁰⁹ His polemics against philosophy may be considered as his way of taking part in the late medieval battles between two rival schools of thought.¹¹⁰ In taking a side in the said intellectual battle, he accepted the nominalist position to couch his philosophical synthesis with the conclusion that God in his full majesty is beyond human comprehension. He also acknowledges that "After the fall of Adam, God did not take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it."¹¹¹ This did not obstruct his operative conceptual optic regarding the incapacity of human beings to know God. As far as Luther was concerned, all that can be known about God is already revealed in the scriptures and the person of Jesus Christ.¹¹² While he may not be regarded as a rationalist in matters of faith, his distrust of the power of fallen reason made him lay so much emphasis on the absolute primacy

106 Horgan, "Newman on Faith and Reason," 136.

107 McDermott, "Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason," 581.

108 "Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason," 573.

109 C. Helmer, "Does Luther have a 'Waxen Nose'? - Historical and Philosophical Contextualization of Luther," in J.H. Dragseth (ed.), *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 23–25 (24).

110 Helmer, "Does Luther have a 'Waxen Nose,'" 25.

111 Janz, "Whore or Handmaid," 48.

112 Hockenbery, "Introduction," 5.

of faith.¹¹³ His postulation that knowledge of reality is only possible through perceptions links him to the development of modern science. This began tentatively during the Renaissance with some publications such as *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) in 1543 by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), and progressively matured in the seventeenth century.¹¹⁴ Like Galileo a century after him, and echoing Plato before him, Copernicus opened his book with a caution to the reader: “Let no one untrained in geometry enter here”.¹¹⁵ It was a preview of the central stage that geometry and mathematics would occupy in the evolution of modern science.

In the wake of its maturity at the dawn of the seventeenth century, modern science also issued forth on the wings of modern philosophy, starting in 1637 with the publication of René Descartes’s philosophical and mathematical treatise, *Discourse on Method*. In the affirmation of Timothy Quinn, modern philosophy, from its inception in the seventeenth century through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was transfused by “anti-theological ire.” Its basic tenet was the emancipation of reason from any authority, natural or supernatural. As far as its founders were concerned, the “new science” ought to remain “metaphysically neutral” by keeping itself untainted without the slightest supposition or claim to the supernatural order.¹¹⁶ Its architects included Francis Bacon, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Baruch Spinoza. With his two influential publications, Spinoza elevated the thoughts of Descartes to the extreme. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), Spinoza denied divine authorship of the Bible, describing it as any other historical literature. He rejected miracles as possible divine interventions in nature. Spinoza, in his *Ethics* (1677) denied the existence of a supernatural or spiritual realm. He posited that all that existed was only matter, postulating that everything occurred

113 Legge, “Reasonable Belief,” 329.

114 Hockenbery, “Introduction,” 5.

115 Cited in Rothman, *The Dawn of Modern Cosmology*, xii.

116 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 179–180; 182

by necessity because the universe was regulated by eternal and necessary laws.¹¹⁷

Taking over from where Descartes had left off, Spinoza laid the ground for the Enlightenment rationalists for whom reason alone was deified as the primary tool and key for the study and understanding of nature and its manifold mysteries.¹¹⁸ He is credited to have introduced the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in furtherance of “the Cartesian search for indubitably certain foundations from nature into historical knowledge.”¹¹⁹ In the same optics are to be inserted Immanuel Kant’s *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone* (1793). Its aim was the rehabilitation of the Lutheran theological place of eminence in Europe against the deism that had become prominent in England and other places.¹²⁰ As for the birthing of German idealism, it came into being through the efforts of Gottfried W. Leibniz (1646–1716) in his endeavours to apply mathematically the tools of Descartes to the harmonisation of reason and revelation. As German idealism is generally considered to have reached its zenith in Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), David Hockenbery affirms that “the secularization of Lutheran theology was virtually completed in Hegel.”¹²¹ Ironically, while adopting a Lutheran theological mindset, Hegel and those in his school of thought became convinced that reason is superior to faith. The result is the effective swallowing up of theology by philosophy with the Hegelian integration of two distinct but mutually interdependent disciplines. Against the absorption of faith by reason, particularly as conceived by Hegelianism and the semi-rationalists, the traditionalists in the nineteenth century took the opposite direction. Although they accepted the traditional view that reason ought to be illuminated by faith, they went too far in the assertion that philosophy was true if it was based on revelation and accepted in faith. What ensued, over time, was a battle in the

117 U.L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement*, New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 2016), 14–15.

118 Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment*, 15.

119 Lawrence, “Athens and Jerusalem,” 233–234.

120 Hockenbery, “Introduction,” 9.

121 Hockenbery, “Introduction,” 9.

trenches where Catholic neo-Scholastics were up in arms against Cartesian rationalists and German idealists, especially in the context of post-Enlightenment modern Catholicism.¹²²

The staunch opposition of the founding generation of modern philosophy against any perceived intrusion of faith into the domain of philosophy begat a set of three theories against faith and the supernatural order. They are (1) idealism and atheistic humanism, with a strong tendency to submerge the idea of religion; (2) scientific positivism and pragmatism, with their inclination towards the reduction of reason to instrumental uses and the truncation of human moral involvement with the world; and (3) eclectic historicism and nihilism, which deny the possibility of absolute truth, leading ultimately to the collapse of the entire horizon of human meaning. All three sets of theories are illustrative of a crisis in three important areas of concern in the contemporary epoch: metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.¹²³ In some sense, they may be described as a furtherance of the Enlightenment in disguise, with its pragmatic materialism that abhorred the miraculous, and also caused a deep rift between matter and spirit.¹²⁴ In its efforts to ward off the intrusion of faith into the domain of reason, modern philosophy regrettably strayed into its own dogmatism, whereby reason became less concerned with the speculative quest for the first principles. It rather busied itself with epistemology, understood as something “within our power” and “useful for life.” On display is the presumption of scientific dogmatism to unilaterally settle the question of faith and reason in favour of practical reason to the exclusion

122 A. Dulles, “Can Philosophy be Christian? – The New State of the Question,” in D.R. Foster & J.W. Koterski (eds.), *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought*, pp. 3–21 (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 3–21; K. Schelkens, J. A. Dick, & J. Mettepenningen, *Aggiornamento? – Catholicism from Gregory XVI to Benedict XVI* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 41.

123 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 189; also see the analysis in H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

124 G. Ashenden, ‘The problem with prioritising ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue at the Synod’, *Catholic Herald*, viewed 28 September 2023 from <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-problem-with-prioritising-ecumenism-and-inter-faith-dialogue-at-the-synod/>.

of faith. This was done in the belief that reason has the means and the ability to settle everything.¹²⁵ It is the same perennial quarrel between faith and reason that emerged in another form, particularly as the rationalists sought to belittle the role of faith. Such presumption is reminiscent of the empiricism of Francis Bacon, John Locke, and David Hume and the likes of Voltaire and John Stuart Mill, with their epistemological insistence that true knowledge is essentially from sensory experience and empirically based.¹²⁶ The postmodern worldview that privileges the empirical sciences as progress and development owes a lot to empiricism. The same is equally true of the pragmatism and the begetting of contemporary philosophical naturalism which in turn is charmed by the success of the empirical sciences which according to Jon Jacobs, “has been one of the main motivations for thinkers to embrace naturalism”.¹²⁷

Conciliation of the Two Wings

To safeguard the deposit of faith and caution against the errors of rationalism and fideism, the Roman Magisterium has had to wade into the debate by taking a middle ground after some precipitations and pitfalls in its hostile and defensive rhetoric against modernity and certain innovations associated with it.¹²⁸ The popes, by the middle of the nineteenth century, had issued a series of documents that contained condemnations and admonitions regarding faith and reason. One such document is the *Syllabus of Errors*, issued on 8 December 1864 by Pope Pius IX (1846–1878). Numbers 1 to 7 of that encyclical condemned pantheism, naturalism, and absolute rationalism that disregarded divine revelation and even considered faith as injurious to the

125 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 191.

126 Richard Fumerton, Anthony M. Quinton, Baron Quinton and Brian Duignan. “Empiricism.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/empiricism>. Accessed 23 July 2024.

127 Jon Jacobs, “Naturalism” (2002). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/naturali/#:~:text=Naturalism%20is%20an%20approach%20to%20philosophical%20problems%20that,without%20a%20distinctively%20a%20priori%20project%20of%20theorizing>. Accessed 23 July 2024.

128 Schelkens, et al, *Aggiornamento*, 41.

perfection of human beings (*Syllabus of Errors* 1–7).¹²⁹ A crucial document that effectively set the parameters of Catholic thought on faith and reason is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, produced by the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), entitled *Dei Filius*.¹³⁰ Against fideism, the council taught that “God can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of human reason” (*Dei Filius* 2). In its disapproval of rationalism, it confessed faith:

to be a supernatural power, by which, by the aspiring and helping grace of God, we believe to be truths revealed by him, not because of the intrinsic truth of things seen by the light of natural reason, but because of the authority of God’s revealing mind who can neither deceive nor be deceived (*Dei Filius* 3).

The First Vatican Council provided a solid platform for the Church to navigate the vexatious problem of conciliation between faith and reason. It also set out the basis for further progress.¹³¹ According to Karim Schelkens and others, Vatican I may be regarded as the “first broad and official attempt” by the Catholic Church to confront the post-Enlightenment era. Similarly, according to the same authors, neo-Thomism became its underpinning philosophical and theological *vade mecum* in confrontation with modernity.¹³² Neo-Thomism received official papal backing in 1879 with Pope Leo XIII’s publication, *Aeterni Patris*.¹³³ Using it, he sought to influence Catholic intellectual life with the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor was presented as a sure and true guide of Christian approach to

129 Pius IX, *The Syllabus of Errors* (1864), viewed 28 September 2023 from <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/syllabus-of-errors-9048>.

130 Pius IX, “Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*” (1870), viewed 28 September 2023 from <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/la/documents/constitutio-dogmatica-dei-filius-24-aprilis-1870.html>.

131 Dulles, “Faith and Reason,” 208.

132 Schelkens, et al, *Aggiornamento*, 70–71.

133 Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris* (1879), viewed 28 September 2023 from https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html

science and knowledge, and as a model for the integration of faith and reason.¹³⁴ Hence, the pope impressed it upon bishops "... to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and the advantage of all the sciences" (*Aeterni Patris* 31). Following the example of Leo XIII, the popes of the first half of the twentieth century also issued a series of relevant documents on the same matter. For the repudiation of the agnostic and historicist theses of modernism, the Congregation of the Holy Office published *Lamentabili Sane* (3 July 1907) which was followed by the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* of 8 September 1907 by Pope Pius X (1903–1914). For his part, Pope Pius XI (1921–1939) condemned Marxist communism for its materialist determinism. Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) with his encyclical *Humani Generis* of 12 August 1950, explicitly cautioned against *nouvelle théologie* as one of the theses that threatened the foundations of Catholic doctrines. This was due to its tendency towards historicism and dogmatic relativism.¹³⁵ The churning out of those documents is not altogether surprising. In the affirmation of Dulles, "the role of reason in preparing for the assent of faith" remained a major preoccupation for the Catholic Church from Vatican I to the Pontificate of Pius XII.¹³⁶

That concern appeared less acute at the convocation of Vatican II (1962–1965). However, the council reaffirmed the position of Vatican I on the distinction between the orders of faith and reason.¹³⁷ Without the ferocity of past contentions that worried his successors, it is natural to see Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* of 14 September 1998,¹³⁸ as the culmination and crowning of Catholic thought on the themes of faith and reason. Therein, he writes: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth" (*Fides et Ratio* 1). In confirming that there cannot be

134 Schelkens, et al, *Aggiornamento*, 70–71.

135 Dulles, "Faith and Reason," 194.

136 Dulles, "Faith and Reason," 194.

137 Dulles, "Faith and Reason," 194.

138 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998), viewed 5 May from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.

a conflict between faith and reason since both are gifts from God who cannot contradict himself, John Paul II insists that the Magisterium has the right and duty to condemn philosophical doctrines that are opposed to the truths of faith (*Fides et Ratio* 55, see footnote n. 72). A novelty in John Paul II's treatment of the issue is the introduction of a pneumatic dimension. He declares that philosophical and theological wisdom stand to be perfected with the infusion of wisdom by the Holy Spirit, which helps the human mind attain knowledge of divine realities (*Fides et Ratio* 44).¹³⁹ While lauding contemporary thinkers such as John Newman, Antonio Rosmini, Vladimir Soloviev, and Vladimir Lossky, he remains critical of scientism, pragmatism, and nihilism. This is because of their propensity to question the capacity of the human mind to transcend factual reality in their empirical preoccupations and denial of metaphysics (*Fides et Ratio* 74, 86–90).¹⁴⁰

As for Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013), the unity between faith and reason was undoubtedly one of his favourite topics. He returned to it throughout his pontificate, calling for reunification and cooperation of faith and reason. He disapproved of what he saw as the forceful separation of faith and reason, especially in the West where a false notion of reason in its exaggerated independence appears to have claimed the upper hand.¹⁴¹ In 2007, exalting St. Thomas Aquinas, Benedict XVI cautioned that “when man limits his thoughts to only material objects, he closes himself to the great questions about life, himself and God.” He contended that the Christian faith does not limit human reason and human liberty. On the contrary, “faith supports reason and perfection; and reason, illuminated by faith, finds strength to raise itself to the knowledge of God”.¹⁴² As far as he was concerned, the success of Christianity is explained by its extraordinary capacity to make a synthesis between reason, faith and life.¹⁴³ In his encyclical

139 Dulles, “Faith and Reason,” 202.

140 Dulles, “Faith and Reason,” 203–205.

141 D.M. Garland, “Faith, Reason, and Scripture: Greek Thought and Biblical Faith in Benedict XVI.” *Angelicum* 90.4 (2013): 799–820.

142 Benedict XVI, *Angelus* (28 January 2007), viewed 30 September 2023 from https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070128.html.

143 McDermott, ““Joseph Ratzinger on Faith and Reason,” 575.

on hope, *Spe Salvi*, he associates Christianity with reason. He identifies reason as the gift of God to human beings, insisting that “the victory of reason over unreason is also a goal of the Christian life” (*Spe Salvi* 23).¹⁴⁴ It means that genuine progress is not truly possible without reason’s openness to the saving forces of faith (*Spe Salvi* 23).

Pope Francis continues in the footsteps of his predecessors by highlighting the intrinsic connectivity between faith and reason as rooted in Catholic tradition. In his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (29 June 2013), he appropriates the thoughts of John Paul II in *Fide et Ratio*, to delineate how faith and reason support and strengthen each other (*Lumen Fidei* 32).¹⁴⁵ He recalls the experience of St. Augustine in whose life “we find a significant example of this process whereby reason, with its desire for truth and clarity, was integrated into the horizon of faith and thus gained new understanding” (*Lumen Fidei* 33). It follows that “the security of faith” shines a light on “the material world” and “also trusts its inherent order” by calling human beings “to an ever-widening path of harmony and understanding” (*Lumen Fidei* 34). Through the awakening of wonder, faith encourages research not to be “satisfied with its formulae” and “broadens the horizon of reason to shed great light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation” (*Lumen Fidei* 34). It was precisely from such perspective that the medieval schoolmen understood theology as a “science of faith” interpreted as “a participation in God’s knowledge of himself” (*Lumen Fidei* 36).

Conclusion

The Catholic Church, at certain times, has had to intervene to preserve the delicate connection between faith and reason, against rationalism on one side of the pole, and fideism on the

144 Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* (2007), viewed 30 September 2023 from https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

145 Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* (2013), viewed 1 October 2023 from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

other side. The history of the marriage between faith and reason in Catholic intellectual tradition has often been fraught with tensions and extremes. As Timothy Sean Quinn perceptively surmises, the seemingly harmonious synthesis between faith and reason in Christian thought may be described as more of an idealisation than a historical reality.¹⁴⁶ The tension between faith and reason has existed since the emergence of the Christian faith.¹⁴⁷ For instance, Justin Martyr in his *Apology*, sought to find a link between Hellenism and Christianity, or between philosophy and Christianity by demonstrating its reasonableness. Tertullian (c. AD 155/165–220), for his part, rejected the appropriation of philosophical categories. His rejection of it is couched in his celebrated aphorism as elaborated in the seventh chapter of his treatise, *On Prescription against Heretics*: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.”¹⁴⁸

That discord has often lurked in the background, as evident in the Bonaventure cum Aquinas disagreement on the rapprochement between faith and reason. This research has demonstrated that the conciliation of the two wings was achieved neither overnight nor by a stroke of the pen by ecclesiastical authorities. It was a process that evolved and matured with time throughout the Christian centuries. The Magisterium has had to wield the stick to reinforce a balance without necessarily truncating the liberty of research even though, in certain instances, the stick came down heavily on certain intellectuals who ventured to think outside the box. Despite the strong tendencies of intellectual currents that would prefer that Jerusalem and Athens had nothing in common, the middle ground has often claimed victory at the end of the day. In the absence of the acerbity of the past, contemporary popes energetically disapprove of philosophical categories and scientific theories that deify reason and ridicule faith. Instead of conflict, Catholic

146 Quinn, “Infides et Unratio,” 190

147 C. Rosental, *Lessons from Aquinas – A Resolution of the Problem of Faith and Reason* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), 1.

148 Cited in Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 9.

intellectual tradition favours a coexistence and cooperation between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, Jerusalem and Athens, the Church and the Academy.



Chapter 3

Philosophical Theologies in South Africa: Genealogies and Traditions Pre- and Post-1994¹

Khegan M. Delport 

When one begins to explore the available scholarship, one finds insufficient reflection on the category of “philosophical theology” or even “philosophy of religion” as such among South African publications. Apart from a handful of significant figures, thematic engagement with the history and reception of philosophical theology has not been hugely forthcoming. The attempt that follows is simply a small step towards developing something of a reception history within the South African context. My focus will be on the pre-1994 period to set the context for the overall development, but thereafter I go on to put forward a typology of philosophical theologies and some representatives in the post-1994 context.²

Philosophy and Theology: Pre-1994 Trajectories

A legitimate query has been raised as to whether there is a sufficiently unique reception of philosophical traditions within South Africa to warrant talk of a *South African* tradition of philosophy.³ If this observation holds any water, then one question

- 1 A different version of this chapter also appeared as a section of “Philosophical Theology in South Africa?” *Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, no.3 (2022): 1–60.
- 2 In the text that follows, I will be focusing on traditions in which philosophy and theology are made thematic *explicitly* rather than delving into the *implicit* philosophical theologies amongst South African authors – which would be a rather unmanageable task.
- 3 Coetzee and Roux have stated that there is “no developed regional philosophy in South Africa,” insofar as the South African philosophical tradition “has its roots in largely European

that arises is whether philosophical theology in South Africa has enough particularised traction to warrant special treatment. An overview of the philosophical scene in South Africa suggests that the reception history of philosophical traditions has not produced anything equivalent to that evoked by “Anglophone,” “Continental” or even “African” philosophy. In broad terms, this judgement seems to have some validity; there is little of a uniquely regional philosophical practice to warrant something like a *South African* philosophical tradition.⁴ Almost any intellectual tendency one examines, whether philosophical or theological, is not unique to this regionality. The postcolonial *mélange* of inherited and invented traditions makes any simplistic characterisation of this or that trajectory as being especially “South African” a tendentious exercise. Furthermore, it is also worth pausing to ask what criteria could apply to any philosophical trajectory being classified as regional. What presuppositions are at work in the production of such categories? Pertinent questions have been raised as to whether such philosophical categorisations (e.g., “Western Philosophy”) are in fact ideologically innocent at all, and do not betray the limits of a colonial imagination.⁵ In other words, how could we judge any intellectual trend as being especially “South African?” To raise this invokes the bedevilment of definitions. Pieter Duvenage’s statement that it is “premature to refer to South African philosophical tradition and more prudent to study the history of the institutionalisation of a philosophical

traditions”; see P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, “Preface,” in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings* (Oxford University Press, 1998), xi.

- 4 Saul Dubow, however, has argued that there has been distinctive tradition of “South Africanism,” linked to figures such as Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, who developed more centrist ideologies of conciliation, moderation, and reconciliation, after the intense histories of interactions between imperialists and colonialists, as well as between the Boers and the British. This tradition did not hold on to power, but it did persist within intellectual and scientific institutions well after the ascent of Nationalist Party and has influence until the present day; see Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 5 Lucy Allais, “Problematising Western Philosophy as One Part of Africanising the Curriculum.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35.4 (2016): 537–545.

discourse in South Africa” is probably an accurate summary of where things currently stand.⁶

In the history of South Africa, by and large, one hears less of “philosophical theology” and more of “Christian philosophy,” here mainly in its Catholic or Calvinistic guises.⁷ “Philosophical theology,” as suggested earlier, is largely a production of British and North American discourse, stemming from Lockean traditions of “rational theology” that have minimal reception within the country. As regards style and methodology, philosophical theology tends to draw upon British common-sense philosophy and linguistic analysis (characteristic of Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein); this movement rose to prominence in the wake of the decline of British Idealism. For various reasons, which I will mention shortly, this tradition did not take root in the faculties of theology or philosophy that hosted the major institutions of theological education. One could say that politics had a big part to play here, especially after the bellicose interactions between the Afrikaner and British in the twentieth century. However, if we turn to something like “Christian philosophy,” as distinguished from “philosophical theology,” then there is a greater reception to be recounted, even as its influence should not be overstated. I will return to the question of

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- 6 Pieter Duvenage, “Phenomenology in South Africa: An Indirect Encounter with Richard Kearney,” in Yolande Steenkamp and Daniël Veldsman (eds.), *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa* (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2018), 68n48.
- 7 “Christian philosophy” of course may be used as a circumlocution for “philosophical theology”. My point here is that the term “philosophical theology” as such does not appear to have significant traction within the South African context, even though it may operate under different names. Moreover, especially in an Anglo-American context, “philosophical theology” is largely identified with “analytic theology” or “analytic philosophy of religion”, a trend which does not have as much institutional reception in South Africa. Within a Catholic context, it may be used interchangeably with “philosophy of religion” or “natural theology”. However, part of the earlier genealogy (in Chapter One) has suggested that this has not always been the case and that the separation of “natural theology” into a distinct discipline may have had a long-term effect of separating “theology” and “natural theology”, pressing the Thomistic *duplex* of theology into a separation – which seems to have *not* been his intention.

whether there is a tradition of “philosophical theology” in South Africa a little later.

Most famously, “Christian philosophy” in South Africa has been associated with the work of Hermann Dooyeweerd and his philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea.⁸ Reformational philosophy (RP), in South Africa, has traditionally been associated with the University of the Orange Free State (now the University of the Free State or UFS) in Bloemfontein and the University for Christian Higher Education (now North-West University or NWU) in Potchefstroom. The tradition in Bloemfontein can be traced to the influence of E. A. Venter, while Potchefstroom is most associated with H. G. Stoker.⁹ For his part, Dooyeweerd argued that encyclopaedic sciences are always-already grounded within a “religious” posture towards the totality of meaning. Drawing on the Kuyperian tradition of “modal” or “sphere sovereignty,” he argued that, within this cosmological perspective, there has developed a hierarchy of interrelated “modal spheres” or “modal aspects” of immanent being that are irreducible to each other, but nonetheless ordered cohesively by law. No modal sphere can be reduced to another, but rather are all orientated towards the origin, goal, and totality of meaning – which for Dooyeweerd is the religious impulse (*sensus divinitatis*). Problems arise when any encyclopaedic science – physics, mathematics, biology, law, or theology – seeks to absolutise itself and reduce other modalities to its own coordinates. In the case of science, this may lead to reductionism, or in the case of philosophy to a production of mutually exclusive philosophies that all seek to conceptualise the whole under one all-inclusive “Philosophy.” The result of this tendency is conflict and antinomy, and thus violates the law of non-contradiction. This constitutes, for Dooyeweerd, a rejection of divine law and a failure to acknowledge the religious orientation of all thought towards the absolute. The

8 Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Vol. I–V (Michigan: Paideia Press, 1984); *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Michigan: Paideia Press, 2012).

9 For an outline of Reformed philosophy in South Africa, see B. J. van der Walt, “Ad Fontes: Eerste Boustene vir ’n Geskiedenis van die Reformatoriese Filosofie – ook in Suid-Afrika.” *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* 43, no.3–4 (2007): 217–234.

distinctiveness of a Christian philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea, according to Dooyeweerd, is that it performs a “transcendental critique of thought” and seeks to show how antinomy arises when modalities are not probably ordered within a sphere sovereignty. Moreover, it seeks to transcend previous Christian philosophies by rigorously ordering its foundational assumptions in line with the principles of Christian faith – here, in distinction from Catholic and Scholastic philosophy, which adopted the pagan thought of Plato and Aristotle.¹⁰

From a Catholic or Neo-Thomistic perspective on “Christian philosophy,” Marthinus Versfeld and Augustine Shutte are of course important to mention, being both one-time professors and lecturers in Philosophy at the University of Cape

10 Strong criticism has been directed at Dooyeweerd’s system by some in the country. For one thing, they argue that Dooyeweerd was aware of the potential antinomic implications of his own philosophy, something that he progressively tried to address; but his attempts ultimately left many unsatisfied. They argued that in order for his critique of philosophy to be sufficiently transcendental, it needs to portray the religious orientation as general and universal enough to be communicable. However, if this religious teleology can be said to be universally recognised, then why does one need a specifically *Christian* philosophy for the transcendental critique? And if one adopts a specific Christian – or Neo-Calvinistic – posture here, then we have an antinomy and a violation of modal sovereignty, since one particular modality – Christian theology – becomes a cipher for the religious orientation in general, thus undermining the transcendental nature of the critique. For an example of this critique, see A. L. Conradie, *The Neo-Calvinistic Concept of Philosophy: A Study in the Problem of Philosophical Communication* (Natal: The University Press, 1960); Vincent Brümmer, “Dooyeweerd and the Role of Religion in Philosophy,” “Dooyeweerd and the Neutrality of a Transcendental Critique,” “The Dilemma of a Christian Philosophy” in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 35–64. Other Calvinist philosophers such as H. G. Stoker and D. F. M. Strauss have attempted to modify the position of Dooyeweerd – Stoker by adopting an explicitly theological starting point in the idea of creation (*Skeppingsidee*), while Strauss has developed a non-reductionist account of interconnected modalities as well as a thesis of the irreducibly philosophical foundations of the special sciences. For this, see H.G. Stoker, “Wysbegeerte van die Skeppingsidee,” in *Oorspong en rigting: Band II* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-uitgewers, 1970), 202–330 and D.F.M. Strauss, *Philosophy: The Discipline of Disciplines* (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2009).

Town (UCT). Their extensive work within the field of philosophy from an explicitly Catholic and Christian perspective was deeply influential on a generation of students who passed through UCT. I will return particularly to the work of Shutte later in this essay, since he continued to publish and produce after the democratic transition in the country. For his part, Versfeld, in an early essay, had bemoaned the status of philosophical education in the country, due to what he saw as its largely Protestant character. By this he meant its anthropological pessimism; its dualism of nature and grace; its avoidance of the doctrine of analogy; an over-emphasis on revelation; an intellectual atomism without synthetic vision; and a general tendency towards nationalism.¹¹ For the Catholic church, as Versfeld reiterates, there is no contradiction between faith and intellect, for faith is “not something repugnant to the natural intelligence but something which dazzles it by the very fullness of its substance, and which on the contrary lures it on by the very wealth of the intelligibles with which it confronts it.”¹² However, only God can be the cause of faith, even as reason may “establish those predispositions which God requires from our side, and it can answer those reasonable questionings which God does not require us brutally to override, because He respects too much the free reasonable image of Himself which He has placed in us.”¹³ However, if we seek a definition of “Christian philosophy” from a Catholic perspective in the pre-1994 period, then one could refer the work of E. A. Ruch, a librarian and professor of Philosophy at Pius XII University College (later the National University of Lesotho).¹⁴ After recounting the history of the term “Christian philosophy,” following the historiography of Blondel and Gilson,¹⁵ Ruch comes to the rather deflationary conclusion

11 Marthinus Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate in South Africa.” *Blackfriars* 28.328 (July 1947): 305–310.

12 Martin Versfeld, *The Perennial Order* (London: Society of St. Paul/Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1954), 241.

13 Ibid., 242–243.

14 E. A. Ruch, “The Problem of Christian Philosophy.” *Philosophy Today* 6, no.2 (1962): 133–145. This article is based on a paper originally delivered at the Sixth Congress of the Society for the Advancement of Philosophy in South Africa at Potchefstroom in 1961.

15 Both Blondel and Gilson were both responding to the claim made by Émile Bréhier that one could no more talk about “Christian

that our use of the term will depend on our understanding of both the task of philosophy and the meaning of Christianity. Because the definitions of what counts as “philosophy” are diverse and depend on the “operational” consistency that any particular philosophical system adopts and practices, “Christian philosophy” for him will imply any system that shows “a sufficiently intimate and natural connection between Christianity and philosophy.”¹⁶

So, if it is apparent that “Christian philosophy” in some form is present in South Africa, then what about “philosophical theology?” As I have said previously, if the analytic tradition of philosophical theology is clearly predominant within the Anglo-American debate, then the sample of South African theologians who could be classified as practising “philosophical theology” is rather small, at least by this standard. There are significant exceptions to this general trend, such as the work of Vincent Brümmer,¹⁷ James Moulder,¹⁸ and to a lesser extent D. C. S

philosophy” than one could speak of “Christian physics” or “Christian mathematics”; see Émile Bréhier, “Y-a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne?” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 38, no.2 (1931): 162.

16 Ruch, “The Problem of Christian Philosophy,” 145.

17 Vincent Brümmer is probably the most notable philosophical theologian from South Africa. He is credited – much to his irritation – of creating the so-called “Utrecht School” for the philosophy of religion, described by Gerrit Brand as a blend of conceptual analysis and hermeneutics; for this, see Brümmer, “Meanders in My Thinking: A Brief Intellectual Autobiography,” 3–27; on “the Utrecht School,” see Gerrit Brand, *Speaking of Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Relevance to the debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 13–15.

18 James Moulder, a professor of philosophy at Rhodes and Natal, for his part was also a respected philosophical theologian who sought to bring his philosophical and theological acumen to bear on problems pertinent problems then current. In addition to engaging in philosophical analysis of Christological doctrine, he also engaged in philosophical debates regarding conscientious objection and the idea of worship during the time of forced military service under the nationalist government. He eventually went on to be a special assistant to the Vice-Chancellor at UCT and would have had institutional interaction with the likes of Augustine Shutte, Martin Versfeld, and later with Patrick Giddy. From accounts of the period, he was a sought-after speaker and gifted philosopher, and

(“Daantjie”) Oosthuizen;¹⁹ but even these have not generated

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- 19 also played a role in the whole “Africanisation” debate regarding institutions of higher learning. Daantjie Oosthuizen studied at Stellenbosch, Vrije Universiteit, and Oxford. He finished his career at Rhodes University, was a particularly outspoken critic of apartheid, and exercised influence on the University Christian Movement, mostly through his popular philosophical lectures that he delivered at gatherings, and as a board member of the Christian Institute of Southern Africa. His career was cut short by his death in 1969, and it remains difficult to judge what kind of influence he would have had if he had lived longer. Nonetheless, his linkage to an historically English institution, and his theologically marginal status within the Dutch Reformed Church, inhibited a wider reception of his style of thinking within that ecclesial body. One could add to this complication the fact that even though he was theologically trained at the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch and the Vrije Universiteit and came under the influence of notable figures such as B. B. Keet and G. Berkouwer, his work did not focus significantly on theological themes, and so it is questionable whether he can even be categorised as a philosophical theologian. Overall, his influence was felt in a more subterranean fashion amongst writers, politicians, philosophers, and anti-apartheid activists, such as Alan Paton, André Brink, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, and Peter Storey. However, even though Oosthuizen’s theological contribution is decidedly less than someone like Brümmer, his general contribution was certainly not negligible; Degenaar credits Oosthuizen for introducing analytic philosophy into South Africa which as we have seen was largely absent from the philosophical and theological scene before him; cf. Johann Degenaar, “Oosthuizen, Daniel Charl Stephanus,” in *Dictionary of South African Biography* (Human Sciences Research Council, n.d.), 429. This might be an overstatement of the matter since someone like Bert Meyer, seemingly independently of Oosthuizen, had come under the influence of Russell’s writings during his stint at Wits University; see Pieter Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie: Perspektiewe en dialoë* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2016), 59–79. In terms of his philosophical approach, his development underwent a rather radical shift after his stint in Amsterdam and Oxford, leading him from a more Kierkegaardian emphasis in his master’s dissertation, towards a more rigorous method of Husserlian phenomenology and philosophical analysis later on. On this, see Andrew Nash, “Dialogue Alone: D. C. S. Oosthuizen’s Engagement with Three Philosophical Generations.” *African Sociological Review* 9.1 (2005): 62–72. For a sample of his work, one may consult *The Ethics of Illegal Action and Other Essays* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press/Spro–Cas Publications, 1973); some of these essays had their original form as popular lectures given at gatherings of the University Christian Movement. Here, one may detect something of a combination of conceptual analysis of the problems related to a *Christian* account of subversive and illegal action, in which

enough reception to be classified as a tradition of philosophical theology within the region. But if this is the case, should one then say that “philosophical theology” has little or no trajectory within the South African context? By the standards of what counts as such in the North Atlantic, there is not much to speak of. However, if one considers the sheer historicity of philosophical theology, with its plurality of practices and theoretical programmes, then it appears that any attempt to articulate a stable “essence” of philosophical theology or Christian philosophy remains fraught. For the sake of our task, then, mapping the trajectories of philosophical theology within South Africa will need to place such a reception thoroughly within its historicity, discursive figurations, and variegated receptions. If this plurality of traditions is acknowledged, then it seems that we might be able to claim comparable examples within the theological and philosophical scenes in South Africa. For the sake of this text, then, I will adopt a broader taxonomy in which “philosophical theology” characterises any theological attempt to make “philosophy” or philosophical questions “thematic” for its style and method. Again, any dualism between “philosophy” and “theology” is probably not sustainable from a *theological* vantage point, but there do seem to be enough methodological differences to warrant something like an interrelation-within-distinction. Furthermore, the style of “philosophical theology,” while deeply connected to the fields of fundamental theology, systematic theology, and dogmatics, is often concerned with questions that are not the traditional domain of any of these related magisteria – even as it touches on themes that presupposes the deliverances of these disciplines.

For genealogical interest though, it is worth asking why a country like South Africa, which was deeply influenced by colonial intellectual traditions, especially at the formative period of political unification and the establishment of universities, ultimately developed very differently from its imperial metropolises, namely Great Britain – as with the analytical tradition, which went on to dominate what we now

the paradoxes involved in claiming both a universal and a religiously particularised standard for such action, are adjoined to a Kierkegaardian “teleological suspension of the ethical.”

call “philosophical theology” in the United Kingdom (e.g., Austin Farrer, Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, etc.). While not being the only factor, it can hardly be denied that there are, at the very least, socio-political reasons for such paucity within the history of South African theology, and philosophical practice more generally.

One general point is that colonial intellectual traditions are received differently within the cultural melting-pot of postcolonial regimes.²⁰ The transposition of intellectual traditions within coloniality complicates any straightforwardly linear continuation between so-called imperial “centres” and colonial “extremities.”²¹ This trajectory is reflected in the particularity of South Africa’s institutional development, especially within the remit of higher education. The first professorial chairs in philosophy at the major centres of learning in South Africa, in the period preceding and around the time of political unification, were occupied by British Idealists, like R. F. A. Hoernlé at the South African College in Cape Town, Thomas Walker at Victoria College in Stellenbosch, and W. A. Macfayden at Transvaal University College in Pretoria. British Idealists, by and large, tended to support the imperialist cause, and sometimes merged Hegelianism, with its assumption of the development of universal *Geist*, with a belief in the British “civilising mission.”²² Though

20 “...colonial intellectual history is characterised by a particular kind of combined and uneven development” whereby “[e]mergent local traditions...define their own ideas, values and aims very much within the ambit of hegemonious imperialist and other ‘foreign’ discourses even (and perhaps especially) where they deliberately set themselves off against these”; André Du Toit, “The Problem of Intellectual History in (Post) Colonial Societies: The Case of South Africa.” *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 18.2 (1991), 8.

21 Of course, to frame things in such a manner already assumes a Eurocentric and colonial frame of reference.

22 For this history, see Pieter Duvenage, “Is there a South African Philosophical Tradition?” in Daniel Smith et al. (eds.), *Thought and Practice in African Philosophy* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2002), 107–119; Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, 1–17; Andrew Nash, *Colonialism and Philosophy: R. F. A. Hoernlé in South Africa* (Unpublished M.A. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 1985), 26–72; David Boucher, “‘Sane’ and ‘Insane’ Imperialism: British Idealism, New Liberalism and Liberal Imperialism.” *History of European Ideas* 44, no. 8 (2018): 1189–1204.

the details are certainly more complicated, the reaction to British philosophy amongst Afrikaner philosophers, especially in the wake of a burgeoning nationalism, republicanism, and *volkskapitalisme* (after the Anglo-Boer war and Great Depression) can be viewed as a localised resistance to imperialising aspirations.²³ Such is exemplified, for example, by the pragmatist philosopher Tobie Muller, who refused the Rhodes Scholarship (and also the chair in philosophy at Stellenbosch) to become a minister in Philippolis; as an activist, he also played a significant role in the then-growing Afrikaans language movement.²⁴ Unlike the British reaction to idealism, which gave way to Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein, Afrikaner philosophy tended towards the Continental traditions of those Dutch and German institutions where students were generally sent to study. These institutions, such as those at Utrecht and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, were known for theological conservatism and their preferences for Kuyperian traditions of Calvinist philosophy and politics. There are exceptions to these trends, of course, but not enough to make a significant impact on the tendencies of the intellectual environment, when viewed holistically.²⁵ The Continental tradition was also seen in the so-called “Homeland” universities of Fort Hare, Transkei, and Zululand, and as well as the University of Durban-Westville and the University of the Western Cape (UWC). By and large, these institutions reflected streams prevalent at Stellenbosch University (SU) and the University of Pretoria (UP), even as these tended to produce philosophers and thinkers who were deeply critical of the apartheid regime. Here Adam Small – the enormously influential writer, dramatist and

23 On some of material conditions that lead to Afrikaner nationalism, particularly in the north, see Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934–1948* (Johannesburg: The Ravan Press, 1983).

24 Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, 18–23; Andrew Nash, *The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2009), 71–74.

25 Exceptions to this general rule, Oosthuizen and Brümmer went through rather significant philosophical developments after their respective stints at the University of Oxford – both under the influence of Gilbert Ryle; see Vincent Brümmer, “Meanders in My Thinking: A Brief Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 10. Oosthuizen had contact with Basil Mitchell while in Oxford; cf. Johann Degenaar, “Oosthuizen, Daniel Charl Stephanus,” 427–429.

poet – and G. A. Rauche should be mentioned as exemplars of this trajectory.²⁶

This is not to say that analytical traditions were totally absent from the country, but they tended to be linked to historically English-language institutions, such as the universities of Cape Town, South Africa (UNISA), Witwatersrand, and Rhodes.²⁷ However, the major theological centres of study, such as Stellenbosch and Pretoria, tended to reflect more Continental traditions of thought. Since the theological seminaries of the Dutch Reformed Church were located there, the impact of such traditions on the training of ministers and theologians throughout the country was impressive, and has tended to predominate since then. This is due to the fact that the Dutch Reformed Church, historically-speaking, was – for all intents and purposes – the official church (even during British occupation from the nineteenth century onwards), and so the theological debates that won out within the Theological Seminary

26 Adam Small, *An Enquiry into Nicolai Hartmann's Appreciation of Nietzsche's Axiology* (M. diss, University of Cape Town, 1962); G.A. Rauche, *The Philosophy of Actuality*. Monograph No. 1 (Ciskei: The Fort Hare University Press, 1963); *Contemporary Philosophical Alternatives and the Crisis of Truth: A Critical study of Positivism, Existentialism and Marxism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1970); *The Abdication of Philosophy = The Abdication Of Man (A Critical Study of the Interdependence of Philosophy as Critical Theory and Man as a Free Individual)* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1974); *Selected Philosophical Papers*, edited by T.J.G Louw (Ciskei: The Fort Hare University Press, 1992).

27 But even here there are very notable exceptions: Errol E. Harris, a highly respected metaphysician and scholar of Spinoza and Hegel, was born in Kimberly and studied at Rhodes and Wits, but eventually left the country to take up professorships in Great Britain and the United States. His work has touched on philosophical theology, mainly from within the study of the Western philosophical tradition. Texts relevant to this theme include the following: Errol E. Harris, *Revelation through Reason: Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); *Atheism and Theism* (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1977); *The Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Publications, 1977); *Cosmos and Anthropos: A Philosophical Interpretation of the Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International, 1991); *Cosmos and Theos: Ethical and Theological Implications of the Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International, 1992).

at Stellenbosch and the Faculty of Theology in Pretoria would have filtered out into the wider theological discourse overall. By contrast, since African and English-speaking churches and their theological faculties, such as those at Rhodes and Fort Hare, did not garner enough social or symbolic capital at the major theological institutions, their contributions did not register to the same degree.²⁸ This explains, for instance, the lack of African philosophy within university and theological syllabi in the pre-1994 period, and also suggests why it has become more prominent in the period thereafter – as seen in the proliferation of “African philosophy,” particularly in UNISA.²⁹ This is not say that African philosophy and theology did not organically interact outside institutions of higher learning during the period of apartheid, as in the black consciousness movement (linked, of course, to Steve Biko), nor does this mean that there were no exceptions to this general rule.³⁰ However, the reality is that if one goes looking

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- 28 This follows the language of Bourdieu; Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,” in *The Field of Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74–111. One could also say, adopting the sociological lingo of Randall Collins, that these philosophers and theologians did not have sufficient “networking” capacity within the apartheid milieu to create enough of a shift within the discourse; see Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 19–79. However, we should add that any theory of social change is multicausal and contextual; see John A. Hall, “An American Portrait: Critical Reflections on Randall Collins’s *The Sociology of Philosophies*,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30 No. 2 (June 2000): 202–206.
- 29 Mabogo More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 149–160.
- 30 One should mention here Anton Lembede, the prominent theorist of African nationalism and founder of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), who completed a Masters dissertation on the history of philosophical theology at the University South Africa. However, it remains a debatable question whether the subject matter contained therein would count as “African philosophy”; see Anton Lembede, *The Conception of God as Expounded by or As Emerges from the Writings of the Great Philosophers – From Descartes until the Present Day* (Unpublished M.A. diss., University of South Africa, 1945). Another example is Mongameli Mabona, a Catholic philosopher, theologian, and canon

for texts in which the interactions between African philosophy and theology are made thematic and explicit, one will not find much in the pre-1994 period, or even thereafter. A scan of the most influential philosophical journals during the time broadly confirms this.³¹ Moreover, it appears that the most seminal texts in the post-1994 period that bring this to the fore are produced by “white”³² South Africans, such as Augustine Shutte at UCT,³³ a fact that only seems to reaffirm the racial homogeneity of the philosophical and theological fraternity in the period leading up to 1994.³⁴

There is another possible reason why philosophical theology, especially of the analytic variety, did not gather much traction within theological discussion in the apartheid period and immediately thereafter: such discussions could be viewed as inadequate to the pressing concerns of church and society at the time. Amongst those involved in the church’s struggle against apartheid, as exhibited in the documents and confessions which characterise this period (e.g. *The Message to the People of South Africa*, *The Kairos Document*, the *Belhar Confession*), abstract reflections on the traditional loci of philosophical theology would have jarred with the mood and urgency of the period. In general, it appears that the concern for a “prophetic” theology in the period of legalised apartheid and “public” theology in the period of socio-political transition and reconstruction does not give equal emphasis to philosophical theology – to metaphysics,

lawyer; Ernst Wolff, *Mongameli Mabona: His Life and Work* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020).

31 More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” 159n1.

32 I use this terminology with the full acknowledgement that such racial classifications (e.g. “white,” “black,” “coloured,” etc.) are complex phenomena and historically dependent on the *long durée* of apartheid. However, I agree with those, like Willie Jennings, who argue that even though these categories are often pernicious, we cannot simply ignore the historical aftermath of “whiteness” or “blackness” or simplistically escape these histories (via a politics of colour-blindness); see *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

33 More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” 158.

34 Cf. More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” 150: “Academic philosophy in South Africa has always been the terrain of whites, particularly white males.”

logic, phenomenology, semantic analysis, and so on. Figures like Versfeld³⁵ and Shutte³⁶ were certainly engaged in philosophical theology during this time, but their influence did not constitute a central force within the theological discussion (their influence was felt elsewhere); moreover, both of them were Catholic thinkers, which already put them at the cultural margins of a majority Protestant ethos, while others, such as Vincent Brümmer, J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, and E. E. Harris, before and after 1994, spent their careers overseas. Versfeld and Shutte also leant strongly towards more Continental philosophies of religion, and did not engage to the same degree with the analytic tradition. Moreover, this concern regarding the social usefulness of philosophical analysis is reflected not only in theological circles, but also amongst professional philosophers, particularly regarding philosophy's wider applicability to societies, like South Africa, undergoing complex and stratified processes of transformation.³⁷

- 35 For example, see Martin Versfeld, *The Perennial Order* (London: Society of St. Paul/ Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1954); "Talking Metaphysics," in M. Versfeld and R. Meyer, *On Metaphysics* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1966), 7–20. Also see Ernst Wolff et al, *Martin Versfeld: A South African Philosopher In Dark Times* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021).
- 36 Cf. Augustine Shutte, "Indwelling, Intersubjectivity and God." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32, no. 3 (June 1979): 201–216; *Spirituality and Intersubjectivity: A Philosophical Understanding of the Relation between the Spiritual Nature of Persons and Basic Structures of Subjectivity* (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 1982); "What Makes Us Persons?" *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1 (1984): 67–79; "A New Argument for the Existence of God." *Modern Theology* 3, no. 2 (1987): 157–177; "The Human Predicament and the Transcendent." *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 68, No. 801 (January 1987): 25–35.
- 37 This may be exemplified by G.A. Rauche: "[the] question is in what way the abstract character of analytical philosophy has a bearing on South African reality. Its protagonists, who follow the Anglo-Saxon tradition, often subscribe to a Western universalism, both philosophically and politically speaking"; G. A. Rauche, "Philosophy in South Africa (1990)," in *Selected Philosophical Papers*, 458. It is also worth comparing here the reflections of André Du Toit in "Philosophy in a Changing Plural Society." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 4 (1982): 154–161. See also Denise Meyerson, "Analytical philosophy and its South African critics." *Social Dynamics* 21, no. 1(1995): 1–32, and the response in André Du Toit, "Clearing the ground: Spurious attacks and genuine issues in the debate about philosophy in a post-colonial society." *Social*

So, with these qualifications in mind: can one develop broad characterisations of how philosophy and philosophical theology was practised at its most influential institutions? The faculties at SU and UP, because of their position within the general ecology of theological training and discussion, were particularly dominant. However, one cannot exclude the theological discussions that were happening in Bloemfontein and Potchefstroom, particularly as regards their strong associations with Reformational and Christian philosophy. During the apartheid period, it was these institutions that exercised the greatest influence on theological and philosophical debates within the country, as well as on what we would now call “philosophical theology.” These traditions did not always cohere particularly well, since the broadly hermeneutical tradition, often associated with Stellenbosch, tended to conflict with the scriptural fundamentalism and apartheid theology dominant then, while some Reformational philosophers – with a preference for Neo-Kuyperian or “pseudo-Kuyperian”³⁸ theories of “sphere sovereignty” or “modal independence” – buttressed Christian nationalism and a racialised policy of separate development in some quarters, as in J. D. Du Toit (“Totius”) and H.G. Stoker.³⁹ In any case, the RP

Dynamics 21, no. 1(1995): 33–70. There is a body of literature, written mostly by external observers, asserting that philosophy departments in South Africa, by and large, tended to reflect the syllabi of American and European universities, with not much consideration of the urgent political questions and *Realpolitik* seemingly required by the context. Analytical philosophers at historically English-language institutions were castigated by the likes of Robert Wolff during the 1980s; see Robert Paul Wolff, “Philosophy in South Africa Today,” *The Philosophical Forum* 18.2–3 (1986–1987): 94–104. The role of Afrikaans philosophers as regards intellectual support for apartheid is, of course, well known; Pieter Hugo, “The Politics of Untruth: Afrikaner Academics for Apartheid,” *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 25, no.1 (1998): 31–55.

38 For this phrase, see J. C. Pauw, *Anti-Apartheid Theology in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches: A Depth-Hermeneutical Analysis* (PhD. Diss., Vrije Universiteit, 2009), 131.

39 Saul Dubow, *Apartheid: 1948–1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16–25. One should, however, not overplay the influence of Kuyper, or Calvinism for that matter, in the construction of Afrikaner identity or apartheid; see André Du Toit, “No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology,” *The American Historical*

and cosmology taught at Potchefstroom and Orange Free State was somewhat different to the philosophy being practised at other Afrikaans-language institutions, even as it furthered its reach through academic journals such as *Koers* and *Philosophia Reformata*. Its actual influence on Afrikaner thinking in general should not be overestimated – as seen in its regional, largely northern predominance – and can be distinguished from the more popular Kuyperianism which came to dominate seminaries in other parts of the country. RP – what Versfeld dubbed “Calvinistic Scholasticism in the Transvaal”⁴⁰ – did not gain as much popular acceptance amongst seminarians, and its reception has therefore remained somewhat limited, up to the present day.⁴¹ Moreover, there was continued opposition to RP at UP (e.g., C. K. Oberholzer)

Review, Vol. 88, No. 4 (Oct., 1983): 920–952; Du Toit, “Puritans in Africa? Afrikaner “Calvinism” and Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism in Late Nineteenth-Century South Africa,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Apr., 1985): 209–240; David Bosch, “Afrikaner Civil Religion and the Current South African Crisis,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (1986): 1–14. On the broad Kuyperian roots of Christian nationalism in South Africa though, see Irving Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981); O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, 67–77; Charles Bloomberg, *Christian-Nationalism and the Rise of the Afrikaner Broederbond, in South Africa, 1918–48* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), 1–30; Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 238–257. As regards biblical interpretation, see J. A. Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa* (Pinelands: Maskew Miller Longman, 1987); Johan Kinghorn, “Social Cosmology, Religion and Afrikaner Ethnicity,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 20, no. 3, (September 1994): 393–404; Robert Vosloo, “On Reading Scripture: The Dutch Reformed Church and the Biblical Justification of Apartheid,” in *Reforming Memory: Essays on South African Church and Theological History* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2017), 127–138.

- 40 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate in South Africa,” 306.
 41 Concerning *Koers*, Elphick says: “Esoteric, belligerent, and faintly Dutch in tone, *Koers* did not become a highly influential journal, even among Afrikaner nationalists. The editors complained periodically that their subscriber list was unduly small, given the number and quality of their authors and their ample financial backing”; Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, 241.

and SU (e.g., Johann Degenaar), which limited its reception in the philosophical faculties there.

Philosophy at UP has also exuded a decidedly Continental flair: one thinks of the Hegelianism of W. Macfayden and J. N. Findlay, the ground-breaking interpreter of Plato, Kant, and Hegel; then there is Oberholzer, a follower of Heidegger,⁴² as well as the psychic-monistic trajectory of T. J. Hugo and P. S. Dreyer who focused on historicity.⁴³ This represents something of the northern tradition within the intellectual topography of the country. Concerning the Western Cape, establishing a fully coherent “tradition” at SU and UWC (as elsewhere) remains tenuous; nonetheless, there are some broad tendencies here. The philosophy department at SU from the mid-twentieth century onwards was influenced by streams of dialectic,⁴⁴ existentialist thought in the vein of Kierkegaard and Sartre, as well as hermeneutics – especially after D. C. S. Oosthuizen, Johann Degenaar, Hennie Rossouw, and Bernard Lategan (at the Department of Biblical Studies). Here, figures such as Socrates, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Gadamer, and Ricoeur exhibited influence. All of these Stellenbosch figures were theologically-trained, to varying degrees, due to the strong relationship between the Department of Philosophy and the Theological Seminary, within the Bachelor and Masters of Arts programme, interrelated as it was with the vocational training of the Dutch Reformed Church. UWC reflected similar traditions, since the theological faculty was founded with scholars trained at Stellenbosch – even as

42 Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, 24–39.

43 Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, 43–58.

44 As Andrew Nash has shown, the dialectical tradition was significant for both the philosophical and theological trends that were developing in Stellenbosch and UWC. From the theological side, the dialectical theology of Karl Barth is certainly a significant development. Nash acknowledges this, suggesting that “dialectic” was introduced to the Theological Seminary via Barth; cf. Nash, *The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa*, 226–227n28. The reception history of Barth in South Africa is too large to indicate in a footnote, but for a sample one may consult Charles Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988); John De Gruchy, “The reception and relevance of Karl Barth in South Africa Reflections on “doing theology” in South Africa after sixty years in conversation with Barth.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 15, no.1 (2019): 11–28.

they exhibited a more independent and radical stance vis-à-vis apartheid.⁴⁵ Someone like J. J. F. Durand, a co-drafter of the *Belhar Confession* and the first Vice-Rector of UWC, is worth mentioning since his second doctoral dissertation at SU evidenced a strong focus on philosophical themes, particularly on Thomistic metaphysics and the concept of dialectics.⁴⁶

The influence of these traditions, however, on theological and ministerial training, especially at places like the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch, was a fraught one. The Curatorium of the Dutch Reformed Church played a heavy hand in appointments in the Department of Philosophy, and was suspicious of the theological orthodoxy of Degenaar, especially after the synodal reactions to Johannes du Plessis in the 1930s;⁴⁷ and so they sought to minimise such influence through a splitting of the Department of Philosophy – giving the lion's share of the philosophical training of ministers to J. F. “Freddie” Kirsten.⁴⁸ Du Plessis, a missiologist heavily influenced by the piety tradition of Andrew

45 For a discussion of the history of systematic theology at UWC, see Ernst M. Conradie, two-part article “Reconstructing the History of Doing Theology at UWC – Some Fragmentary Decolonial Perspectives.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no.1 (2021).

46 The influence of dialectical thought at Stellenbosch is thus reaffirmed in Durand's doctoral dissertation, even as it was completed under the supervision of noted apartheid apologist F.J.M. Potgieter; see J.J.F. Durand, *Heilsgeskiedenis en die dialektik van syn en denke: strukturele verbindingslyne tussen Thomas Aquinas en die Teologie sedert die Aufklärung* (Doctoral diss., University of Stellenbosch, 1973). Durand and Dirk Smit carried something of this Barthian tradition to the UWC, where they would spend a large portion of their careers. Along with Smit, he would be one of the key drafters of the *Belhar Confession*. Smit, for his part, completed a masters dissertation on Jürgen Habermas (under Hennie Rossouw) and went on to complete a doctoral dissertation on Karl Rahner at Stellenbosch; see Dirk J. Smit, *Teologie as antropologie? 'n kritiese beoordeling van die transendentiaal-antropologiese teologie van Karl Rahner* (Doctoral diss., University of Stellenbosch, 1979).

47 For this section on Du Plessis, see Nash, *The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa*, 38–54; 74–84; Hennie Rossouw, “Die Du Plessis Saak” (August 2000), Unpublished manuscript (originally presented at the so-called Degenaar Discussion Group). My thanks to Robert Vosloo for giving me access to this text.

48 Anton A. Van Niekerk, “A Department Under Siege: How Philosophy at Stellenbosch was Split in Order to Survive.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3.1 (2017): 453–462. The Department was split into the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Political

Murray, had argued for a philosophical optimism,⁴⁹ an ultimate reconciliation of faith and reason, which emphasised the radical difference between God's self-knowledge and the contingency of our approximations, while maintaining an eschatological harmonisation within the absolute. He opposed any doctrine of "double truth" that implied a final separation of religious and philosophical perspectives, or a dualism between the reasons of the head and the heart. For du Plessis, faith itself is the highest form of reason, one that finds completion in the absolute.⁵⁰ He thus expressed a greater openness to scientific developments and historical criticism, and could be classed as relatively progressive as regards the racial question. This caused enormous controversy within the Dutch Reformed Church, which led to vociferous accusations of "liberalism" against du Plessis, eventually resulting in his dismissal from the Theological Seminary.⁵¹ Later on, Kirsten, even as he drew upon the tradition of du Plessis, served as a philosophical compromise (according to Andrew Nash) insofar as he was able to grant sway to an "epistemological flux" associated with historicism, evolution, and Bergsonian vitalism, on the one hand, while appeasing the Reformed Orthodoxy of the Curatorium by maintaining an "anthropological stasis" on the

Philosophy – where Degenaar was placed, along with others like André Du Toit.

- 49 Retief Müller describes Du Plessis as exhibiting "the optimistic rational intellectualism of nineteenth century academic discourse"; "Sacralisation and the Colonial indigenous Encounter In Southern African Christian History: The Memory and Legacy of Johannes Du Plessis as Case Study." *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 41, no.2 (2015), 85.
- 50 See Johannes du Plessis, "Geloof en Rede." *Die Soeklig* 11 no. 5 (15 May 1933): 141–151.
- 51 The charge of heresy was brought against Du Plessis by the Synod of the Orange Free State and led to a highly acrimonious legal battle between Du Plessis, the Stellenbosch *Ring*, and the Curatorium. Du Plessis ultimately won the legal battle, but was shifted out of teaching in the Theological Seminary. The so-called "Du Plessis Affair" became a watershed moment in the DRC, seen as symbolic for the purported struggle between "liberalism" and "Reformed orthodoxy" in the DRC. The movement against Du Plessis mainly came from hard-line Kuyperians and fundamentalists influenced from the Princetonian tradition of Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield.

other.⁵² He was highly respected, being the first Afrikaner to hold a professorship in philosophy in the country; however, he seemed to keep himself above the fray of controversy, which in terms of ecclesiological politics was more acceptable to the Curatorium. The generation after Kirsten were somewhat more outspoken and tended to be much more openly critical of developments in the Dutch Reformed Church, especially in its granting of intellectual and philosophical support for the architecture of apartheid.

One could see these trends amongst Afrikaner liberals like Degenaar, but they were also prevalent amongst that generation of thinkers who were then transmitting the hermeneutical traditions from Europe into the Department of Philosophy and Ancient Studies. Exemplary here are Hennie Rossouw, a Professor of Philosophy and one-time Vice Rector of SU, and Bernard Lategan, Professor of Biblical Studies, and the founding Director of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS). Their broad focus on the hermeneutical standpoint was applied to biblical texts, but was also taken up regarding broader questions of “understanding” and “meaning,” as seen in the tradition of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur.⁵³ They were also involved in thinking through questions of cultural and social transformation in the aftermath of the 1994 elections, with Rossouw having a

52 Nash, *The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa*, 85–90. On this, also see Calvin D. Ullrich, “Philosophy and Theology: Reviews from Stellenbosch – Proposals from Paris?” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no.1 (2021): 1–28; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2021.v7n1.t1>.

53 See H.K. Rossouw, *Die sin van die lewe* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-uitgewers, 1981); Bernard Lategan, “History, Historiography, and Reformed Hermeneutics at Stellenbosch: Dealing with a Hermeneutical Deficit and its Consequences,” in Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology II: Identity and Ecumenicity – Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157–171; Bernard Lategan, “Hermeneutics,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 149–154; Lategan, “Ricoeur in South Africa: Some Remarks on his Impact beyond Philosophy.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, No 2 (2018): 115–134. The hermeneutical philosophy exhibited at Stellenbosch, especially after Rossouw, has also been encapsulated by the likes of Anton van Niekerk – also a trained theologian; cf. Anton van Niekerk, “Understanding Theology as Understanding.” *Acta Theologica Suppl.* 14 (2011): 112–127.

focus on higher education,⁵⁴ while Lategan brought hermeneutics, reception- and memory-theory into conversation with the questions of values- and identity-formation.⁵⁵

As a side note, however, one should not plot any specific philosophical trajectory in the pre-1994 period along a strictly “right,” “centrist,” or “left-liberal” axis, as if a movement like RP was inherently conservative and Continental trajectories necessarily critical and progressive. The philosophical traditions are more internally variegated than a simplistic narrative would allow. For instance, Stoker was a strong proponent of apartheid and exhibited influence via the Afrikaner *Broederbond* and the far-right *Ossewabrandwag*; but the Kuyperian tradition was inherently unstable, tending towards both democratic impulses and hyper-traditionalist ones.⁵⁶ Strauss has maintained that Dooyeweerdian philosophy was intrinsically opposed to apartheid, insofar as it asserted both a non-reductive pluralism of sphere sovereignty and a refusal to reduce legal structures to the maintenance of the *volk*.⁵⁷ The Kuyperian tradition thus offers a contested legacy,

54 H. K. Rossouw, *Universiteit, wetenskap en kultuur : opstelle oor die krisis, uitdagings en geleentehede van die moderne Universiteit* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-uitgewers, 1993).

55 Bernard C. Lategan, *Hermeneutics and Social Transformation – A Selection from the Essays of Bernard C. Lategan*, ed. Dirk J. Smit (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2015). See especially also the introduction to this volume by Smit. The comments of Rauche might also be pertinent here: “[in] view of South Africa’s complex pluralistic society and the socio-political conflict emerging from it, the importance of philosophical hermeneutics and post-structuralist philosophy for the existential problem and the problem of relevance as they arise in South Africa’s multi-cultural society becomes understandable”; Rauche, “Philosophy in South Africa (1990),” *Selected Philosophical Papers*, 452.

56 Bloomberg, *Christian-Nationalism and the Rise of the Afrikaner Broederbond*, 4–13.

57 See his interview with Pieter Duvenage in *Afrikaanse filosofie*, esp. 148–161. There were, of course, differing receptions of “pluralism” within South African intellectual traditions. In distinction from the Kuyperian-Calvinist trajectories, there are “liberal” traditions associated with R.F.A. Hoernlé that advocated an integrative “pluralism” – here following the account of “positive liberty” of T.H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet. Hoernlé himself was ultimately opposed to separate development, even though he conceded it was the only feasible option under the white minority government of the time. Somewhat differently, though drawing on a similar tradition, A. H. Murray, a Professor of Philosophy at UCT, under

being used by both apartheid theologians like F.G. Badenhorst and F. J. M. Potgieter as well as anti-apartheid theologians such as B. B. (“Bennie”) Keet, C. F. B. (“Beyers”) Naudé, J. J. F. (“Jaap”) Durand, and A. A. Boesak, figures who came under the sway of Herman Bavinck.⁵⁸ For apartheid apologists, by and large, the deployment of philosophical and theological traditions for the justification of racial segregation came as retroactive justification for the already-existing separate development; these were themselves the outgrowth, amongst others, of settler colonialism, slavery, white trusteeship and paternalism, indirect rule, and “racial pragmatism.” Other factors include the DRC’s politics of segregated worship and missional theology, as well as *volkskapitalisme*, racism, along with RP, and especially its concept of “creational orders” deduced from the positing of racial difference. This variety of creation theology was adopted by some (like Stoker and Potgieter) as a *post factum* theologisation of white supremacy and separatism.⁵⁹ Analogously, positivism, as disseminated in the fields of anthropology, sociology, education,

the influence of Jacobus De Mist, merged “plural liberalism” with support for a modified apartheid. See R.F.A. Hoernlé, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit* (South Africa: Lovedale Press, 1939); A.H. Murray, *The Political Philosophy of J.A. De Mist: A Study in Political Pluralism* (Cape Town: HAUM, 1958). On De Mist, see David Johnson, “De Mist, Race and Nation.” *Alternation* 5, no.1 (1998): 85–97; on Hoernlé, see William Sweet, “R.F.A. Hoernlé and Idealist Liberalism in South Africa.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2010): 178–194. On Murray, see Sweet, “Philosophy under Apartheid,” in Jonathan Allen Lavery, Louis Groarke, William Sweet (eds.), *Ideas Under Fire: Historical Studies of Philosophy and Science in Adversity* (Madison & Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2013), 251–270.

58 See George Harinck, “‘Wipe Out Lines of Division (Not Distinctions)’: Bennie Keet, Neo-Calvinism and the Struggle against Apartheid”. *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11 (2017): 81–98.

59 Indeed, this appears to be the tendency of apartheid theology throughout, at least since the infamous *Acta Synodi* of 1857 which formalised the already-existing practice of separate worship for black, white, and so-called “coloured” congregations in the DRC. Kuyper-inspired dialectics of common and special grace, diversely actualised within different national and racial groupings, along with missional theory of *Volkchristianiesrung* (e.g., Gustav Warneck), were used for a theological rationalisation of already-existing, racialised separate development, particularly after the contributions of G. B. A. Gerdener and his leadership of the Federal Missions Council; see Piet Naudé, “From Pluralism to Ideology:

and economics, traceable to traditions of European liberalism, was deployed by “racial pragmatists” such as H.F. Verwoerd who himself came under the influence of John Dewey as well as American traditions of sociology and philanthropy (exemplified by the Carnegie Commission’s study on “poor whiteism”); these sciences were in turn appropriated for the knowledge production and social control of the indigenous population.⁶⁰ Something similar could be said for the phenomenological tradition, which has both a right-wing and left-wing reception within the country (as elsewhere). In South Africa, phenomenology was used to buttress “Fundamental Pedagogics” (*Fundamentele Pedagogie*) at places like Potchefstroom, in line with the National Party’s plan of Christian National Education; it commandeered the Husserlian language of *Lebenswelt* and *Weltanschauung* towards apartheid policies of racial difference and separation.⁶¹ Even African

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- 60 The Roots of Apartheid Theology in Abraham Kuyper, Gustav Warneck and Theological Pietism.” *Scriptura* 88 (2005): 161–173.
- 60 In this light, one could read apartheid policies as developing, at least partially, out of a combination of the Victorian-styled bourgeois and colonialist liberalism of the Cape, with its trajectory towards a universal “civilising” mission, with more pluralist and positivist view of cultural and economic development, which grew out of the urban and industrial centres of the northern provinces; on this, see C. J. Allsobrook, “A Genealogy of South African Positivism,” in P. Vale, L. Hamilton, & E. Prinsloo (eds), *Intellectual Traditions in South Africa: Ideas, Individuals and Institutions* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014), 95–118. Indeed, Hermann Giliomee argues that apartheid originated amongst the Afrikaner intelligentsia of the Cape (e.g., D.F. Malan), who were comparatively more “liberal” than their northern counterparts. Figures like Malan had little taste for the neo-Calvinist trajectory found among the “Doppers” (members of the more strictly conservative Gereformeerde Kerk), such as Stoker. Overall, the actual influence of the *Broederbond* on the genesis of apartheid was tenuous. By contrast, the liberal nationalism of the Afrikaner poet N.P. Van Wyk Louw was more influential; see Hermann Giliomee, “The Making of the Apartheid Plan, 1929–1948.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, No. 2 (2003): 373–392.
- 61 More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” 153–154. The phenomenological influence can be seen from one of the foundational texts of fundamental pedagogics, namely C.K. Oberholzer’s *Inleiding in die Prinsipiële Opvoedkunde* (J.J. Moreau & kie, Pretoria, 1954). On the philosophical status of fundamental pedagogics, see D. B. Margetson, “Pedagogics in South Africa: The Mystification Of Education?” *Philosophical Papers*, 6 no. 1 (1977): 31–56.

philosophy, as summarised by John Mbiti, could be exapted by thinkers like F. J. Engelbrecht to justify racial separation on the basis of supposedly incommensurable worldviews.⁶² In a strikingly different fashion, the hermeneutical tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer was also taken up at Stellenbosch (especially after Hennie Rossouw⁶³) as a mode of apartheid-critique, particularly regarding its scriptural exegesis.⁶⁴

What, then, have I been saying so far? I have argued that there is little of a coherent “philosophical tradition” within South Africa that warrants talking about something like a unified tradition of philosophical theology – analytic or otherwise. What one has is a disparate array of approaches that seek to relate philosophy and theology in accordance with some generalised approach that may be broadly categorised as Continental, analytical, African, or some variation of Christian philosophy, whether this be Catholic or Calvinist in orientation. Moreover, I have argued that what usually goes by the name of “philosophical theology” in the northern hemisphere does not find wide reception within the South African context. Philosophical theology in Europe and North America, as we have seen, is usually associated with the conceptual clarification of Christian doctrine, or (amongst Catholics) in a modern deployment of Thomistic philosophy. However, with some exceptions (e.g., Brümmer, Shutte, Moulder), there does not appear to be a sufficient institutionalisation of analytical philosophy of religion to suggest that it has been taken up (or will be) as a significant

62 More, “Philosophy in South Africa Under and After Apartheid,” 155.

63 Particularly in the wake of his highly influential and learned dissertation at the Vrije Universiteit, entitled *Klaarheid en interpretasie: enkele problemhistoriese gesigspunte in verband met die leer van die duidelikheid van die Heilige Skrif* (Amsterdam: Jacob Van Campen N.V., 1963).

64 By and large, it is worth mentioning here that those few theologians and philosophers who were trained in the analytic method, like Brümmer, Moulder, and Oosthuizen, were mostly critical of the theological developments in the DRC; however, they were too marginal to create an institutionalisation of such philosophical theology, probably due to several factors, including Brümmer’s decades-long career at Utrecht, Moulder’s outsider position in the theological mainstream, and Oosthuizen’s move to Rhodes – combined with his premature death.

locus within the country. The paucity of professorial chairs in philosophical theology or the philosophy of religion only seems to confirm this fact. Philosophical theology, if practised, is usually taken up within the Departments of Systematic Theology within universities. However, if one broadens one's categories of philosophical theology to include a wide array of approaches that include some kind of thematic correlation of theology and philosophy, then one could say legitimately that there are enough practitioners, in pre-1994 and post-1994 period, to justify a special treatment.

Typologies of Post-1994 Approaches

With the above in mind then,⁶⁵ post-1994, it seems that the main traditions that we have to deal with are: (1) *Continental* thought, and more generally what could be classified under *Continental* philosophy of religion (CPR). This tradition, with its concern for hermeneutics, phenomenology, deconstruction, and so on, is by far the most dominant voice. (2) We will also have to address *Reformational* philosophy, particularly in the work of D. F. M. Strauss, which in recent times has been connected to the philosophy departments at NWU and UFS. (3) One will also have to talk about *analytical* philosophy of religion (APR), even though its reception is limited. Here, Vincent Brümmer will feature prominently as the most notable South African exponent of this tradition, but we will also allude to the work of others. However, notably absent in this genealogy is the presence of African philosophy, which (as we have mentioned earlier) has gathered momentum post-1994. It therefore seems pertinent to include accounts of what one could call an (4) *African philosophical theology* in the post-1994 period (APT).⁶⁶ Here, Augustine Shutte, Gerrit Brand, and Patrick Giddy will be discussed as exemplars

65 Here concurring with Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, ii.
66 There has been some critical reception of Duvenage's book, precisely on this question of the relation between "Afrikaans" and "African" philosophy; see Dirk Louw, "The Phenomenon of Philosophy in Afrikaans: On Pieter Duvenage's *Afrikaanse filosofie: Perspektiewe en dialoë*." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4.2 (2018): 777–797.

of a philosophical theology that seeks to take seriously the contributions of African thinkers and theologians.

Taking these typologies into account, I will move on to a more substantive treatment of the reception of philosophical theology in the post-1994 period.

Continental Philosophy of Religion

Beginning with the most disparate and wide-ranging of the South African traditions, I will start with CPR. While not exclusively located at such institutions, as regards the cultural production of *theology* it seems feasible to centre our discussion on SU and UP when talking about this specific tradition, before moving on to some others. Within the tradition of CPR, one may mention a few broadly representative figures who studied under and drew upon the legacy of Rossouw, Degenaar, and Lategan. The first that comes to mind is J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, the James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary (1992–2014); he is especially well-known for his juxtaposition of post-Kuhnian philosophies of science with systematic theology.⁶⁷ Van Huyssteen develops an argumentative and interdisciplinary theology, in a postfoundationalist mode, postulating the linguistic and cultural mediation of religious experience and the necessity of modelling and metaphor construction within both theological and scientific paradigms.⁶⁸ Hereby, Van Huyssteen moves towards an emphasis on how

67 J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); cf. *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 105–123.

68 *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 11–52; 124–161. Other South African theologians who have evidenced a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary theology, under the influence of Van Huyssteen, include Ernst Conradie, Klaus Nürnberger, Cornel Du Toit, and Danie Veldsman. Of course, one also cannot forget the enormously influential work of George Ellis from UCT, and (in particular) his seminal text (co-authored with Nancy Murphy) entitled *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). For more on this in general, see Ernst M. Conradie and Cornel W. du Toit, “Knowledge, Values, And Beliefs in the South African Context since 1948: An Overview.” *Zygon*, vol. 50, no. 2 (June 2015): 455–479.

understanding and experimentation is mediated through human subjectivity and language, without thereby denying access to reality – hence his preference for a weaker form of “critical realism” that resists “strong forms of justification” outside of “the way of life” in which first-order faith commitments are contextually placed.⁶⁹ Metaphor construction in religion and science undermines a strictly referential understanding of language, and therefore moves beyond any direct or naïve realism. However, religious and faith commitments remain open to interpersonal and interdisciplinary criticism, thereby resisting a trajectory of irrationalism and incommensurability of discourses – as in some postmodern theory and narrative theologies. In this sense, he emphasises both “contextuality” and “transversality,” that is, the situated and embodied placement of rationality, as well as focusing on the discovery of interdisciplinary criteria and “approximate truth” between distinct traditions.⁷⁰ For him, any criteria for theological rationality must aspire to realism and display a capacity for contextual and theoretical problem-solving, as well as evidencing constructive and progressive advancements in this regard. His major research in recent times has been in theological and scientific theories around human personhood and the evolutionary origins of rationality and human uniqueness, chiefly exemplified in his Gifford Lectures.⁷¹ His later development has tended to focus more on pragmatic methods of problem-solving (after Nicholas Rescher); hereby, religious explanations and justifications aspire to an ideal of “maximally solving and meaningfully integrating problematic data” within “mankind’s experiences of reality”⁷²; this occurs within a broad pragmatism that acknowledges the different domains of rationality – the cognitive, the evaluative, and the pragmatic – and combines this with a theoretical argumentation that invests itself in real-world

69 *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 53–72.

70 *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 165–169; On transversality, see Calvin O. Schrag, “Transversal Rationality,” in Timothy Stapleton (ed.), *The Question of Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Joseph J. Kockelmans* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 61–78.

71 Published as *Alone in the world? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

72 *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, 95.

application, thus requiring the gradual development of epistemic skill and judgement.⁷³

W. L. (“Willie”) Van der Merwe, a Professor of Philosophy at SU (1998–2008), and later Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Vrije Universiteit (2008–) is also worthy of mention. Van der Merwe’s method is summarised in an inaugural lecture.⁷⁴ The Stellenbosch tradition is present via a proposal of a “cultural hermeneutics” (“*kultuurhermeneutiek*”) that exists within faith and culture, theology and philosophy. Van der Merwe here places both philosophy and theology within the question of the meaning of Being, the sense of the Being of all beings (“*die sin-van-die-Syn van alle syndes*”). Echoing Aquinas, he conceives philosophy as an infinite orientation towards “ultimate significance,” on the one side, while theology, on the other, commences from a presupposition of faith, seeking to reflect upon the diverse traditions in which this is configured. Like Gadamer, faith is conceived as a “living tradition” that continues to give meaning (“*singewing*”) to believers, since it is only through the particularity of traditions that significance is made to “appear.” The identity of traditions is always performed and retold differently, within a dialectic of a future-oriented identity that is continually “deferred” (“*‘n na-die-toekoms-uitgestelde identiteit en/of ’n uit-die-toekoms-komende identiteit*”). Included here is the way that the Christian faith has been disseminated in various “cultural incarnations” within a postsecular milieu, offering an incentive for a philosophy of religion as cultural

73 See J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). For an account of the development of Van Huyssteen’s thinking, see Kenneth A. Reynout, “The Evolution of van Huyssteen’s Model of Rationality,” in F. LeRon Shults (ed.), *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–16; Niels Henrik Gregersen, “J. Wentzel van Huyssteen: Exploring Venues for an Interdisciplinary Theology.” *Theology Today* 72, no. 2 (2015):141–159.

74 “Tussen Jerusalem en Athene: Die christelike geloof in die hedendaagse kultuur.” *LitNet Akademies* (8 October, 2009); accessed from <https://www.litnet.co.za/tussen-jerusalem-en-athene-die-christelike-geloof-in-die-hedendaagse/>, 25 October 2021.

hermeneutics (“*kultuurhermeneutiese godsdiensfilosofie*”). These “incarnations” of faith within contemporary society create a legitimate sphere of enquiry into the manner in which Christian faith continues to manifest and inform aspects of postsecularity – and here especially within the European context. However, such “cultural incarnations” need to be grammatically qualified by an “eschatology of transcendence” that resists any “immanentization of the transcendent”; such resistance is rendered tangible and legible for Van der Merwe in what he calls “a surplus of sense,” a “givenness” that exceeds every “given” – here adopting Marion’s account of saturated phenomena. It is within this dialectic between incarnation and eschatology that the relationship between philosophy and theology finds its ultimate ground for Van der Merwe.

Anné Verhoef, a Professor of Philosophy at NWU, has penned one of the more programmatic and representative recent texts on CPR in South Africa. He has proposed this tradition as a corrective to what he sees as the overly metaphysical, ontotheological tendencies of theology in South Africa.⁷⁵ Echoing a philosophical mood that is present at places like SU and UP,⁷⁶ Verhoef believes that CPR may provide a corrective to

75 “The Relevance of Continental Philosophy of Religion for Theology in Contemporary South Africa.” *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (2017):168–187.

76 One can reference here the well-received visit of Richard Kearney to both the faculties of theology at Stellenbosch and Pretoria, and the subsequent publication that stems from this visit; see Yolande Steenkamp and Daniël Veldsman (eds.), *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa* (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2018). Kearney’s reception among younger scholars is especially noticeable in this volume, and in some postgraduate work completed at these faculties; see Helgard M. Pretorius, *Theology at The Limit? An investigation of Richard Kearney’s philosophical hermeneutics in search of a responsible theological hermeneutic* (MTh diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2015); Yolande Steenkamp, *Post-metaphysical God-talk and its implications for Christian theology: Sin and salvation in view of Richard Kearney’s God Who May Be* (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2016); Steenkamp, “Of poetics and possibility: Richard Kearney’s post-metaphysical God.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 73.3 (2017), a4689. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4689>. One should also mention reception of figures of Jean-Luc Nancy and John Caputo as well; Schalk H. Gerber, *Towards a Politics of Love: The Question of Transcendence*

metaphysics, particularly within Reformed traditions. Alluding to Heidegger's well-known critique of metaphysics,⁷⁷ Verhoef argues that ontotheology construes God as a "transcendental signifier," a *causa sui*, that gives "a logical structure" to being, while forgetting the difference between Being and beings, the uncreated and the created, thereby reducing the God of revelation to the God of the philosophers.⁷⁸ Hereby, the otherness and transcendence of God is reduced to a causal schema *within* finite being. Philosophy and metaphysics thereby predetermine how the God of revelation may appear. Verhoef, however, appears not so much to be opposing metaphysics per se, since any God of revelation should imply transcendence of some sort; but he does suggest that CPR can provide a helpful corrective to metaphysics. Moreover, under the sway of postfoundationalism, Verhoef also argues against any ghettoising drift towards "particularism" and "postmodern fideism," which is why he is not opposed to the search for something like metaphysical truth (with all the due qualifications, customary of CPR).⁷⁹

At UP, a recent contributor to CPR is Johann-Albrecht Meylahn – a Lutheran minister and one-time Professor of Practical Theology at UP, and now at the Evangelische Hochschule

as Transimmanence in the Thought of Jean-Luc Nancy (MTh diss., University of Pretoria, 2016); Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), an award-winning book based on a PhD dissertation originally completed at the University of Stellenbosch in 2019.

- 77 Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Staumbach (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 42–74.
- 78 Verhoef, "The Relevance of Continental Philosophy of Religion," 174.
- 79 "Theology should guard against becoming so contextualised that it loses its metaphysical mooring"; nonetheless, he still insists that theology cannot be "pure metaphysics" either, and certainly not a theological nostalgia: for "a coherent metaphysical answer cannot be a move back to premodern fundamentalism, and it cannot be an uncritical move towards a new metanarrative." Rather, such a "theology – if it takes the criticism of metaphysics seriously – can give answers that take account of its constant need to question itself. In this way, theology remains an ongoing and open-ended task" (Verhoef, "The Relevance of Continental Philosophy of Religion," 182.)

Dresden. Initially trained in practical theology at UP,⁸⁰ Meylahn went on to complete a second doctorate in philosophy of religion at the Vrije Universiteit.⁸¹ His early work exhibits an interest in Continental and critical theory, including the postfoundationalist approach of Van Huyssteen and the work of Heidegger and Derrida;⁸² but in more recent times this has become much more explicit in his articulation of a “postmetaphysical” style. This approach places metaphysics *within* and *after* the linguistic turn, in which metaphysics is always-and-already *in-scripted*, always textually situated within an *archi-writing*. Moreover, through a reception of the “non-standard philosophy” of François Laruelle, Meylahn has proposed a postmetaphysical “Christology,” a revised *theologia crucis* that seeks to cross out or “crucify” every transcendent logos in the name of an immanent and kenotically-inspired practice of theology.⁸³

Several of the thinkers mentioned above offer revisionist accounts, commandeering postmodern theory for a re-imagining of theological loci. However, it is also worth alluding to a few philosophers who are similarly influenced by these trajectories, but who nonetheless seek a theological orthodoxy within this new philosophical context. For example, Callum Scott (a Professor at UNISA) proposes a renewed Thomistic natural philosophy, advocating for a reconciliation of metaphysics and science within a generalised *scientia* and clarified realism – based on Aquinas’s concept of adequation between knower and known-thing – in distinction from post-Kantian and scientistic epistemologies

80 *Towards a Narrative Theological Orientation in a Global Village from a Postmodern Urban South African Perspective* (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2003).

81 *The Limits and Possibilities of Postmetaphysical God-talk: A Conversation between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

82 Cf. Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Postfoundationalism, Deconstruction and the Hope that Motivates Research in Practical Theology.” *HTS Theological Studies* 62.3 (2006): 983–999.

83 “Postfoundational Practical Theology as Public Christology.” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 2 (2014): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i2.875>. Also see *Trans-Fictional Praxis: A Christ-Poiesis of Imagining Non-Colonial Worlds Emerging From the Shadows of Global Villages* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2019); *[Call], Responding and the Worlds Inbetween: Doing (non) Philosophy in a Time of Democratic Materialism* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2021).

(e.g., positivism, hyper-constructivism, naïve realism). Opposing scientific expansionism, he places the empirical sciences within the limited order of the material world, and thus as simply one path within the economy of knowledge. Echoes with RP are probably not far off here: precisely because the metaphysical cannot be reduced to the empirical, or secondary causality to primary causality, he argues that the scope of empirical science cannot be coterminous with the totality of knowable things or the Being of beings.⁸⁴ Scott's retrieval of Aquinas echoes attempts by some other South African scholars to appropriate the resources of traditional and orthodox Christianity for philosophical purposes. Jacobus Erasmus's attempt to articulate and defend a modern form of the *kalām* argument appears to cohere with this tradition.⁸⁵ But there are others too: from diverse backgrounds and exhibiting distinct philosophical projects, they have drawn upon movements like Radical Orthodoxy for South African questions. One thinks here of Danie Goosen, formerly from UNISA but now head of Akademia, who in recent times – in distinction from his earlier leanings towards poststructuralism – has sought to reclaim a more traditional metaphysics to articulate an alternative to contemporary nihilism; he puts forward a communitarianism that aims to bypass abstract individualism or a homogenising spatiality of modernity through an emphasis on the particularity of place. This is mainly directed towards the political dilemma of the Afrikaner within the post-apartheid state.⁸⁶ Johann Rossouw,

84 Callum D. Scott, "Fides et Ratio: Science and Faith in Complement." *Phronimon* 11, no. 2 (2010): 49–67; *A Thomistic Exploration of the Unity of Truth in the Science and Religion Dialogue: Returning to the Oneness of the Human Experience of Reality* (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2014); "Primary Causality: In Defence of the Metaphysical Rationality of Faith in God as Creator." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no.1 (2015): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i1.1377>; "The Frontiers of Empirical Science: A Thomist-inspired Critique of Scientism." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (2016): <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3180>; "Saint Thomas Aquinas' Ontological Epistemology as Clarified Realism: The Relating of Subject to Object for Ontological Knowledge." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2016): 249–260.

85 *The Kalām Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

86 Danie Goosen, *Die nihilisme: notas oor ons tyd* (PRAAG, 2007); *Oor gemeenskap en plek: Anderkant die onbehae* (Pretoria: FAK, 2015);

a Professor of Philosophy at UFS and an Orthodox priest, has put forward a comparable vision via a prioritisation of the liturgical ordering of time and space, combined with a theory of technological mediation (here following Bernard Stiegler).⁸⁷ Others influenced by Radical Orthodoxy include Jaco Kruger,⁸⁸ a Professor of Philosophy at St. Augustine's College, and Duncan Reyburn,⁸⁹ a Professor of Visual Arts at UP, both of whom have decidedly theological inclinations. One might also mention the work of Wynand De Beer, a convert to Russian Orthodoxy, who has expressed a significant interest in reclaiming an ancient and patristic metaphysics for understanding issues of evolutionary science and politics from a distinctly anti-modernist trajectory.⁹⁰

Reformational Philosophy

The reception of RP has not been as extensive as one would expect. Its epicentres in South Africa have rather consistently been UFS in Bloemfontein and NWU in Potchefstroom. *Koers*, a publication heavily influenced by RP, continues to be published. By far the most outstanding representative of this tradition is D.F.M Strauss, an award-winning philosopher who has spent decades promoting and interpreting the work of Dooyeweerd within the country and abroad – being the general editor of *The Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd* (published by Paideia Press in Michigan) and penning

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- “Tradition, Modernity, and Apartheid.” *Acta Theologica* Suppl. 25 (2017): 73–93.
- 87 Johann Rossouw, “The Politics of Liturgy Between Tradition and Modernity in South Africa.” *Acta Theologica* Suppl. 25 (2017): 111–125; “Bernard Stiegler’s Theology of Writing and the Disorientation of Western Modernity.” *Telos* 185 (Winter 2018): 149–64.
- 88 For instance, see Jaco Kruger, “Reassembling and Remembering – The Politics Of Reconciliation In South Africa.” *Acta Theologica* Suppl. 25 (2017): 94–110; “Still searching for the pineal gland? Reading the Ricoeur–Changeux debate in terms of Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4.2 (2018): 95–114.
- 89 Duncan Reyburn, *Seeing Things As They Are: G. K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene: Cascade, 2016).
- 90 Wynand De Beer, *From Logos to Bios: Evolutionary Theory in Light of Plato, Aristotle, and Neoplatonism* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2018); *Reality: From Metaphysics to Metapolitics* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2019). These three latter figures were all doctoral students of Danie Goosen.

several works in constructive philosophy that develop a “non-reductionist ontology.”⁹¹

For him, non-reductionist ontology implies a *sphere-sovereignty* grounded in the creational order of a distinction between God and beings, on the one side, and the differences, relations, and modal aspects existing between all beings on the other – what RP theorises as *inter-modal coherence*, *sphere-universality* or *enkapsis*. Strauss’s philosophy is characterised by a consistent attempt to show how antinomies arise in thought when this rigour of conceptual distinctions is not adhered to, whereby different orders of being are confused or collapsed together, thus undermining the given diversity and lawfulness of being itself. However, neither should these spheres be separated dualistically since their interconnection also implies analogical *retroicipation* and *anticipation* between modal aspects. For him, Dooyeweerdian thought does not imply a division of life into distinct spheres, but rather focuses on *how* the totality of the lifeworld is refracted ontically within any particular modal aspect (here echoing Leibniz). Modal aspects are not to be reduced to each other, but neither are they to be dualistically conceived. For instance, the lifeworld may become the subject of biological, scientific, or sociological research, which implies all the techniques and skills required to carry out such research. Such research takes place *within* these specific spheres of theoretical and scientific inquiry, in which their scientific objects are called modal aspects. But when one moves by reflective abstraction onto something like the philosophy or history of any of those modal aspects, then one has proceeded onto a distinct modal sphere of historical or philosophical study that is neither reducible *nor* separable from its object of study.

Following RP, his thought aims to be a consistently *Christian* philosophy by orientating its *a priori* assumptions towards a theological metanarrative of creation, fall, and redemption, and thereby showing how every encyclopaedic science is properly understood when it is situated within such a context. For example, he is critical of what he calls “theo-ontology” in

91 His magnum opus remains *Philosophy: The Discipline of Disciplines* (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2009).

which modal properties (e.g., time, space, and movement) are conceptually abstracted from the existing finite and created order, analogically attributed to God, and then duplicated once more in the natural world, as being creatively derived from God. There is a circularity here that he finds worrying, since it carries with it the suspicion of anthropomorphic projection. In an interesting fashion, comparable with post-Heideggerian commentators on the history of metaphysics, Strauss is critical of someone like Aquinas because, he argues, the Angelic Doctor presupposed a working, aprioristic account of “Being” which then in turn is applied to God-in-himself. However, quite differently to other practitioners of CPR, Strauss is not particularly fond of negative theology insofar as it might act as a corrective to “theo-ontology” since (according to him) it appears to go against the plethora of more “positive” usage of images and metaphors for God found in the Bible. However, Strauss is fully aware that any speech about God requires philosophical terminology or language drawn from the created world. This is the only language we have to work with. Nonetheless, such philosophy needs to be reflective of its own presuppositions, and properly ordered to Christian teaching in order for it to be theologically serviceable.⁹² It is also worth adding that in recent times Strauss has also shown how he sees RP as an alternative account to something like Radical Orthodoxy. For, whereas Milbank seeks to order philosophy *within* the theological, so that theology supplements and completes philosophy, Strauss proposes that the modal aspect of theology *already* is reflectively determined by a philosophical gesture, since to conceptualise such a modal aspect, and its ordering within the encyclopaedia of knowledge, is already to make a philosophical decision.⁹³

As mentioned, there is a tradition of RP linked to NWU and journals like *Koers*, and so by referencing Strauss I am by no means saying that he is representative of all practitioners of RP – or that his proposals are uncontroversial within the broader RP community. However, I have selected him because of the

92 D.F.M. Strauss, “Is it Possible to Do Theology without Philosophical Presuppositions?” *Acta Theologica* 22, no. 1 (2002): 146–164.

93 See “Theology and Philosophy within Radical Orthodoxy (Milbank) and Reformational Philosophy (Dooyeweerd).” *Acta Theologica* 35, no.1 (2015): 201–222.

persistence and expansiveness of his scholarship on RP, and because of his seniority and general philosophical sophistication.

Analytic philosophy of religion

Vincent Brümmer was a Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Utrecht from 1967 until his retirement in 1997. He is probably the most significant philosophical theologian to have emerged from South Africa in the twentieth century. He is particularly associated with the tradition of APR, and was instrumental in developing a tradition of philosophical theology at Utrecht known for its mixture of philosophical analysis and hermeneutical approaches. Following in the footsteps of his father N.J. Brümmer and maternal grandfather J. I. Marais, he began his philosophical and theological training at Stellenbosch, before completing a doctorate on Dooyeweerd in the Netherlands. He spent periods of study at Harvard and the University of Oxford, and under the influence of figures like Gilbert Ryle gradually made a move from a more historicist focus, predominant at SU and UP,⁹⁴ towards the analysis and clarification of Christian faith and doctrine, moving from a *descriptive* focus to the practice of *doing* philosophy.⁹⁵ He taught for several years at the University of Natal and UNISA before taking over the position previously occupied by A. E. Loen at Utrecht. After his retirement, he held visiting and extraordinary professorships of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch, the latter of which he held until his death in early 2021. Brümmer's reception has been felt significantly in the European context; he played a leading role in the European Conferences on Philosophy of Religion, and his standing as a philosophical theologian can be seen in the various thinkers he influenced (e.g., Gijsbert van den Brink, Marcel Sarot), as well as in the projects and publications he oversaw in that context.⁹⁶

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- 94 Nash, *The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa*, 93–105. At UP, P. S. Dreyer was a philosopher, and trained theologian, well known for his reflection on historicity; Duvenage, *Afrikaanse filosofie*, 43–58,
- 95 Cf. “Meanders in My Thinking: A Brief Intellectual Autobiography,” 18.
- 96 Overall, see “Meanders in My Thinking: A Brief Intellectual Autobiography,” 3–27. For his influence, see Gijsbert van den Brink, Lucio J. van den Brom, Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Christian Faith*

Brümmer's philosophical theology, with the notable exception of Gerrit Brand, has not generated a significant reception in his birth country of South Africa though, and is probably linked to the aforementioned paucity of analytic philosophy within historically Afrikaans universities. His influence has been felt more recently, however, in a prize-winning book he wrote – in Afrikaans – on the history of theology in the Dutch Reformed Church, which he characterises as moving between the two poles of Reformed Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and pietism on the other.⁹⁷

Brümmer has penned several books and dozens of essays devoted to philosophical theology.⁹⁸ His early work was focused on a critical engagement with Herman Dooyeweerd, which set the stage for his later developments. Because of his critique of what he saw as the inherent antinomies of Dooyeweerd's thought, and his related distaste for totalising philosophical systems, Brümmer sought to apply the tools of philosophical analysis towards the conceptual clarification of systematic theology. He did not, by and large, seek to engage in what Dalferth called "dogmatic philosophical theology,"⁹⁹ associated with traditional apologetics and older attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, etc, via something like natural theology – especially in its post-Enlightenment iterations. For Brümmer, philosophical theology does not "demonstrate what must be believed";¹⁰⁰ rather, it should recollect the interior logic and grammar of religious speech and practice, and thereby articulate conceptual clarifications, limitations, and innovations which may be accepted without logical contradiction, with a degree of recognisability for religious adherents who aim for personal and spiritual integrity *within* the particularity of religious traditions.

and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer (Kampen: Pharos, 1992).

97 Vincent Brümmer, *Vroom of Regsinig? Teologie in die NG Kerk* (Wellington: Bybel-Media, 2013). The award in question was the Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize.

98 The most representative text available regarding the body of his work is Brümmer on *Meaning and the Christian Faith*.

99 Cf. Ingolf Dalferth, "Philosophical Theology," in David Ford and Rachel Muers (eds.), *Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (3rd ed., Blackwell, 2005), 309–313.

100 "Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection," Brümmer on *Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 449.

His first book, originally published in Dutch but later revised for English, was framed as a textbook for connecting philosophical analysis of axiology, epistemology, and ontology to the question of God.¹⁰¹ This book, along with the rest of his oeuvre, exhibits the strong influence of ordinary language philosophy in the vein of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Like Van Huyssteen, the importance of metaphor and modelling in philosophical theology is emphasised in many of his published texts and monographs. In 1984, he wrote a text on the meaning of prayer, a book that was later revised into an award-winning monograph in 2009.¹⁰² Towards the end of his career at Utrecht, he wrote two books on philosophical theology: one on the doctrine of God, which addressed the task of philosophical theology, theological language, and the themes of grace, evil, divine action, and theodicy.¹⁰³ The other dealt with the topic of love, both human and divine, and the pertinence such philosophical clarifications have for the doctrine of atonement and reconciliation.¹⁰⁴ Developing these themes, in a later work, Brümmer unpacks atonement theology and its interplay with the doctrine of the trinity.¹⁰⁵

Two essays are worth mentioning here, as they speak to Brümmer's method in general, namely "Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection" and "The Inter-subjectivity of Criteria in Theology."¹⁰⁶ In the first, Brümmer proposes philosophical theology as a mode of conceptual recollection, imagination, and innovation. In a revision of Platonic anamnesis, he argues that concepts should not be conceived as "mental representations" but rather as "mental capacities" that are "rule-based"; this happens by recalling how concepts are performed and, moreover, how they should be performed, thus implying

101 *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981).

102 *What are we doing when we Pray? On Prayer and the Nature of Faith* (Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2009). For this book, he also won the Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize.

103 *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

104 *The Model of Love: a Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

105 *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity: Making Sense of Christian Doctrine* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

106 *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith*, 433–470.

a normative and prescriptive element.¹⁰⁷ It involves – to use a Gadamerian phrase – a recollection of *horizons of understanding*, namely those “intuitive conceptual capacities” that are inherited through human “socialisation” and moreover how such intuitive capacities interact with the texts of religious traditions, creating new meaning through a fusion of horizons.¹⁰⁸ The creation of new meaning and concepts thus leads to the play of the imagination, in which “philosophers reflect on *possible* conceptual forms” and not just “their own *actual* concepts,” thereby “producing conceptual forms that are to be *preferred* to those with which we are familiar.”¹⁰⁹ Our conceptual capacities therefore will also have to innovate if they are to be serviceable for us now, and not merely an exercise in the theoretically descriptive. This implies a degree of relativity regarding conceptual forms, since intelligibility is dependent on context and consequently, to some degree, is “person-relative,” that is, influenced by the horizons of understanding that frame communities and individuals. However, such relativity is not absolutised, and Brümmer believes (in similar fashion to Van Huyssteen) that there are criteria which may be approximated inter-subjectively so that intelligibility may be sustained across distinct traditions and horizons of understanding.

This is the concern of the second essay mentioned, which aims to set out those criteria which may be adduced in philosophical theology towards such ends. In distinction from “revealed theology,” which tends towards fideism, or natural theology, which seems to be predicated on foundationalism, or descriptive theology, which is insufficiently critical, Brümmer proposes philosophical theology as a way of using publicly available methods of reason and analysis “to make an innovative contribution to the conceptualisation of the tradition.”¹¹⁰ For him, philosophical theology is about “clarifying and limiting our conceptual options,” namely those that may be “accepted without contradiction.”¹¹¹ Important for him is the fact that traditions,

107 “Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,” 434–435.

108 Ibid., 437–441.

109 Ibid., 442–443.

110 “The Inter-subjectivity of Criteria in Theology,” 459.

111 “Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,” 448.

including Christian theology, are historical phenomena that are plural and subject to change. Because of this propensity for change, there is the need to reflect upon the quality of such changes: how is one to adjudicate the integrity of such changes? To help with this, Brümmer proposes criteria for thinking through the reality of innovation within religious traditions, in order to more reflectively consider their quality. Brümmer goes into some detail cataloguing these criteria, and so I will not belabour upon his own exposition, but in short he suggests that any “innovative proposals for re-conceptualising the heritage of faith,” within historical change, will need to be “logically consistent and coherent, credible, intelligible, relevant and adequate to the changing circumstances and demands of life, and recognisable to the community of believers” so that they may “decide whether they are willing and able with integrity to make these proposals their own.”¹¹² Brümmer believes that all of these criteria exist on a scale of being more inter-subjective, that is, more publicly available for evaluation, on the one side, and more person-relative on the other; but even the more person-relative criteria, he argues, should not be overly-particularised because they remain imbued with inter-subjective elements.¹¹³

Brümmer is not the only figure from South Africa to connect analytic philosophy to theological discourse, even if he is the most prolific. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the work of some other thinkers who have made contributions to this style of philosophical theology. In particular, one thinks of James Moulder, a philosopher, logician and one-time student of Daantjie Oosthuizen, who can also be classed within this broad tradition. He spent a considerable part of his career in South Africa, particularly at Rhodes University, the University of Natal, and UCT, and also lectured at US and was close to Johann Degenaar. He wrote several essays on philosophical theology, addressing questions such as: the question of religious perception,¹¹⁴ the logical and semantic

112 Ibid., 460.

113 Ibid., 467–470.

114 “Aspectual and religious perceptions: A Reply to M. W. Hughes.” *Sophia* 8, no. 2 (1969): 10–17.

quality of proofs for divine existence,¹¹⁵ reflections on the concept of worship (in relation to the heated political issue of conscientious objection),¹¹⁶ the solvency of Chalcedonian doctrine,¹¹⁷ the problem of theodicy,¹¹⁸ religious metaphor,¹¹⁹ and so on. Martin Prozesky, an emeritus Professor at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, is another thinker worth mentioning who has written on themes relating to the philosophy of religion, comparative religion, and the idea of God.¹²⁰ More recently, Jaco Gericke, a Professor based at NWU, from a descriptive and postrealist vantage point, has sought to apply the tools of philosophical theology and the philosophy of religion to the God-language of the Hebrew Bible, attempting to clarify and elucidate the multiplicity inherent in such depiction. His proclivity is towards debates within analytical philosophy of religion, but he has not avoided engaging Continental traditions too.¹²¹ This experimental juxtaposition of vocabularies is a novel approach to the study of the Old Testament, even as Gericke himself is aware of the limits of such an approach.

This section has tried to represent of some of the work done in the tradition of APR within South Africa, particularly in the post-1994 period. In this section, I have focused on Brümmer because of his local and international prominence. There is

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- 115 "Logicians and Agnostics." *Sophia* 10, no.2 (1971): 1–5;
 "Convictions about God." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (3 Jun 1973): 18–25.
- 116 *Conscientious Objection and the Concept of Worship* (Doctoral diss., Rhodes University, 1976)
- 117 "A Model for Christology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 35 (1981): 10–17
- 118 "Philosophy, Religion and Theodicy." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 3, no.4 (1984): 147–150.
- 119 "Metaphors and Models in Religion and Theology." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 6, no.1 (1987): 29–34.
- 120 *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984); *A New Guide to the Debate about God* (London: SCM Press, 1992).
- 121 *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); *What is a God? Philosophical Perspectives on Divine Essence in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); *A Philosophical Theology of the Old Testament: A Historical, Experimental, Comparative and Analytic Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2020).

certainly more work currently being done in this field,¹²² but for the sake of space the above documentation will have to suffice.

African Philosophical Theology

African Philosophical Theology (APT) can be classified as those attempts which seek to bring African philosophy into an explicit conversation with theology, or subjecting African theology to philosophical analysis. In this regard, someone like Augustine Shutte or Patrick Giddy might exemplify the former trajectory, while Gerrit Brand exhibits something of the latter. Because this tradition has been addressed in more detail elsewhere,¹²³ I will not expand upon work already done, but rather indicate the broad outlines of this distinct trajectory. For his part, Shutte spent a significant part of his academic career focusing on the theme of personhood, one which emphasised the spiritual and relational nature of this concept, and its resistance to a purely deterministic and reductive analysis. He went on to argue that the irreducibility of personhood, here via a Thomistic account of metaphysical causality, suggested the personal nature of reality itself, and that the advent of personal being was most adequately explained if the ultimate cause was itself personal, as in the triune God of Christian faith.¹²⁴ Later on, he brought this focus on personhood into an explicit juxtaposition with African philosophy and traditional religion, arguing for a synthetic approach that showed the congeniality of a Thomistic theory of personhood with African accounts of sociality and cosmology (e.g., *ubuntu*).¹²⁵ Following

122 For example, see the work of the independent scholar Arlyn Culwick, who could also be classed within the analytic tradition; see “An Empirically Testable Causal Mechanism for Divine Action.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, No 4 (2020): 247–282; “A Theodicy of Kenosis: Eleonore Stump and the Fall of Jericho.” *Open Theology* 6 (2020): 665–692.

123 Khegan M. Delpont, “Pathways in African Philosophical Theology: Augustine Shutte (1938–2016) and Gerrit Brand (1970–2013).” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, No 1 (2021): 1–26.

124 See “What Makes Us Persons?” *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1 (1984): 67–79; “A New Argument for the Existence of God.” *Modern Theology* 3, no. 2 (1987): 157–177

125 *The Mystery of Humanity* (Cape Town: Snail Press, 1993); *Philosophy for Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1993); *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Press, 2001).

in this line, Patrick Giddy (a student of Shutte and an expert on his work) has taken something of this tradition forward. His work has exhibited a Thomistic trajectory from its beginnings,¹²⁶ which continues up to the present day, touching on themes that are germane to the field of philosophical theology.¹²⁷ He has also published research in the field of African philosophy, as seen in some of the work he has done on Placide Tempels.¹²⁸ In a similar vein, Callum Scott, who was discussed earlier, has also sought to bring Thomistic philosophy to bear on the topic of African philosophy and decolonisation.¹²⁹

Unlike Shutte, Giddy, and Scott, Gerrit Brand came from a distinctly Reformed and Protestant tradition. In several shorter and more popular works, he touched on some traditional areas of philosophical theology.¹³⁰ His most significant work is his doctoral dissertation, which aspired to be a work in “meta-theology,” one that combined systematic theology, the philosophy of religion, and what could be called a philosophy of theology.¹³¹ He completed this work under the deep influence of Vincent Brümmer, and

126 *Ethics and Human Nature: A Reconsideration of Ethical Naturalism in Contemporary Thomist Writings* (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 1993).

127 “Special Divine Action and How to Do Philosophy of Religion.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30, no.2 (2011): 143–154; “Human Agency and Weakness of Will: A Neo-Thomist Discussion.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2016): 197–209; “The Human Spirit and Its Appropriation: Ethics, Psyche, and Religious Symbolism in the Context of Evolution.” *Religion & Theology* 25 (2018): 88–110.

128 “Can African Traditional Culture Offer Something of Value to Global Approaches in Teaching Philosophy and Religion?” *Acta Academica* 45, no. 4 (2013): 154–172; “The Ideal of African Scholarship and its Implications for Introductory Philosophy: the Example of Placide Tempels.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no.2 (2012): 504–516.

129 “The Decolonial Aquinas? Discerning Epistemic Worth for Aquinas in the Decolonial Academy.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2019): 40–54.

130 For example, see Gerrit Brand et al. *Godverlanger: ‘n Huldingsbundel vir Gerrit Brand*, edited by Willem De Vries and Robert Vosloo (Stellenbosch, SUN Press, 2014); “Om God in goed en kwaad te sien. Oor twee vorme van teodisee.” *NGTT*, 53, Suppl. 3 (2012): 1–12.

131 *Speaking of Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Relevance to the debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002).

sought to apply his philosophical approach to the questions of African theology. In particular, he juxtaposed Brümmer's criteria for adjudicating integrous change within traditions to the question of African theology. Following a postfoundationalist approach, he articulated the criteria that he discovered within traditional "Western" theology, and then moved onto an in-depth and wide-ranging exploration of African treatments of the topic of salvation, with the goal of addressing whether similar criteria in such traditions would be discovered or not. His explorations found a significant amount of overlap, even as African theology brought the question of contextuality much more explicitly to the surface. In line with the so-called Utrecht school and Stellenbosch tradition, Brand's work also exhibited a strong interest in philosophical hermeneutics, engaging before his death with the work of Ingolf Dalferth.¹³²

Space again does not permit extensive engagement with the topic. There are certainly others who seek to bring philosophy and theology into conversation within an explicitly African context,¹³³ but once more I sought to represent those who are the most notable and representative within the APT tradition, as far as I am aware.

Concluding Thoughts

As we bring this chapter to a close, some provisos and disclaimers should be given concerning the above account of philosophical theology in South Africa. The first thing to

132 This is based on several conversations the author had with Brand, shortly before his death.

133 For instance, from an especially CPR and African perspective, see Silakhe Singata, "Justice for the Dead," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 4 (2020): 319–345, which seeks to bring John Caputo's eschatology into conversation with traditional African religious thought, particularly on the theme of the living dead. Even more recently, outside the ambit of Christianity, Thaddeus Metz and Motsamai Molefe have attempted to reconstruct the philosophical monotheism of African Traditional Religion; Thaddeus Metz and Motsamai Molefe, "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism." *The Monist* 104 (2021): 393–409. Justin Sands, from St. Augustine's College, is also developing a project of philosophical theology inspired by African philosophers such as Tsenay Serequeberhan.

mention is that although it is possible to draw broad typologies regarding different streams within the post-1994 context, much theoretical overlap can be found between theologians who work across differing traditions. I have already mentioned the fact that someone like Brümmer works within a broadly analytical framework; however, his hermeneutical tendencies create overlap with many of the other thinkers who will be discussed. This is understandable because of the deep impact his training at Stellenbosch had on him. We can see this in other areas too. Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist and transversal approach to the question of truth and realism has significant parallels to Brümmer's plea for the development of intersubjective criteria in philosophical theology and for the discernment of integrative change within religious traditions. This complicates the typology hereby given, but it does appear nevertheless to have some heuristic value. Another complication is that the category of CPR is so widely spread and disparate that people of radically different and opposing trajectories can and will be included under the same broad taxonomy. Despite this limitation, this seems to be the most elegant solution to the problem of categorisation, especially when considering the space that would be required to multiply further categorical differences.

Another challenging and troubling aspect of this theme, worth mentioning, is the almost complete hegemony of "white" men amongst practitioners of philosophical theology. In other contexts, the names of Marilyn McCord Adams, Sarah Coakley, Grace Jantzen, Catherine Pickstock, Eleonore Stump, and Edith Wyschogrod are still synonymous with cutting-edge research in the field. Unfortunately, South Africa does not appear to boast comparable examples. The reasons for this are probably not simple, but one cannot avoid invoking the historical chauvinism of both the theology and philosophical guilds respectively. It might also be due to the aforementioned suspicion of philosophical theology as being largely irrelevant to the broader task of theologians in South Africa. Why should we engage in the metaphysical or philosophical clarification of doctrine, for example, when we are surrounded by more pressing issues of gross inequality and violence? What does philosophical theology

have to say to these realities? Whatever the reason for this, the gaping absence of women within this field is worrisome.

Connected to this concern is the marked lack of racial diversity within this guild of research. Africa boasts a list of impressive philosophers who have reflected on theological themes, whether this be from a Christian, Islamic, or a traditional African religious perspective. But within the South African context, it is difficult to find comparable examples, particularly amongst Christian theologians. One can find exceptions to this general trend in figures like the Catholic thinker Mongabeli Mabona; however, his body of work is very limited and his general occlusion only appears to confirm the historical tendency overall. Again, the reasons for this being the case are probably not simple, short of alluding once more to the continued factor of institutional prejudice and racism within the sector of higher education. However, there are promising signs that some of these discrepancies are currently being remedied at places like UNISA, which shows a strong drift towards the study of African philosophy and theoretical decolonisation more generally – as some of the contributors to this volume will show.



Chapter 4

Philosophical Theology and Semitics/Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa

Jaco Gericke 

Introduction

In South Africa, as elsewhere, research in Semitic Languages (SL) and on the Old Testament (OT) have been closely aligned with the study of Theology in general. Changing times and new methodological developments require biblical and other scholars working in these disciplines to reflect anew on the nature of supervening and emergent interdisciplinary relationships, including those with Philosophical Theology (PT). Historically, this kind of concern has often led to debates about theoretical matters that in hindsight have turned out to be more complicated and nuanced than many of the arising controversies initially suggested.¹ In this contribution, the same question about whether and to what extent the concepts, concerns and categories in

1 OT scholars do not always refer to PT, but when they do it tends to carry with it the history of baggage related to hermeneutical fallacies at risk in involving issues of interest in PT in the interpretation of ancient texts in the SL and the OT. On closer inspection, however, it has been demonstrated that the second-order discourses of PT and associated trends and topics still supervene on the theoretical frameworks of scholars, even and perhaps especially on those who oppose any such relations. For an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon in the context of leading international biblical scholarship, see Jaco Gericke, *A Philosophical Theology of the Old Testament. A historical, experimental, comparative and analytic perspective*. (London: Routledge, 2020). For relations with philosophy of religion, see Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and philosophy of religion*. RBL 70 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

PT currently overlap with popular presuppositions, problems and perspectives in SL/OT scholarship will be asked. This time, however, the context of the question itself will be constructed around related research in 21st-century South African SL/OT scholarship.

Historically and comparatively speaking, PT could be seen as a fuzzy concept.² To avoid digressing by engaging in the associated (important) debates, for the sake of the argument only, popular ways in which PT is currently constructed in the writings of philosophers of religion will be used as an experimental frame of reference.³ One of the practical reasons for doing so is the fact that very few local theologians currently identify themselves as first and foremost philosophical theologians, while even fewer discuss the ways their field overlaps with research in SL/OT. Local scholars in SL/OT tend to reflect on the matter even less, often in piecemeal and polemical ways in the context of research, the primary purpose of which lies elsewhere.⁴

- 2 A helpful recent overview that is sufficiently nuanced is that of Vladimir K. Shokhin, *Philosophical theology: the canon and the variability* (Saint Petersburg: Nestor-History, 2018)
- 3 In full awareness of the conceptual-historical variation and associated methodological developments and distinctions. On these, see e.g., Merold Westphal, "The Emergence of Modern Philosophy of Religion," in Charles Talliaferro, Paul Draper, Philip Quinn et al. (eds.), *A companion to philosophy of religion*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 133–140. Additionally, instead of limiting the idea of PT to a particular theological discipline or way of doing theology, or as the premodern precursor to the modern emergence of philosophy of religion, here it is taken to refer to philosophical perspectives on theological concepts in a particular religious tradition and as including not only a concern with propositional justification but also conceptual clarification.
- 4 Most related research is focused on hermeneutics and questions derived from the philosophy of science. For the local background during the 20th century, see Jaco Gericke, "The concept of philosophy in post-apartheid Western historical overviews of South African Old Testament scholarship," *Old Testament Essays*, 31.2 (2018): 299–322. For the international context during the 20th century, with reference to relations between OT theology and philosophy and natural theology during the 20th century, see James Barr, *The concept of biblical theology. An Old Testament perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 146–171. A more recent overview is provided by Dagfinn Føllesdal, "Basic questions of hermeneutics as part of the cultural and philosophical framework of recent Bible studies," in Magne Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old*

To move beyond the confines of past related research, rather than simply focusing on relations between SL/OT and PT proper in the ways this has been done in the past, the discussion will incorporate additional typological distinctions. These will allow for the inclusion of second-order discourse that for all other purposes would neither qualify as, nor be perceived to overlap with, PT. Examples of operative binaries will be those between implicit and explicit, descriptive and critical, strong and weak, positive and negative, historical and contemporary, popular and professional, correlative and contrastive, intentional and incidental, and other subtypes. Not, perhaps, of PT so much as of the “philosophical theological,” and without implying that biblical, historical or systematic types of theology did not also supervene. Although it is hard to isolate PT from other types in the contexts discussed, the assumption of relevance is that any overlap is still overlap, even if such relations may be more directly influenced by the philosophical concerns in exegetical methods or theological disciplines other than PT. In other words, SL/OT can overlap with PT and be correlated to issues and interests in PT to illustrate this, without implying PT to the only, primary or direct causal conceptual background involved. Such qualifications not only allow for better insight into the complexities involved but also offer more specificity and nuance to what is already known. without begging certain questions or inviting the charge of identifying what is obvious and/or trivial.⁵

Regarding method, random sampling based on correlating second-order religious language (RL) in publications by local SL/OT scholars between 2000 and 2022 were used to identify exemplars featuring overlap. The rationale for the limited number of studies discussed is found in the sufficiency or the limited quantity to prove the hypothesis of the research i.e., that there are indeed likely to be examples of common interests between SL/OT and PT. In terms of research structure, a thematic format

Testament, the history of its interpretation. III/2. The twentieth century (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, 2015), 29–44.

5 For what these binaries involve and for a more extensive typology in general, see Gericke, *A philosophical theology of the Old Testament*, chapter 4.

was adopted to allow for a systematic presentation of the findings without invoking stereotypes/caricatures. Themes in PT used to identify cases of overlap were tradition-specific concerns with RL, the concepts of revelation and religious experience, the nature and attributes of God, divine relations and actions, theodicy, and moral-philosophical foci.⁶

Each of these were correlated with samples of publications in SL/OT, selected based on the inclusion criterion that there was at least some obvious overlap between the contents and the

6 Since the start of the new millennium, popular overviews of topics in PT relevant to supervening international trends on the local ones are found in English works, including, inter alia, Charles Talliaferro & Chad Meister, (eds.) *The Cambridge companion to Christian philosophical theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Oliver Crisp, *A reader in contemporary philosophical theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); Kevin L Flannery, "Ancient philosophical theology," in Charles Talliaferro, Paul Draper, Philip Quinn et al. (eds.). *A companion to philosophy of religion*. Part II: philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in Western history. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 81–90; Thomas Flint, and Michael Rea, *The Oxford handbook of philosophical theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Daniel Frank, "Jewish philosophical theology," in Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (eds.). *The Oxford handbook of philosophical theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 541–553; Geoffrey Gorham, "Early modern philosophical theology in Great Britain," in Charles Talliaferro, Paul Draper, Philip Quinn et al. (eds.). *A companion to philosophy of religion*. Part II: philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in Western history. 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 124–132; Derek Pereboom, "Early modern philosophical theology on the continent," in Charles Talliaferro, Paul Draper, Philip Quinn et al. (eds.). *A companion to philosophy of religion*. Part II: philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in Western history. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 114–123. In SL/OT, internationally, include, whether for clarification, correlation or contrast: classical theistic constructions of the divine attributes (holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, goodness, etc.) as well as divine actions (creation, providence, miracles) and relations (prayer) in the context of specific (mostly Christian) doctrines. Some contributors to edited volumes offer perspectives other than the typical Western Protestant or Catholic Christian views, e.g., Islamic and African types of "philosophical theology." As for historical developments, related traditions include Theological Realism and Antirealism, Continental Philosophy of Religion, Reformed Epistemology, Feminism, Philosophical Reflection on Revelation and Scripture, Philosophical Reflection on Mysticism, Religious Pluralism, and Comparative Philosophy of Religion.

concepts, concerns, and categories typically associated with PT. The orientation of the overview is descriptive rather than evaluative, i.e., clarifying meta-commentary rather than (also) endorsing or criticising any particular instance of partial overlap identified.⁷ Readers with a background in PT will no doubt spot numerous problems with the way SL/OT scholars involve in auxiliary fashion the second-order concepts, concerns and categories from that field. Here I provide only the relevant data for anyone interested in an additional critical assessment of a problem that is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Regarding limitations, an in-depth consideration of the currents, traditions and backgrounds of the PT involved is beyond the scope of this chapter. With reference to the available data in SL/OT scholarship, many similar cases could not be included in the discussion due to a lack of space. In addition, the preliminary research done also encountered many publications by the same and other scholars of SL/OT where either no overlap is obviously present or of a sufficient quantity to warrant inclusion. Though

7 The distinction between descriptive and evaluative discussions can and has been rightly considered problematic for a variety of reasons. These include, among others, personal bias blurring the distinction, assumptions in making the distinction in the first place, as well as appearing to privilege description over evaluation and therewith not offering a comprehensive overview. All that may be readily granted, while offering the following reasons for why the distinction is deemed relevant. First, there are practical considerations, the amount of potentially relevant data, the variety of themes involved, limitations of space and the need for a relatively broad overview of overlapping interests simply do not allow for in-depth critical discussion in the sense of evaluative assessments of each sample provided. Second, it is perfectly acceptable to contribute to related research by adding to the data by providing a bird's eye view of related concepts and concerns. Third, most samples of overlapping interests do not themselves count as philosophical theological approaches, so that it would be unfair to evaluate them as such. Fourth, while one can surely still point out potential and problems involved, doing so is beyond the scope of this contribution. Fifth, since identifying overlap is synonymous with identifying interdisciplinary research or limited to a particular type of relation, it suffices as a first attempt to map certain aspects of the territory (an attempt which itself can and should be criticised). Sixth, since most philosophical theologians will not be able to following in-depth discussions featuring SL and SL-scholars philosophical-theological critiques, doing so here would not be of service to the implied reader of this volume.

all local scholars' works were considered, including everyone who has written something related was also not possible; yet none were excluded for personal reasons. As for the implications of the findings, these can neither be used to infer how a particular scholar's list of publications in its entirety happens to be related to PT nor for extrapolating to general conclusions of relations between SL/OT and PT in "South Africa" as a whole.⁸ What is highlighted applies only to the context of the particular exemplar, with the synthesis and conclusion at the end allowing for systematising the data only on the level of the thematic.

In terms of relevance and originality, although the idea of partial overlap between SL/OT and PT in a selection of studies might seem to be anything but novel or trivial in its relevance, this is not the case. No-one, if asked about the relations between PT and SL/OT in the 21st century would be able to respond with the specificity, detail and counterintuitive or applied meta-theoretical inferences of the findings presented here. On the contrary, what might *prima facie* be thought of as the case about the present state of interdisciplinary relations, given their sticky past, is demonstrated to barely scratch the surface thereof in the local present. Herein, then, lie the actuality, relevance and original contribution of the discussion to follow.

A last preliminary remark involves pointing out that the perspective offered on the overlap of interests comes from someone working in SL/OT rather than in PT proper. Consequently, the way the research samples were identified, considered and correlated is not only likely to differ from, but

8 The kind of overview presented here cannot be expected to include what would be required in a general or specific history of local biblical interpretation, and PT where everyone should ideally be mentioned or discussed to an extent that is in proportion to their research status, or to rectify past negligence in other contexts (as it should). The same consideration also warrants not discussing my own related research, although most of it would otherwise qualify for inclusion. A more exhaustive and comprehensive future discussion, if such were ever deemed helpful, would be required to obtain the full picture of how SL/OT and PT are related locally, and consequently, no general conclusions extrapolating over contexts not discussed will be drawn.

can also supplement and compliment, any similarly focused interdisciplinary overview from the perspective of PT.⁹

SL/OT and Partial Overlap With Themes in PT

Samples featuring overlapping interests in the nature, meaning and reference of RL

Given that the study of SL by default tends to engage in questions regarding the nature, meaning and reference of RL, it should come as no surprise that some SL/OT scholars operate with interests overlapping with those in PT. To be sure, the pathway thereto might come from theories in linguistics or literary criticism or textual criticism. This does not, however, detract from the observation that there is overlap with PT as well. Also, what distinguishes this interest in RL from the one in philosophy of religion – though hardly absolute – is the focus on the first-order discourse in the literature of a particular religious tradition.

In the first example, Philip Nel¹⁰ has argued against certain popular views about the implications of the metaphoric expressions of God's "fatherhood" in the OT supervened on by the male-centredness of the religio-cultural context. In his view, given that the meaning and reference of metaphorical RL in this context "transcends the perception of any biological or physical fatherhood," it does not in fact predicate masculinity as an "essential" property of God. However, in this context, the view that RL is metaphorical (or analogical, rather than univocal or equivocal) should be noted as being more general than the corresponding theory in PT. Within the cognitive approach to

9 For a more general overview of SL/OT scholarship in what some call the "third phase" of biblical Hebrew Linguistics in South Africa, or the "third generation of local OT scholarship," see respectively, Jacobus A. Naudé & Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé, "The evolution of biblical Hebrew linguistics in South Africa: the last 60 years," *Old Testament Essays* 31.1 (2018): 12–41, and Hulisani Ramantswana, "Past The Glorious Age: Old Testament Scholarship in South Africa—Are We Moving Anywhere Close to Blackening Old Testament Scholarship?" *Scriptura* 119.3 (2020): 1–19.

10 Philip J. Nel, "Does changing the metaphor liberate? On the 'fatherhood' of God," *Old Testament Essays* 15.1 (2002): 131–148.

metaphor Nel operates with, all language is to some extent metaphorical. This would make the observation of the presence of metaphor in RL trivial, were it not necessary in the context of the world of the text ontologies, to be reminded of the ontological status of the imagery used in references to the religious object.

In the next sample, At Lamprecht¹¹ also operated with the view that RL is metaphorical in nature. Again, this classification is not limited to RL. Moreover, in light of the fact that cognitive linguistics “lacks more cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research and does not account for the entire Biblical Hebrew conceptual background,” it is still insightful to clarify associated conceptual content within the RL, analysed from the perspective of this prototypical approach to conceptual structure, operating with typicality rather than essentiality of properties exemplified. More specifically, the conceptual clarification of RL via the theory of conceptual metaphor shows some overlapping concern with PT in the context of metaphors used for divine action. That is, “the Biblical Hebrew verbs related to descent and ascent that are usually described as ‘bipolar lexical concepts’ are found as potentially able to ‘split into two unipolar lexical concepts in which only one unipolar lexical concept, that is DOWN or UP, respectively, is used for metaphorical conceptual mapping’.”

In a more extensive related discussion in his doctoral dissertation, Nick Schmidt took as his point of departure Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigms in the natural sciences. Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor theory is then adopted and adapted “to explain how the Divine is metaphorically delimited, analysed and portrayed.” A conceptual analysis¹² of metaphorical categories and linguistic extensions of the biblical Hebrew concepts for “heart,” “wisdom” and “God-fearing” are shown to be “expressions which schematically structure the concept of God according to prototypical domains” (i.e., different from the classical theory of concepts and associated notions of essential

11 At Lamprecht, “Unipolar Conceptual Metaphors in Biblical Hebrew.” *Journal for Semitics* 30.2 (2021): 1–20.

12 Cf. Scott MacDonald, “What is philosophical theology?,” in Kevin Timpe (ed.). *Arguing about religion*. New York: Routledge, 2009), 17–29.

properties and/or necessary conditions). Reasons are provided for why the Divine is conceptualised metaphorically, which in turn allows for the non-traditional but relevant (for our purposes) conclusion that “the inherent nature of Biblical Hebrew proverbial wisdom boils down to natural theology.”¹³

In an overview of “Philosophical Perspectives in the Septuagint of Jeremiah,” Johann Cook sought to “move beyond the usual text-critical debates in LXX research to ask how recent scholarship has approached the question of whether ancient Greek PT perspectives had an impact on the Septuagint.”¹⁴ With what approximates to an interest overlapping with historical and comparative PT, Cook argued that “whereas some tend to oppose the idea, there are scholars who insist that the LXX was interspersed with Greek philosophical perspectives to a greater or lesser extent.” Some have even “sought to show that Greek (i.e., ‘philosophical’) ‘thought’ had a fundamental impact on the Hebrew Bible,” and Cook seeks to give an insight into the associated meta-philosophical theological questions by discussing how these views have been put forward in the context of the LXX (Old Greek) text of the scroll of Jeremiah.

Taking an interest in “the effect of etymology on the rendering of the divine epithet (El) Shaddai in the Peshitta,”¹⁵ Godwin Mushayabasa argued for a reconsideration of the reasoning behind religious thought in this ancient Syriac translation of the OT. This departed from semantic trends in contemporary biblical Hebrew Linguistics where the “etymological fallacy” is for the most part avoided and ignored as a source of semantic insight into the meaning and reference of first-order biblical RL. In the translation under consideration, the “epithet” for God which “appears 48 times in the Hebrew

13 Nicolaas Fryer Schmidt, *God Is A Sage Human Cognition and Metaphorical Conceptualisation In Biblical Hebrew Wisdom*. PhD thesis University of the Free State, 2016.

14 Johann Cook, “Greek Philosophical Perspectives in the Septuagint of Jeremiah?” in: Andreas Michel & Nicole Katrin (eds.) *Jeremia, Deuteronomismus und Priesterschrift* ATSAT 105; FS Hermann-Josef Stipp (Sankt Ottilien: EOS 2019), 265–278.

15 Godwin Mushayabasa, “The effect of etymology on the rendering of the divine epithet (El) Shaddai in the Peshitta.” *Journal for Semitics* 31.1 (2010): 19–35.

Bible” is shown to have been “rendered in at least seven different ways”. By showing how the Peshitta translators used etymology to make sense of the divine epithet, some overlap with the interest in etymology in ancient PT is clearly present and its value for contextual conceptual clarification reappropriated.

In a different kind of comparative PT interest, Jackie Naude and Cynthia Miller-Naude discuss how the concept of alterity in the writings of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas might assist SL/OT scholarship when considering what is “foreign/the Other in the translation of ancient religious texts.”¹⁶ The authors are very much aware of the problems of incommensurability that may arise in attempts to use Levinas’ philosophical views of alterity “for either the foreignization or for domestication of the text.” While such an application would be invalid and defeat the purpose of bracketing intrusive and anachronistic philosophical-theological assumptions of scholarly readers, Levinas’ “emphasis on the face-to-face quality of the text does hold application value for the translation of religious texts as implying the oral presentation of alterity.”

Samples featuring overlapping interests in divine revelation and religious experience

Religious-epistemology, or the epistemology of religion, is currently one of the standard loci found in overview of in analytic philosophy of religion. The latter tradition also tended to overlap in many ways with analytic PT. Epistemological interests in problems and perspectives related to the rationality of religious beliefs have also been discussed under headings not synonymous therewith. These include “religious knowledge”, “the concept of revelation” and ““religious experience.”¹⁷ In other contexts, the

16 Jacobus, A. Naudé, & Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé, “Alterity, orality and performance in Bible translation,” in Kirsten Malmkjær, Adriana Șerban and Fransiska Louwagie (eds.), *Key Cultural Texts in Translation* (Benjamins Translation Library 140, Leicester 2018,) 299–314.

17 It may be noted that religious epistemology is here not assumed to be synonymous with religious knowledge or the concept of revelation and religious experience. All that is assumed is thematic overlap of concerns in research in SL with reasoning in religious language in ancient conceptions of (religious) knowledge and

latter topics are also found in attempted conceptual clarifications and propositional justifications with special attention to PT themes, the focus of which lay elsewhere aligned (e.g., among others, faith and reason, divine inspiration, Scripture, the relationship between religion and science, to name but a few). If we look at overlapping interest in local research on SL we encounter some associated questions regarding assumptions in ancient texts concerning the sources, justification, criteria and ends of certain beliefs. Typical contexts of discussion can be found in search on OT wisdom and prophetic literature of the HB/OT. This often includes a comparison (contrasting rather than correlating) with later PT notions of inspiration and revelation dominating the underlying anachronistic readerly concerns. Supervening on the discussion are the binaries known from PT and featuring the biblical and the philosophical, faith and reason, and Hebrew and Greek thinking, among others.

In his overview of the recent history of theological approaches to the OT, Fanie Snyman wished to highlight major turning points in the 21st century as well.¹⁸ In the latter context, a particularly obvious overlap with interests in PT is evident in the

revelation, both of which also happened to be discussed in religious epistemology. It is not assumed that SL scholars are actually doing PT. To be sure, often the overlap is not so much the result of direct interest in PT but mediated via some knowledge of systematic theological, cognitive linguistic, or other literary critical auxiliary disciplines where philosophy is a primary informant in the theoretical framework. Moreover, what counts as valid PT-related interests will surely vary between those utilising “continental”, “analytic”, “Thomist”, “Jewish”, “African”, “Feminist,” or other traditions, currents or approaches popularly distinguished in many Handbooks and Companions to Christian PT. Granted, the motivation, method and means of those doing research in SL and PT also tend to be quite different. Yet these qualifying remarks are added for the sake of avoiding misunderstanding of what might understandably been regarded as treating second order concepts as synonymous when they are not, thus doing a disservice to epistemology in general and religious epistemology in particular. The author is grateful for the critical feedback and request for nuance and the avoidance or errors in formulation as provided on this point by the reviewers and the editor, Dr Khagan Delpont.

18 Fanie Snyman, “Mapping recent developments in Old Testament theology,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(3) (2019), a5021.

way in which the recent theology of the OT of the German scholar Jörg Jeremias (2015) is described. Explicit links to PT are evident in the dependence on some of the religious-epistemological concepts of Paul Ricoeur, a popular interlocutor in discussions of OT hermeneutics and the way metaphor functions in biblical literature. Snyman notes that “Jeremias views the literary genres in the OT as (also) being ‘thought patterns’ (Denkformen).” Consequently, “the identification of the basic thought patterns to be detected in the OT forms the basis from which he wrote his OT theology.”

In his reflection on “Augustine and the study of the Psalms,” Jurie Le Roux brought into dialogue another popular philosophical voice in OT hermeneutics, namely that of Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹⁹ In this way Le Roux is able to show how interests from Augustine’s PT supervene on his reading of the Psalter. This legitimised the then popular view that the main task of exegesis of this OT text was “finding the meaning that illuminates the love of God and the love of the neighbour.” From this flows a better understanding of the reasoning behind Augustine’s religious thought and an insightful Gadamerian account of why his PT brought him to the view that the psalms that are themselves not PT could be seen as an answer to a philosophical-theological question.

Izak Spangenberg, for his part, took an interest in the place of doubt in ancient folk-epistemologies of Israelite religion. More specifically, Spangenberg seeks to clarify the way later concepts of revelation and religious experience can and cannot be considered present in two different OT perspectives thereon, namely those of the writers of Ps 73 and the book of Qohelet.²⁰ These two texts are deemed relevant to present-day discussions of doubt because the speakers of those texts “underwent experiences that did not concur with the traditional wisdom paradigm.” As such, they reflect “how various Jewish thinkers came to terms with contradictions and doubts.” The study concludes that “whereas

19 Jurie H. Le Roux, “Augustine, Gadamer and the Psalms,” in Dirk J. Human & Cas J.A. Vos (eds.), *Psalms and liturgy*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 123–130.

20 Izak JJ. Spangenberg, “Psalm 73 and the Book of Qoheleth.” *Old Testament Essays* 29.1 (2016): 151–175.

one abandoned the ‘wisdom paradigm’, the other adjusted the paradigm,” thus representing two different strategies in the logic of belief revision. From this it is inferred that the religious epistemology of wisdom in the OT in fact allows for and was well aware of the problems of religious disagreement, itself a hot topic in philosophy of religion at present.

Christo Lombaard took the road less travelled by returning to the question of the relationship between “Mysticism and/ in the OT.”²¹ Mysticism is also a familiar concern in PT and in Lombaard’s case, he proceeded from an acute awareness of the lessons of “African mission history” which “has taught us that the Western interpretative framework, based on ancient Greek philosophical suppositions (most directly the concepts rendered by Plato and Aristotle) is an obstacle to historical understanding.” The associated assumptions imported from anachronistic varieties of PT “transpose” that which it encounters in other cultures into its terms, thus rendering the initial cultural understandings inaccessible. In the context of his research focus on the implications of this for “biblical spirituality,” Lombaard accepts that we always operate in some idiom from PT, but then goes a step further to explore the obvious question of how associated problems of methodological commensurability can be overcome to understand the text on its own terms, even if not in them.

Samples featuring overlapping interest in the nature and attributes of divinity (or related)

In SL/OT the nature and attributes of God are often discussed, if not with these very terms, as the concept, word, image, idea, character, being, person, view, of God/Yhwh/the deity and the characteristics, appellatives, adjectives, qualities, properties, predicates, traits, marks and other of the divine (often relative to a specific form of biblical criticism, e.g., narrative criticism has character and characteristics instead of nature and attributes). Specific elements of the divine nature popular in the study of

21 Christo Lombaard, “Mysticism and/in the Old Testament: Methodological orientation and a textual example.” *HTS Theological Studies* 71(1), Art. #2813, (2015), 5 pages.

OT theology are those found in metaphors of divine greatness, while specific attributes of interest include divine presence, power, holiness, incomparability, goodness (in more specifically biblical terms). Although these interests derive from biblical, historical and systematic theology, the interest in the conceptual clarification and epistemic justification implicit in ancient texts, the purposes of which lay elsewhere, makes this topic an example of partial overlap with PT as well.

Looking at the female imagery in the marriage metaphor in chapters 1–2 of the Book of Hosea, for example, Willem Boshoff sought to clarify conceptions of God therein.²² Noting that the characterisation of the divine is often constructed in the context of polemics against particular traits of divinity in Israelite religion associated with other gods, Boshoff seeks to reconstruct the second-order reasoning for/against a particular view of the divine nature in the colourful and metaphorically rich first-order RL of the poetry in this OT text. The study concludes with the finding that for the biblical writer, God's relation to the world "is presented in terms of three critically important aspects of His being as the only God." More specifically, "these are the divine relations to history, nature and the divine realm" itself.

In an article entitled "I Love Yahweh and I Believe in Him – Therefore I Shall Proclaim His Name: How Psalm 116 Integrated and Reinterpreted Its Constituent Parts," Hendrik Potgieter discussed the ways in which the reasoning, implicit in the theology of divine essence in the name of Yhwh, functions in the RL of Ps 116. Behind the "name" theology lies a certain acritical reflection about the divine nature that has led to the choice of Yahweh as "the preferred name for God." More specifically, to reflect on the nature of divinity, and on what may be believed about divine attributes and relations, must be presupposed as conditions of possibility for the construction of the specific poetic first-order RL and for the associated concept of God to be present in this Psalm. Additional emphasis is placed by the Psalmist on the divine

22 Willem Boshoff, "The female imagery in the Book of Hosea. Considering the marriage metaphor in Hosea 1–2 by listening to female voices." *Old Testament Essays* 15/1 (2002): 23–41.

attribute of Yahweh's "righteousness," which in its RL alludes to "one of the appellatives" in the classic OT "Gnadenformel."²³

In an obvious overlap with the PT interest in the nuances and distinctions associated with talking about the divine attributes, Albert Coetsee sought to clarify the concepts of YHWH's "Greatness," "Mighty hand," "Deeds" and "Mighty Acts" as they appear in the context of the RL of the tradition Deuteronomy 3:24.²⁴ These are all predications believed to be necessary conditions for the exemplification of "the uniqueness of YHWH," i.e., divine incomparability. Moreover, "Deut. 3:24 suggests that all four words or phrases refer to concepts that were physically perceptible to Moses." Consequently, from this "assessment it may be concluded that further nuance is needed." In second-order discourse of the kind reminiscent of PT, Coetsee concludes that, technically, only "the first two refer to attributes of God, namely his 'greatness' and 'might,' while the last two refer to concrete expressions of these attributes, namely his 'deeds' and 'mighty acts'."

With reference to Malachi 3:8–12, Lekgetho Moretsi²⁵ considered the relation of the polemical RL with the belief in divine immutability (in the context of priestly disputes about tithing). In his assessment, the concept in context assumed that the nature of God is constant, so that, "despite Israel's sins, she lived because God's love changes not." Hence, the absence of total divine condemnation, rather than representation proof of divine injustice, silence or absence, simply means that "God does not change because divine goodness supervenes and itself is by implication not an accidental property of YHWH." The concern with what an OT perspective on divine immutability involved, and what not, and how to square this with objections to the beliefs

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- 23 Hendrik Potgieter, "I Love Yahweh and I Believe in Him – Therefore I Shall Proclaim His Name: How Psalm 116 Integrated and Reinterpreted Its Constituent Parts." *Old Testament Essays* OTE 32.2 (2019): 398–411.
- 24 Albert Coetsee, "YHWH's 'Greatness,' 'Mighty hand,' 'Deeds' and 'Mighty Acts' in Deuteronomy 3:24." *Old Testament Essays* 34.1 (2021): 114–140.
- 25 See Lekgetho Moretsi, H. *An Exegetical Study of Malachi 3:6–12 with special reference to tithing*. MTh Dissertation, North-West University, 2004.

involved, especially in the rhetoric of legal argumentation in Malachi, clearly has some interest in the concepts and concerns associated with discussions of this divine attribute in PT as both conditions of its possibility.

An interest in divine presence as a conceptual problem and reasoning in RL related to clarifying it is found in a discussion of Jeremiah 23:23–24 by Willie Wessels.²⁶ The study identified a polemic against certain prophets' views on Yahweh's presence. The rhetoric of the context is shown to follow the literary convention of legal dispute to demonstrate that Yahweh is not just a localised god, but an omnipresent God from whom no person can hide. When read as part of the mentioned cycle, it should be regarded as a polemic against a view held by some prophets that Yahweh's nearness guarantees peace and security. Their domesticated view leads to complacency and disregard. It is argued that Jeremiah opposes their view by stating that Yahweh is also a distant God who is aware of their false and deceitful attempts to provide revelatory knowledge to the people. In this regard, chapter 23:23–24 serves as a polemic against so-called false prophets and implies a threat of judgement.

Samples featuring overlapping interest in divine relations and action in creation

To the extent that some contexts in twentieth-century PT have equated it to natural theology, the interest in the latter and the claim of its presence in the OT in eco-theological, environmental-psychological, critical-spatial and related forms of biblical criticism and phenomenological/naturalist histories of Israelite religion, represent a new development in local scholarship, one not possible a few decades ago, and featuring a variety of research interests clearly overlapping with those of PT.

Jo-Mari Schäder's Master's dissertation presupposed an interest in various concerns overlapping with those in PT in general and with reference to the concepts of divine power,

26 Wilhelm Wessels, "Jeremiah 23:23–24, as polemic against prophets' views on Yahweh's presence." *HTS Theological Studies* 72.3 (2016): 1–7.

presence and universal relations in particular. The research problem identified in the study is subsequently correlated with some of the questions Psalm 47 begged from the perspective of our own anachronistic philosophical-theological frames of reference, leading to an inability to make sense of the meaning of the RL involved. This is evidenced by the conceptual clarification of divine attributes, relations and actions required in response to exegetical questions like the following: “What does it mean when Yahweh is characterised as fearsome (verse 3)? Why and how does Yahweh subjugate the nations under Israel (verse 4)? How does Yahweh choose Israel’s inheritance and what is this inheritance (verse 5)? Why does Yahweh ascend? From and to where is this ascension (Verse 6)?”²⁷ Schäder then adopts, adapts and applies the theory of critical spatiality as “allied with a number of moves within postmodern philosophy” in order to determine the extent to which the universalism typically associated with the theology of the Psalm can actually be regarded as such. By clarifying concepts in the RL in this manner, it becomes possible to bracket and see a different view of divine presence and relations than what anachronistic assumptions prevalent in the history of this Psalm’s interpretation would seem to imply.

In Leonard Maré’s discussion of “Creation Theology in Psalm 139,”²⁸ a clarification of the concept of divine action was pursued to establish how divine relations are related to divine attributes in the text under consideration. In his assessment, “Creation theology plays a decisive role in every aspect of the psalm.” This includes divine attributes also discussed in PT, namely, “God’s omniscience (vv. 1-6), his omnipresence (vv. 7-12), his creation of humankind (vv. 13-18) and the petition for vengeance and transformation (vv. 19-24) should be understood within the framework of creation theology.” The “perfect being” theology in Mare’s reading, and the apologetic interest in showing the rationality implicit therein, with an eye to

27 Jo-Marí Schäder, *Psalm 47 – how universal is its universalism? An intra-, inter- and extratextual analysis of the poem*. Magister Artium in Ancient Languages and -Cultural Studies, University of Pretoria, 2008.

28 Leonard. P Maré, “Creation Theology in Psalm 139.” *Old Testament Essays* 23.3 (2010): 693–707.

countering religious-historical alternative interpretations of the divine in Psalm 139, likewise overlap with the interests of more conservative varieties of Christian PT.

A similar apologetic concern was also present in a publication by Matt Haynes and Paul Kruger entitled: "Creation Rest: Genesis 2:1-3 and the First Creation Account."²⁹ Since the reference to God having to rest does not make sense on the assumptions of a PT derived from classical theism, an attempt is made at arriving at a more orthodox understanding of "the nature of God's rest" i.e., "by describing what 'rest' entailed for God." The authors conclude that "God's notion of 'rest' has nothing to do with recovering from exertion but is a specific divine relation to the world that emerges from the creational activity of the first six days" and which "continues into the present time," "serving as a counterpoint to the notions of rest presented by other cultures of the ANE."

Hennie Viviers took as his point of departure the wonder that humans have with reference to nature's powers and regularities which, as ancient philosophical theologians have noted in other contexts, led people believe in a divine creator. Viviers finds this implicit in Psalm 19, whose "author allows both nature and law to communicate elatedly about this god, who is believed to exist objectively."³⁰ Moreover, "this ease with which human beings conceptualize counterintuitive beings ('gods'), has lately been confirmed by Evolutionary Psychology as well. The "Theory of Mind" mental tool, particularly, plays a primary role in this regard and "bringing Darwinian evolution into the conversation, the problem of the 'existence of god' becomes even more critical, as evolution does not need a creator god." In conclusion, Viviers proposes that, seeing how neither the personal "god" of theism

29 Matthew Haynes & Paul P Krüger, "Creation rest: Genesis 2:1-3 and the first creation account," *Old Testament Essays*, 30.1 (2017): 663-683.

30 Hennie Viviers. "Who really 'created'? Psalm 19 and Evolutionary Psychology in Dialogue." *Old Testament Essays* 21.2 (2008): 546-563.

nor the no-god of atheism are sufficient and relevant, a third option he called “a-theism” becomes “quite attractive.”³¹

In the context of translating SL for the OT for children’s Bibles, Annette Evans took up an interest found in PT, namely, different perspectives within a particular theological tradition on the relationship between science and religion.³² Approaching the interdisciplinary challenge where conflicts are likely to arise (i.e., creationism/intelligent design vs. evolution), “epistemological differences between science and religion are considered.” Adopting the view of harmony rather than conflict or complete divergence – on the assumption that both are true in some sense – our translation of and interpretation of OT accounts of divine creation require us to take seriously the belief that “they must cohere.” Given the problems with reading Genesis and the story of two original humans’ ‘fall’ into sin as science and history, as well as attempting to ignore the findings about evolution through natural selection, Evans concludes with suggestions based on the moral-hermeneutical requirement that “we urgently need to find new ways to convey our Bible-based faith to young children.”

Willie van Heerden likewise showed an interest in divine relations in the context of divine action, again with specific reference to the creation. In his overview of “OT Scholarship on

31 Since the present discussion involves a history of interpretation and it is not possible to offer evaluative comments on each alleged overlap, it may still be rightfully pointed out that mere description of this not sufficient for it to be termed an overlap with Philosophical Theology. Terms like theism, atheism and a-theism are not part of any SL and are, among others, second-order philosophical theological terms imposed from the outside. One could disagree with the use of these terms or the proposals about their attractiveness. What cannot be disputed is that these terms have been and are still used in international and local studies of SL. As such they are also representative of partial overlap with categories employed discussions of concepts of God in PT. It is therefore neither possible nor necessary to evaluate the proposal by Viviers, in view of the practical considerations outlined in the distinction between descriptive and evaluative overviews mentioned earlier. Granted, ideally doing so would have to be part of any future related comprehensive overview of SL and PT in SA. That is, it would require more in-depth discussion than the present introduction can do justice to.

32 Annette Evans, “Interpreting the Bible for Children.” *Old Testament Essays* 26.2 (2013): 315–333.

Environmental Issues in South Africa,”³³ overlaps with interests in PT enter the picture in the traditionally more acceptable manner, namely, through Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between the “hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval.” In van Heerden’s assessment, and with reference to the late twentieth vs. early twenty-first century trends respectively, “the earlier studies seem to cluster around the ‘retrieval’ element, whereas most of the more recent studies contain a healthy dose of ‘suspicion’ with regard to both the biblical texts and extant interpretation of the texts.” In addition, van Heerden discerned “a threefold typology of eco-theological studies (covenantal, prophetic and mystic) that are frequently combined in local scholarship which is otherwise at times also quite diverse.” In doing so, the study acknowledges a debt to thinkers also familiar to those in PT, namely Rosemary Radford Ruether and David Tracy.

Samples featuring overlapping interest in suffering and theodicy and divine goodness in prayer

Research in SL/OT, despite often being averse to the concerns of PT, has been selectively so. This is perhaps nowhere as clear as in discussions of “theodicy” and the “problem of evil” in the biblical texts. This theme and overlapping interest has moreover been aligned with various interpretative approaches and many different currently relevant topics, including discussions of perspectives in the text on the way the divine goodness is related to concerns with social justice, suffering, trauma, poverty, disability, colonialism, violence, patriarchy, forms of homophobia and just about every socio-political and church-theological debate currently in vogue.

Gert Prinsloo, for example, in identifying similarities between the theological perspectives in the books of Habakkuk and Isaiah, respectively, notes that the former “also shares the theodicy theme with the Psalms, Job and Qohelet.”³⁴

33 Wilhelm S. Van Heerden, “Taking Stock of Old Testament Scholarship on Environmental Issues in South Africa: The Main Contributions and Challenges.” *Old Testament Essays* 22.3 (2009): 695–718.

34 Gert Prinsloo, “Inner-Biblical Allusion in Habakkuk’s מִשָּׁחַ (Hab 1:1–2:20) and Utterances Concerning Babylon in Isaiah 13–23 (Isa 13:1–14:23; 21:1–10).” *Old Testament Essays* 31.3 (2018): 663–691.

Moreover, both prophetic texts are also read as “concerned with the manifestation of YHWH’s ‘work’, as well as sharing ‘the awareness’ pertaining to questions of divine hiddenness ‘that YHWH uses the great nations as agents of judgement’” (Hab 1:12; Isa 7:20; 10:5–6). The experience of suffering and critical reflection on its implications for how the divine is conceived has led the biblical writers of the time to reflect on the nature of divine providence. The RL of prophetic polemics is understood as presupposing coming to the reasoned conclusion that there must be “a critical role empires play in the divine plan” (Hab 1:12; Isa 10:7–8).

Gerda de Villiers also discussed the problem of suffering, albeit in the context of the Epic of Gilgamesh. In her assessment, “the plot of the narrative is structured by means of relationships and interactions between gods and humans which may be on the one hand mutually rewarding, but on the other hand destructive and damaging.”³⁵ Though divine goodness is often assumed as a given, “the other side of the coin is when the gods remain silent to human suffering.” Even this non-biblical text presupposes an intellectual wrestling with the question of how to understand the deity’s relation to suffering: “When the humans do everything, they were supposed to do to maintain good relationships between the ‘here’ and ‘there’.” Here, too, overlap with the interests of PT is evidenced when, with reference to the theology of a particular religious tradition, the need for “theodicy” arises. This need not take the form of logical and systematic arguments, since the same second-order reasoning in RL could be conveyed in narrative form, as an extended parable on the problem of suffering (amongst others), clearly visible in the intellectual world that can be postulated as condition of possibility for the meaningfulness of conceptions of the human condition in “the Epic of Gilgamesh.”

Juliana Claassens also gave evidence of recourse to interests overlapping with those of PT in her discussion of the prophetic protest by Jeremiah against YHWH (Jer 20).³⁶ Claassens also

35 Gerda De Villiers, “Suffering in the Epic of Gilgamesh.” *Old Testament Essays* 33.3 (2020): 690–705.

36 Juliana Claassens, “Not Being Content with God: Contestation and Contradiction in Communities under Duress.” *Old Testament*

pointed out that the same “inclination to challenge portrayals of God that are limiting and even harmful to people today is reminiscent of John Caputo’s assertion that it is ‘in the best interest of theology not to be content with God’.” In her reading of the RL of Jeremiah 20, she concludes that bringing the text into dialogue with the weak postmodern Continental PT of Caputo “gives words to God, to what is going on in the name (of) God.” Moreover, it reveals “the theological challenge” inferred from Jeremiah’s lament and the way this text conceptualises, in its own RL, Caputo’s notion of the “weakness of God,” i.e., the “unconditional, undeconstructable tenants of a type of proto-religion rooted in faith, hope, love and justice.”

The language of PT, when concerned with clarifying the concept of divine goodness in relation to suffering, is also present in Dirk Human’s discussion of the incomparability of Yahweh In Psalm 113.³⁷ In restating what the RL of the psalm implies in the language of Christian PT, Human notes that by conceptualising Yahweh in Psalm 113 as an incomparable God, and through the metaphors of the divine “king, creator and God of justice,” the Psalmist presents a different kind of justification for belief, despite human suffering. In the logic of the Psalm, Yahweh is worthy of praise “because he stoops down as enthroned king to uplift the destitute and downtrodden.” According to Human, this concept of God and the RL used to construct it “greatly enhances Yahweh’s character” and helped the implied audience to find new ways to think of the divine as “simultaneously transcendent and immanent of nature.”

Divine goodness and the questioning thereof is also a familiar topic in research on ethics and various forms of prayer, e.g., lament. In his discussion of trauma perspectives on the poor in the Psalms, Alphonse Groenewald sought to demonstrate how “trauma shatters all interpretative frameworks and therefore poses serious challenges to the theologian who has the

37 *Essays*, 30.3 (2017): 609–629.
Dirk Human, “Yahweh, The Israelite High God Bends Down to Uplift The Downtrodden: Perspectives on The Incomparability Of Yahweh In Psalm.” *Journal Of Northwest Semitic Languages* 30.1 (2004): 41–64.

responsibility of interpret human experience and existence.”³⁸ He noted that “theologians have always been reflecting on the questions of human suffering and have always been struggling with the question how to understand suffering in the world, given the theological claim that God is in a relationship with the world.” Moreover, since “in the Psalms God is portrayed as the saviour of the poor, their hope, their stronghold and liberator,” Groenewald was able to conclude that a kind of second-order thinking about suffering, of the kind one finds in PT, can be postulated as a condition of possibility for the construction of a “theology of the poor” in the post-exilic redaction of the Psalter.

Motivated by the conundrum in PT regarding the purpose of prayer with reference to a certain conception of the divine, June Dickie asked the question of what it was that was assumed to “persuade” God to respond to the psalmist’s cry?³⁹ Psalms of lament characteristically include affirmations of trust and sometimes a vow to praise God in the future. She questions the motivation behind such vows by looking carefully at whether future praise is conditional on God’s positive response and what other rhetorical devices are linked to the promise God makes. In addition, her focus is specifically on the use of rhetorical devices in the RL of prayer and related to “Vows of Future Praise” in some psalms of lament – with special attention to discern the reasoning in religious thought from the perspective of the nature of praise and lament psalms on the one hand (considering the power dynamic) and foundational principles of Persuasion Theory on the other.

38 Alphonso Groenewald, “A Trauma Perspective of the Redaction of the Poor at the end of Book I (Pss 3–41) and Book II (Pss 42–72) of the Psalter,” *Old Testament Essays*, 31/3 (2018), pp. 790–811.

39 June F. Dickie, “What ‘Persuades’ God to Respond to the Psalmist’s Cry? Use of Rhetorical Devices Related to ‘Vows of Future Praise’ in Some Psalms of Lament.” *Old Testament Essays*, 34.1 (2021): 741–767.

Samples featuring overlapping moral philosophical-theological interests

Pieter Venter's sample study proceeded from the observation that OT Ethics and OT Theology are related to each other.⁴⁰ In his assessment, when dealing with the OT, "two questions are traditionally asked: 'Who is God?' and 'Who are we?'" Consequently, Venter suggests that "the type of OT ethics we pursue is also directly linked to the type of OT Theology we cultivate." Understandably, he rejects "a doctrinal approach to the Bible working with abstract conceptions" which "ipso facto leads to a rigid set of ethical rules and regulations for human behaviour." It is no longer possible to write an OT ethics that "consists of drawing up and abstracting timeless principles for the life of the faithful." For this reason, instead of a prescriptive approach, Venter opts for a descriptive method, nevertheless seeking to distinguish it by distinguishing "ethos" in the OT as practical morality, whilst "ethics" is viewed as "the formal reflection on that behaviour identifying permanent values and norms that may become prescriptive."

Ndiko Mtshiselwa also took an interest in the moral concerns typically present in PT. More specifically, Mtshiselwa engaged in what he termed an "African philosophical analysis of Isaiah 58: a hermeneutic enthused by Ubuntu."⁴¹ This was done with special attention to theological ideas in African philosophy in general and those of Xhosa perspectives in particular. In both a comparative and revisionary mode, his research looked to neglected aspects of "African philosophy in South Africa with a view to conceptualise a hermeneutic enthused by Ubuntu," all as part of an attempt to "show the relevance of this in the attempt to re-construct the Sitz-im-Leben of Isaiah 58" from this angle. The study concluded that "the allusion to sins (Is 58:1) and evil (Is 58:9) suggests that Trito-Isaiah was in his own way concerned

40 Pieter M Venter, "Congruent ethos in the Second Temple literature of the Old Testament." *HTS Theological Studies* 67(1), 2011, Art. #965, 13 pages.

41 Bhele Ndikhokele Mtshiselwa, "An African philosophical analysis of Isaiah 58: a hermeneutic enthused by Ubuntu." *Scriptura* 116 (2017): 1–12.

with similar issues of morality as what moral philosophers have reflected on in some contexts of ‘metaethics’.”

Lerato Mokoena likewise shows interests in the issues of PT when she notes that in research on the book of Qohelet, some scholars have sought to compare aspects of the text with ideas of Nietzsche (amongst others).⁴² Proceeding from the assumption that “humanity has an existential need to create meaning and ascribe value,” when these start to “erode, it is our task to re-evaluate them and overcome that state of decadence.” From such a Nietzschean philosophical point of departure, she “explores the various ways in which Qohelet’s use of the concept of ‘vanity’ could be better understood theologically by clarifying it with reference to the concept of ‘active nihilism’.” This allows her to move beyond more purely pessimistic readings, which, she argues, in a sense all presuppose what Nietzsche would call “passive nihilism.” In addition, her study also looks to African philosophy and specifically local existential traditions to provide an added dimension to reflections on the application value of Qohelet’s thinking for the present day.

The final exemplar to be discussed differs from the preceding ones in that the author comes from the side of PT, yet has been involved in sustained interdisciplinary dialogues with scholars working on the SL/OT. From well before the 21st-century, Danie Veldsman has collaborated philosophically with with scholars in SL like Ferdinand Deist, and more recently, Jurie Le Roux. In the former context, publications helping the public to appreciate questions about biblical inspiration and authority, in light of historical-critical scholarship, followed.⁴³ In the latter context, Veldsman has been a familiar face at ProPsalm and ProPent OT Seminars hosted at the University of Pretoria where he is based. Deeply immersed in Continental varieties of PT, examples of his foci include the problem of “speaking about

42 Lerato Likopo Dinah Mokoena, *Another meaning is possible: a re-reading of hebel in Qohelet* URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/75266>Date: 2019 Thesis (PhD)--University of Pretoria, 2019.

43 See Eugene Botha, Ferdinand Deist; Danie Veldsman. *Kan God spyt kry? Kaleidoskoop van tergende Bybelvrae* (Halfway House, Orion, 1995).

God,” as seen from the phenomenological traditions in PT, and with reference to both the interpretation of the Psalms and the Pentateuch.⁴⁴ In this case, the overlap with issues of interest in PT dominates his contributions, all of which nevertheless manage to demonstrate links with whatever SL/OT scholarship puts forward as the annual theme or topic of choice. Although other local systematic or doctrinal theologians have no doubt achieved similar things in their own ways, Veldsman is clearly one obvious example of the recent overlapping interests of interests in SL/OT, albeit from the opposite side of the disciplinary divide.

Synthesis and Conclusion

From the brief, hardly exhaustive, and random sampling of exemplars of overlapping interests between SL/OT scholarship and PT, from the side of the former, it may be concluded that, typologically, most of the overlap occurs in ways that are both implicit and explicit, descriptive and critical, strong and weak, positive and negative, historical and contemporary, popular and professional, correlative and contrastive, intentional and incidental. This will facilitate not only better insight into the complexities involved but also offer more specificity and nuance to what is already known and/or would otherwise appear trivial.⁴⁵

In terms of thematic overlap with reference to the nature, meaning and reference of RL in a particular religious tradition, a broad concern with concepts as metaphors were identified. Although usually theorised from the perspective of theories of metaphor in cognitive linguistics or literary criticism, the philosophical background in general and the framework of interests in PT are never far removed, given the focus on the

44 Daniël Veldsman, “The iconic significance of the Psalms as a literary genre for speaking about God: A phenomenological perspective.” *HTS Theological Studies* [Online], 67.3 (2011): 6 pages; Daniël Veldsman, “The impossibility of speaking about God: sharing with OT scholars the importance of the phenomenological-theological approach of Jean-Luc Marion.” *ProPent Seminaar*, 28 Augustus, Bass Lake, Pretoria, 2010.

45 For what these binaries involve and for a more extensive typology in general, see Gericke, *A philosophical theology of the Old Testament*, chapter 4.

concept of God and other related terms and translations (e.g., Nel, Lamprecht, Schmidt). Not only do conceptual analysis and clarification, which are also part of PT in some contexts, occur, but non-trivial extensions of the view of RL as metaphorical also supervene on much of local research in SL/OT. These disciplines are separated from PT for reasons derived from hermeneutic traditions in PT, and have interests, in addition to those found in PT (besides BT, ST), as the reason why they are pursued and the purpose for which they are intended (e.g., ancient and contemporary OT translations, as discussed in Naude and Miller-Naude, Cook and Mushayabasa).

Regarding religious epistemology, research in SL/OT has been shown to include a definite overlap of interest with topics like the concepts of divine inspiration, revelation, and religious experience in specific religious traditions. More specifically, the exemplars included discussions of different perspectives and religious disagreement on what count as justified true beliefs about the sources and modes of religious knowledge (Spangenberg on Ps 73 and Qoheleth). There was also the interest in the epistemological dimensions of OT theology in recent research (Snyman on Jeremias) and on comparative concerns in OT with reference to the concept of mysticism as problematic in conjunction with ancient PT where this is anachronistic (Lombaard).

Much overlap of interdisciplinary interest has been demonstrated with reference to OT concepts of God, and these in ways clearly overlapping with the interest in PT in the nature and attributes of divinity (Boshoff on Hosea, Potgieter on Psalm 116, Coetsee on Deuteronomy 3:24; Moretsi on Malachi 3:8-12). Again, with the focus being on concepts in specific religious traditions of the OT, the link to PT is as applicable as to POR. The need for conceptual clarification and sometimes even identification of folk-philosophical modes of epistemic justification, presupposed by the text, further confirms the alleged overlap.

In the next section, different kinds of interests in the theme in PT of divine relations are demonstrated. Although this interest is also present in BT and ST, this is sometimes due to the overlap

with PT or vice-versa. In the context of local research in SL/OT, the relevant themes include the concepts of divine creation and action (Hayes and Kruger and Mare from conservative apologetic perspectives; van Heerden and Viviers from eco-theological and environmental psychological perspectives; and Evans from the context of the science and religious debates with reference to the creation narratives in Genesis).

An overlap of interest in SL/OT with PT was also detected with reference to the problem of evil or, more specifically, with theodicy. A lot of the research is focused on how divine goodness was assumed to be conceptualised in relation to human suffering. Examples included theodicy in Habakkuk/Isaiah (Prinsloo), the Epic of Gilgamesh (de Villiers), Jeremiah's Lament in chapter 20 of that book (Claassens), Psalm 113 (Human on divine incomparability), Books 2 and 3 of the Psalter on divine relations to the poor (Groenewald), and on the divine will and human agency in prayer (Dickie).

Finally, moral interests in PT were found to overlap in the last set of exemplars. These included OT ethics and theology as descriptive tradition-specific conceptual clarification (Venter), African philosophical perspective on ethics and the concept of Ubuntu with reference to Isaiah 58 (Mtshiselwa), Qohelet's concept of "vanity," Nietzschean "active nihilism," and African existential philosophy. One sample from the side of PT was included, where the overlap of interests included SL/OT themes related to the Psalms/Pentateuch and PT concerns with speaking about the divine as problematic from a phenomenological point of view.

The findings are broadly similar to what has also been discovered to be the case internationally as regards the relationship between SL/OT and PT discussed elsewhere. This includes general opposition to the intrusion of anachronistic or too abstract concepts, categories and concerns of OT, the use of comparative PT to demonstrate distinctions between SL/OT RL and Western varieties, a preference for Continental traditions (phenomenology, hermeneutics, Levinas, Ricoeur, Gadamer, Caputo) over analytic ones (except in contexts of conceptual

analysis/clarification), and certain themes in analytic PT. Although it could hardly be inferred that SL/OT scholars engage in PT in all its tasks, or would wish to apply any theme or perspective from PT uncritically, or wish to add normative or prescriptive observations to PT as rational, natural or critical theology, the second-order concepts, concerns and categories as noted above appear to remain part of the technical terms also in SL/OT.

Ideally more could be said about the reasons for the overlapping interests between SL and PT in SA. Again practical considerations do not allow one to do justice to what is a complex matter which can be viewed from different disciplinary perspectives. Suffice it to say the following may be noted in passing as some of influential factors that appear to be implicit in the related research.

1. The absence of explicit PT reflection in SL.
2. The presence of assumptions in SL nonetheless related to PT problems and perspectives.
3. The need for a holistic understanding of ancient worldviews, that is not possible without attending to metaphysical, epistemological, moral and other assumptions in ancient texts.
4. The indelible presence of philosophical concepts and concerns in the second-order auxiliary discourses of research in SL, i.e. linguistics, literary criticism, social-scientific perspectives, religious-historical and comparative-religious perspectives in the context of working with the HB/OT
5. The history and complexity of interdisciplinary relations between SL and biblical scholarship in SA and elsewhere.
6. New forms of supervening influences on SL from theology in general and systematic/dogmatic theology informed by philosophy in particular.
7. Global trends towards interdisciplinarity in research.
8. The decrease in anti-philosophical sentiment in biblical scholarship and research on the ancient Near East.
9. New developments in SL and PT allowing for new ways of attending to questions that used to be limited to one or the other.

10. Demands to be relevant, and to show the implications of one's research for the broader associated academic discussions.

While such correlation is also no doubt due to overlap between biblical, historical and ST, and the residual vocabulary in the history of the disciplines, the overlap of interests in one way or another in some local research cannot be doubted. Without implying whether this is a good or a bad thing, or whether what was discussed allows for generalisation, it may be concluded that despite the demarcation between the disciplines in the theological encyclopaedia, some overlap of interest on occasion, even if only partial, still constitutes and characterises the current relationship between PT and SL/OT in South Africa.

Chapter 5

Towards a Decolonial Philosophical Theology

Johann-Albrecht Meylahn 

Introduction to the Problem Field

The conversation between theology and philosophy in Africa, and more specifically South Africa, can be interpreted from different points of view, either ideally or realistically. Realistically, in the sense that South Africa is part of a global world, so global trends, for various reasons, have an impact on the local conversation, which should ideally be a lot more local and focused on the local philosophical and theological traditions. In this chapter, I will focus on a specific global trend, view this trend critically from a philosophical and theological perspective, and thereby propose a relationship between theology and philosophy that might be relevant to the decolonial South African perspective. The trend that I will focus on, which I will argue is a specifically Western trend, has an impact on South African academia.

Robert Tally, in his recent book, identifies and criticises this global trend, namely the growing negative attitude towards critical theory, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School within the humanities of North American universities. Philosophy cannot be equated with critical theory and theology cannot be equated with literary studies, yet the tendency to move away from theory towards surface reading of contexts, phenomena and texts has certainly crept into theological academia as well. This might be specifically relevant in Public and Practical Theology, as these are the disciplines that directly engage with contemporary public discourses and surface phenomena. These public discourses and phenomena appear within a particular world; the world of late capitalism. It is in such a world that the relationship between

philosophy and theology needs to be considered, and maybe the perspective of the southern part of this global world might offer unique insights.

The relationship between philosophy and theology has a long and beautiful tradition, but with the Enlightenment, this relationship became strained, and later with the Left-Hegelians, it became basically impossible. Yet, the re-emergence of interest in Christianity within Continental philosophy (e.g., Agamben, Badiou, Laruelle, Latour, Nancy, and Žižek) is not completely disassociated from those influenced by the Left-Hegelians. A new site has emerged where theology and philosophy can once again engage with each other. This site will be explored in this chapter, but in the context of the dominant world of late capitalism.

The biggest temptation for Public Theology in this late capitalist world, in my view, lies within the social-justice tracks. If social-justice issues are read only as surface phenomena, there is a real danger that the prophets (unknown even to themselves) are revealed as the priests of Capital. It is with this danger in mind that this chapter will argue that theology and philosophy need each other.

Theology and Philosophy

The relationship between theology and philosophy is a long and intense relationship, which has had its ups and downs, but of late it has come under greater strain. The strain is not only on the relationship; each discipline, individually, is struggling to survive in academic institutions, specifically in South Africa where Reformed Theology faculties in the past had a privileged and secure place in the old South Africa. In the New Democratic South Africa, denominational theological faculties have the option to leave the university and continue as a church seminary, but philosophy does not have such alternatives, although Western Philosophy, it is said, was born in exactly such a seminary, namely a school outside the influence and power of the city in the school gathered around Socrates. In this context of constant financial and output pressure exerted on tertiary institutions, and the financial constraints of the state, these two disciplines

need to prove themselves and justify their existence. In other words, the necessity and relevance of philosophy are questioned as much as the necessity and relevance of theology, but at least religion has made a comeback of late, specifically in the context of radicalisation and fundamentalism, and therefore has gained a certain amount of relevance – and therefore theology has found its justification. In such a competitive atmosphere it makes sense that theology has abandoned its traditional partner and rather sought more lucrative partners, such as the natural and social sciences.

A lot of these shifts in the humanities have to do with the phenomenon that theory, and specifically critical theory, has become old-fashioned, as academia has entered a post-theory period. In such a post-theory time, to be a true liberal, or to be a politically correct academic, one should not concern oneself with too much theory, but rather jump on one or other current bandwagon. In the age of the spectacle or in a time of continuous crises there should not be a lack of bandwagons: from climate catastrophe to a newly identified victim, or Covid-19, and now, at least for Europe and USA, the war with Russia, which could be presented as a war between BRICS and a monopolar world with the USA at its centre. These are all hot topics, as they say in the research industry, that can win one research grants and awards. Such funding and positions might create the impression and even the belief that by following these trends, it clearly proves that theology is indeed a relevant, and even necessary, conversational partner.

In the humanities, specifically in literary studies (a field that was in the past closely aligned to philosophy), Robert Tally¹ identifies this trend and the conscious turning away from critical theory, which once characterised tertiary education and specifically the humanities, and formed the heart of a critical university. One can identify this same trend within theology and the turn towards practise and empirical research. The litmus test seems to have become: what does it practically mean, what is the use-value, or what does it imply for the ordinary person

1 See Robert Tally, *For a Ruthless Critique of All that Exists: Literature in an Era of Capitalist Realism*. (Washington USA: Zero Books, 2022).

on the street? The ordinary person on the street has become the norm of understanding – this indeed sounds like a wonderful principle and certainly laudable, as it would be, in theory, highly democratic. The idea that the ordinary people on the street have become the critical measure would indeed be democratic and convey a sense of justice incarnate. The problem is that the people on the street are not natural humanity and are not real, yet remain a social construct and in the dominant global discourse, they are constructed as consumers created by capital – where algorithms determine taste in films, music, and even food, just as the media and social media determines thoughts, opinions and the democratic vote. This person on the street is not the adult or child from an informal settlement, or those living on the street or in shelters. The “ordinary-person-on-the-street” is the modern individual who is connected to the world wide web so that via feedback mechanisms, as Vilem Flusser² argues, the image and the subject can begin to reflect each other and eventually perfectly mirror each other. Jean Baudrillard, in conversation with Bataille,³ also warns against this deadening and growing homogeneity. Thanks to ever-growing mobile connectivity, these feedback loops function to homogenise the dreams and desires of humanity, even of those who are not the typical wage-labouring consumer.

There are those who remain excluded; the heterogeneous, the remnant, or, one could argue, Hegel’s *Pöbel*,⁴ who cannot be completely absorbed into the same; but there is no lack of trying. One could convincingly argue that the vast majority of the world’s population is still excluded from this standard measure – which makes them second-class citizens, which again has become blatantly clear in the last year, where only those refugees who look like the same, the norm, are truly welcome within the borders of Europe and deserve the little Ukrainian flags on Facebook profiles.

2 Vilem Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Berlin: European Photography, 2018).

3 See William Pawlett, “Baudrillard’s Duality: Manichaeism and The Principle of Evil.” *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 11.1 (January 2014), accessed April 22 2024 from <https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/baudrillards-duality-manichaeism-and-the-principle-of-evil/>

4 See Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum 2011).

There are victims and then there is collateral damage, as not all victims are equal.

Philosophy needs to accept its co-responsibility for this turn towards the surface reading of texts and context as Tally describes it, and thereby accept responsibility for this turn towards the ordinary man or woman “on the street.” Philosophy, and specifically somebody whom I highly respect, is in a strange twist of fate co-responsible for this turn towards the surface reading and ordinary man, namely Derrida⁵ and his infamous statement, *there is nothing outside text*, or rather *There is no outside-text*. All there is, is text, surfaces with no access to any transcendental. This can easily be interpreted as: there is nothing deeper – all there is, is what appears on the surface. This would make everything a surface, a mirage, an image, with no possibility of accessing anything beyond this surface of the image, text, or mirage. There are only technical images that together create a universe of technical images (Flusser): an ever-expanding homogeneity.

Critical Theory and Philosophy

Critical theory within Continental philosophy, and thus also in European Theology, determined much of academic philosophy and theology post-World War II and more importantly the thinking of the sixties. The attitude towards critical theory has changed, as there is currently a condescending, or maybe even resigned, attitude towards critical thinking.⁶ Critical thinking is understood as the idea that one needs to unpack what is behind the text, interpret and analyse the context, and try to get behind the surface so as to delve deeper into the construction of phenomena. This lack of engagement with critical theory might also explain the lethargic or resigned acceptance of the heightened bureaucracy of a control society⁷ that has entered academia and

5 Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press 1997), 158.

6 See Tally, *Ruthless Critique*, 9.

7 See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control (1990),” accessed April 16 2024 from <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gilles-deleuze-postscript-on-the-societies-of-control>

education generally, where one is constantly involved in various feedback loops (Flusser).⁸ So much of one's time as an academic or educator is spent on anonymous student evaluations, external evaluations, peer evaluations, rating applications, and trying to fulfil ranking requirements that the institution has set as its goals. All this is expected and done, not in the name of control, God forbid, or even worse, the outmoded idea of discipline, but in the name of self-development and to ensure the highest possible quality of the consumer goods produced (education and research outputs). In such a control society, control is exercised via the idea that one is in constant need of further self-development – one more course to teach one to migrate all one's skills onto the virtual platform. The institution will even provide online yoga lessons and breathing lessons for their staff. They are really only looking out for their employees' best interests. One is constantly being sold goods for self-development, and the market is filled with opportunities and possibilities, as even breathing can now be sold to one as a self-development skill. Yet one constantly gets the feeling that quality is the last thing that is being upheld by these various bureaucratic mechanisms, and that there is a general downward spiral in the quality of students finishing their studies, as well as the research outputs flooding the digital research platforms. One cannot complain about the general lack of critical thinking in current politics and public discourses, for example, about vaccines, the war in Ukraine, or identity debates in South Africa, if critical thinking is no longer taught at universities. Critical theories are cancelled because thought is judged by the race and sex of the face of the author, and thus a module on Dostoevsky can be cancelled because the West is now at war with Russia. Or Lacan can no longer be taught at a prestige African university because he was male and white.

This demise in the relationship between theology and philosophy probably is related to the post-truth world one is living in. In a world, as Badiou⁹ argues, which is only made up of bodies and languages (democratic materialism) and where bodies

8 Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, 55.

9 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans Alberto Toscano, (London: Continuum Books, 2009), 4.

are caught in feedback loops with languages, with images, one is truly caught in the ever-expanding rhizome of the homogeneous same as Guattari and Deleuze describe the world.¹⁰ In the context of democratic materialism, what is the task of theology? Theology with her hermeneutic skills has the ability to read languages and to read the bodies, but even in a post-truth world, there is still the need for a normative element in theology. The normative element could be understood that, while reading the bodies and languages of a specific context, there should be the passionate search for a more just language – a more just language that would include more diverse bodies within the unquestioned and accepted dominant language of democratic materialism. This conception of justice sees (reads) only the appearance of diverse bodies in the specific *Lichtung* without seeing (reading or analysing) or at least recognising the *Lichtung* in which the diverse bodies appear. So, theology, specifically public theology, has taken it upon herself, as her calling, to make the democratic materialist world a more inclusive world, with the conviction that this would make it a more just world, without questioning the world as such, or the light (*Lichtung*) of the world as such. The universal good is captured in the believed relationship between capitalism and freedom, democracy and universal rights, and this has become unquestionable, as if it is God's Law or the natural light. Mark Fisher¹¹ captures this idea of there being no alternatives in his book *Capitalist realism: Is there any alternative?* – all that one can hope for is a more inclusive capitalist world, but the world will remain *essentially* capitalist.

Theology, Philosophy and Truth

It might be useful for a moment to reflect on the relationship between theology and philosophy with regard to Truth (with a capital T). Humanity, for structural reasons, will always seek explanations for the default of being a barred subject, which is the

10 Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3–26.

11 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* (Winchester, UK: John Hunt 2009).

reason why Lacan argued that religion will always triumph.¹² The barred subject needs, in other words cannot exist without, some form of explanation, traditionally taken up in the big existential questions. Throughout human history, these questions have been answered differently, and philosophy and theology (religion) have contributed their share of answers to these questions. Philosophy and psychoanalysis started shifting their focus when they no longer sought answers to these questions but rather started asking why these questions are asked in the first place. Why is the human being a questioning being? What does it mean to think, what does it mean to be a barred subject, and why is humanity such a restless creature?

In this shift from what is *the* Truth, to why is the human in need of truth, Truth became relativised and lost its capital T status. With this loss, it also became difficult for theology or the church “to go and make disciples of all nations.” With this Great Commission, theology (church) has consciously or unconsciously participated in colonialism. Theology rightly became very self-conscious of her global role in colonising countries and people, and thereby subjecting others to her Truth. Therefore, liberal theology tried to avoid proclaiming universal truths, and placed its hope in the fact that theology, or at least the Bible, has had such a tremendous impact on European values that in a sense, if one proclaims and protects European values: democracy, freedom, and universal human rights, one is more or less protecting and promoting Christian values. Thus, colonialism takes on a new face, this time not in the name of a metaphysical or transcendental Truth, but in the name of a universal ethical (moral good) good, which not only justifies neo-colonialism, but also enables once again the idea of a just war. These justifications are not in the name of a God or Truth, but in the name of a universal (Western) ethical idea of what is right, or the correct thing to do.

This is the danger that every theologian, and likewise every academic, is critically aware of, namely that theory colonises human experiences and colonises life-worlds, practices and languages, unless it is done in the name of democracy, freedom

12 Jacques Lacan, *The triumph of religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity 2013).

and universal human rights. In the name of these three universal goods, other peoples' religions, cultures and traditions may be criticised.

The Value of Being Critical of Critical Theory for Theology

Theology and academia have come a long way from a linear approach of applying theory (truths) to contexts, and have developed towards a hermeneutic spiral where creative and critical interaction between theory-laden-practice and practice-laden-theory is sought. In this hermeneutic conversation, theory or Truth is not imposed on the context, but theory and context enter into a creative and critical correlational conversation. It is in this shift towards hermeneutic sensitivity that the central question has become: How to study human phenomena, texts, and context without colonising their worlds, actions, practices, and words? With this colonial concern in mind, it is of utmost importance to be highly critical of theory, and especially critical of critical theory, and also harbour a healthy suspicion towards Western Philosophy and Western Theology, as theory colonises and imposes itself on ordinary readers, texts, spaces and places. Considering that too many of these theories were written by European white males, the issue is even more problematic. The bias for the voice of the outsider, the marginal, the other, is a bias that should not be lost. This hermeneutic sensitivity, together with the bias for the marginalised other, is an important contribution that came from the global South in the thoughts of someone like Enrique Dussel¹³ (philosophy) and Gustavo Gutiérrez¹⁴ (theology). Dussel has had a tremendous influence on decolonial thinking in Latin America and, via Latin America, on decolonial thinking in South Africa, while Gutiérrez has influenced liberation, contextual and black theology in Southern Africa. The “suspicion” of critical theories is thus important, yet

13 Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1985).

14 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theologie der Befreiung*, trans. Horst Goldstein (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1980).

the belief that subjects can speak *for themselves*, that the subaltern can speak, and more importantly can speak in their own language and voice, and that the phenomena need to be given the necessary space to appear *for themselves* without being forced into specific theoretical categories, is naïve. As subjects, phenomena, words – even my own words in this chapter – always appear within certain contexts, within a certain world, and these worlds in turn appear within a specific light (*Lichtung*). A light in which things are revealed, always presents what is revealed within a certain logic or theory (*logos*). In the writing of these words, they are already carrying out a specific world of a *Geviert* (fourfold: divine and morals, earth and sky)¹⁵ and thereby already convey a certain sense of what the author and/or reader believes is good and right. This light, *Lichtung*, in which things appear, and are already judged in their appearance, is seldom thought of, because this light is not thought of and is therefore believed to be the natural light in which things appear *all by themselves* and *as they truly are* – totally unconscious of the ideological or religious or metaphysical light (*Lichtung*) in which these things appear. Empirical realism, one could argue, is a dominant light in the contemporary world, with the belief that things are in themselves as they are presented to one. To not reflect and question this light (*Lichtung*) is problematic when the light (*Lichtung*), always unreflected, also reflects power and certain interests of particular powerful groups, who might benefit from things appearing in a certain light.

It is this naïveté that is concerning because it plays into the hands of the status quo (as things are believed to be) – which is confused with the natural light in which things are supposed to appear as they are. It is concerning because it so often presents the world without any alternatives. This belief then becomes the basis for the argument that all one can do in this world is to fight for a more just world, which becomes a matter of finding the correct inclusive language so that more diverse bodies can eventually appear equal in a democratic materialist world. The basic argument is: the more inclusive language, the more democracy and therefore the more egalitarian diverse bodies. This makes

15 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 179.

sense in a world where all there is are bodies and languages. If only this was a move towards heterogeneity, but all the bodies and pronouns and languages enter the homogeneous Same as the other, as disturbance, as possible irruption, as the hope for alternatives is integrated into the same.

It might be relevant for this chapter to consider this believed natural light in which things and their world appear today, which opens the door to focus exclusively on surface reading.

Is There an Alternative to Surface Reading?

From the above, it is clear that to take things at face value is the basis for surface reading and this explains the heightened focus on empirical research, the collection of surface data. What is not considered is that this surface data appears to us in a certain light: that things, the collected data, carry out a certain world, and that this particular carried-out-world gives these things (the collected data) their allotted time-space. It becomes an enclosed system, without any alternatives – where the things carry out a world, and the world grants the things their correct place. These two mutually carry out and confirm the same world.

Two important authors in this context are Vilem Flusser, with his book *Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder*,¹⁶ and Guy Debord, with his book *The Society of the Spectacle*.¹⁷ They argue that in a world of information technology and digital images it actually makes sense to focus on surface readings, because the past and future are both virtually (digitally) present as they are only a keystroke or swipe away on a laptop or smartphone. In a modern Western world (*Lichtung*) not only do things (phenomena) appear in a certain light, but part of the collection of things of this particular modern Western world are the various past and present phenomenological and epistemological theories.

The various epistemological theories, the history of interpretations, the various hermeneutical theories, all form

16 Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen bilder*.

17 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Fredy Perlman, Detroit, 1970, and Ken Knabb, Berkeley, 2004–2014 (New York: Critical Editions, 2021).

part of the past that one can play with as one presents the digital present, and as there is nothing behind the text, this playfulness with past theories is possible, and therefore these theories do not need to be taken too seriously. Texts, phenomena, together with past theories are all digitally to hand and therefore can be combined at will or ignored altogether, as all that matters is: that all that is, is information, which is to hand, and therefore can be “creatively” combined at will to create different information. If being-in-the-world (*Lichtung*) is not considered, but the world-of-things is taken as empirically real-in-itself, in other words to hand, this opens the door to tremendous differentiation and supposed infinite possibilities. If one is liberated from onto-theology and the belief that there is something behind the text that can be captured more or less successfully in thoughts, then one is free to differentiate and combine at will, and this freedom is presented as infinite possibilities, which present themselves as hope.

For example, one could combine a Marxist analysis of society with a queer reading of power, whilst subscribing to a capitalist appreciation of the importance of a free “liberal” market. This is all possible because Marxist theory, queer theory and liberal economic theory are all equally to hand and all equal fictions¹⁸ free to be used, differentiated and combined at will so as to present an appearance of something novel. These infinite possibilities are possibilities for their own sake and change nothing. One important aspect of practical and public theology, as well as philosophy, was the idea of changing the world, the idea of transformation. Thinking (philosophy and/or theology) no longer changes the world; it at best adds data to the ever-growing stream of information that is at hand.

Is a Marxist critique, as a philosophical basis for a liberation (black, queer, contextual) theological critique, just one of many possible tools for context analysis? Or does a Marxist critique and/or a psychoanalytical critique transcend these theories that are to hand, as it engages something structural about the very production of texts and contexts, the creation of subjects and

18 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Fictional metaphysics of fiction: Metaphysics and imagination in the humanities.” *HTS Theological Studies* 73 (3) (2017); DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4699>.

worlds, together with the production of the various theories of these constructions? Does it offer a structural interpretation of human creativity, externalisation, production, and imagination? If it does, it could immanently transcend all the theories that are to hand, which would be just bytes of information to be differentially played with and open a door to disruptive critique. In the context of surface readings being all there are, the challenge for theology and philosophy, specifically in the global South, with the added challenge of decolonial thinking, is to think from the deconstructive bias of the excluded or repressed so as to glimpse hope in alternatives to a world presented to one as a world without alternatives. It is exactly in this space that one finds oneself today between deconstruction and construction from the perspective of the repressed and excluded.

The most common response to this challenge is to believe oneself to be living in the only existing real world, to forget that this world is presented in a certain light. If this is the only possible world, then the only task left for philosophers and theologians – who seek to change the world – is to seek to create a neutral and respectful space for the phenomena or subjects to speak *for themselves* in their own language or voice, or allowing things to appear in their natural light. This desire to create a more just, that is, a more democratic world, for all the things at hand (including those hidden, marginalised, oppressed), is to be duped by ideology, duped by the *Lichtung* – a false consciousness and a false sense of reality. Yet critical theories that believe that they can liberate subjects, texts, and contexts from alienation, and from being duped (false consciousness), are the real ones who are duped, according to Lacan.¹⁹

Two thinkers who have tried to work creatively with this space between construction and deconstruction are Bruno Latour²⁰ and Flusser. They have explored the idea of a network society; a society where one accepts that there is no outside text, there is no way outside the rhizome, and where one seeks to establish

19 See Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 971.

20 Bruno Latour, “Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern.” *Critical Inquiry*, 30, (2004): 225–248.

networks of creativity rather than repeating the eternal return of differentiation. In other words, consciously constructing, rather than just repeating the same.

There is another possibility. This idea can be translated into blatant surface reading without alternatives, or the acceptance that nobody has access to the beyond-the-text, that one is always in-the-world one is trying to understand, but one can appreciate that these worlds that one is always in are called forth,²¹ and that this call, calls thinking, and by implication world and human subjectivity, forth. There is a call, that which calls forth thinking, and this call of thought needs to be thought.

It is in this context that one can argue that critical thinking never stops, or, one could argue, it has never actually started, as it must “apply” its critique to itself, in other words, be aware of its own construction and being in-a-world, be aware that in seeking to un-dupe, it might be the most duped. It needs to be aware of its own light in which it appears, which is what Latour argues. One can debunk myths, but the greatest myth to debunk is the one that one can be free of myth. Latour’s insight can lead to two opposing consequences. The first is that one realises that one is always in myth and therefore it makes no sense to try and escape myth, the consequence of which is to resign to this fact. The direct consequence of this resignation is that the dominant myth is accepted without any alternatives. The second is, inspired by Tally’s book, a *continuous and ruthless* critique of all that exists. The challenge to critique all that exists would be a radical destruction and deconstruction of all constructions, or an infinite awareness that all is constructed. This is how I read Latour: an acute awareness that all is constructed and to embrace this constructedness of all that exists. To embrace the construction of all that exists, to embrace the textuality of all that exists, to embrace the fictionality of all that exists, could link up with the idea of the Utopian in Jameson.²² This approach would come

21 See Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, *[Call] – Responding and the worlds inbetween: Doing (non) philosophy in a time of democratic materialism* (Zürich: Lit Verlag 2021).

22 Tally, *Ruthless Critique*, 60ff.

very close to a *radical* democratic approach, as Laruelle²³ argues, where all things (thoughts) are equal in a democracy of thought. The difference between such a radical democracy of all thoughts and democratic materialism, where eventually more and more bodies find their appropriate language, is that a radical democracy is called forth by the repressed truth of the dominant world, and thus opens this world to alternative worlds and transformation. This radical democracy of thought is possible because it is equally called forth by that which haunts all thoughts, by that which haunts all constructions: the rabble or the refuse or the ghosts – the murdered and suppressed (repressed) truths of these worlds.

Critique of All That Exists from *Dasein*'s Being In-A-World, not from an apparent outside perspective; or the Challenge of Doing Philosophy and Theology from a Radically Immanent Posture

Critique, understanding, and thinking for both philosophy and theology, are no longer possible from an outside (transcendental) perspective. If this metaphysical or onto-theo-logical door has been shut, what is left for theology? Can a Marxist and Freudian critique offer a way of interpreting the task of thinking, i.e., of being human, that is fundamental whilst refusing any metaphysical transcendental explanations? Is there a future for theology and philosophy? The future might lie in thinking the light [*Lichtung*] (ideologies, religions, metaphysics) in which things appear, which is highly relevant to decolonial theologies and philosophies: to think and challenge the Western modern light in which the dominant and dominating world appears. This means to be acutely aware that theologies, philosophies, and theories appear in a certain *Lichtung*, that is, the world. This world is so often presented as a world without alternatives, thereby presenting the world as if it is the world as it is, ignoring thereby that it is a world presented to us in a modern Western light.

23 Francois Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London: Bloomsbury, Kindle version, 2013) pos 1344 of 7408.

To reflect with Heidegger,²⁴ one could argue that Marxist and psychoanalytic theories have entered the call of thinking, and have discovered not the true essence of the Thing to be thought, but have paved the way to help one be aware of that what needs to be thought – *das Bedenklichste*, the THING of thought itself, namely how thought thinks. How the symbolic, imaginary and the real interact in the Borromean knot²⁵ in which human subjects find themselves. In the Lacanian theory, the subject in this Borromean knot is a barred subject, a divided subject, in other words, a subject that is not whole in itself. This not being whole is not due to a mistake, a false consciousness that can be healed or corrected, but is the universal structure of *Dasein* in-a-symbolic-imaginary-real world. The challenge of thinking is to think in this site (*Ortschaft*) and to be conscious of the fact that the subjects and their world are called forth from this site. In other words, this is the site of thinking and thus of the various constructions of worlds. The subjects and worlds constructed in response to that which called them forth, are always haunted constructs, as that which called them forth is never captured in the construct. That which calls is named in the response, but the name is always but a tomb of that which called it forth. This is not because of a lack of trying, but is a structural necessity of language, or the structural necessity of the interplay between the symbolic, real and imaginary.

A possible task for theology and philosophy and their interaction is to think in this site (*Ortschaft*) of the calling forth of thinking and the structural necessity of this hauntology. If theology and philosophy think this necessity and in this site, then there is more than just languages and bodies, as in Badiou's democratic materialism,²⁶ as there will also be Truth, which haunts the democratic materialist world. It is perhaps the task of philosophy to think this *Bedenklichste* – that which calls

24 Martin Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* Zweite, unveränderte Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1961), 3.

25 Jacques Lacan developed his idea of the Borromean knot in Seminar XXII (1974) and Seminar XXIII (1975/6); see translations by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French manuscripts <http://www.lacaninireland.com>

26 Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum 2009), 4.

thought forth – but not from outside of thought. It is not some transcendental; for Badiou²⁷ it is the multiple; for me it is from within thought (consciousness) itself (from the pharmakon-nature of thought) that it calls forth that to which one is called to respond, and to which one is responsible.²⁸

If it is philosophy's task to think in this site the structural necessity, it is also the temptation of philosophy, as it is the temptation of theology, to offer a cure for the barred subject, as well as offer peace and rest to the ghosts who haunt the worlds. It is in response to this temptation that I believe that Christian theology, specifically in the tradition of a *theologia crucis*, can offer a guiding, even confessional, narrative: a Christ *poiēsis*.²⁹ A confessional narrative that continuously deconstructs (crucifies) onto-theo-logy, or any attempt at metaphysics or transcendentalism. Philosophy offers theology the thinking of the site of thinking, the desire of thinking and structural impossibility of thought. The two disciplines complement each other in this site (*Ortschaft*) of thinking.

The Temptation of Theology

There is a difference between thinking this truth that haunts the various constructs and thinking justice in a democratic materialist world. Public theology very often rises to the occasion of seeking to make the democratic materialist world a more just world, by broadening the language so as to include more diverse bodies, whilst keeping the world of these bodies and languages unchallenged.

This is a fair task, because on what grounds would one challenge the world if there is no outside world? Hegel with

27 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum Books, 2007).

28 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, *[Call] – Responding and the worlds in between: Doing (non) philosophy in a time of democratic materialism* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2021).

29 See Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Non-philosophical Christ-poetics beyond the mystical turn in conversation with continental philosophy of religion.” *HTS Theological Studies* 72.3 (2016); DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3542>.

his *Pöbel*³⁰ and later Marx with his proletariat³¹ identified the necessary consequence of the construction of a world, namely rabble: those that are structurally excluded and cannot be structurally included. The *Pöbel* in Hegel does not exist because of a lack of trying to include all in the *Bürgertum* of the state, but they are a logical consequence of the construction of *Bürgertum*. If one constructs a system, a state of free autonomous self-defining and self-sufficient citizens, there will be those who by the very definition, naming and differentiation of what a citizen is, are logically excluded. No amount of effort on the side of the state, via social services or police or charity, can change the fact that the *Pöbel* exists and will always be part of the state.³² It cannot be a matter of changing the language or changing a few laws that would solve the problem of the poor who become rabble and of the constant danger of becoming the proletariat. The rabble will always be present, perhaps similar to Jesus saying the poor will always be with us (Matthew 26:11). It is not a matter of democratic will or social justice or political correctness: it is a structural necessity, a structural universal. The proletariat, not as a specific class or identifiable group, but as structural necessity, namely as the repressed truth of a world or of a construct, as that which haunts that construct. In the previous section, I argued that this is the site of theological and philosophical thinking, because this is also the *Ortschaft* of a true political force, in Rancière's³³ sense of political. For Rancière, it is a force within society that can bring about transformation (Badiou's³⁴ sense of change, which is not just modification). The proletariat is not an identifiable oppressed identity; nor are they identifiable victims, but a political force that haunts the democratic materialist world, like the ghost of communism haunts Europe. It is a latently present universal

30 See Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum 2011).

31 Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble*, 169–179.

32 See Frank Ruda, *Hegels Pöbel: Eine Untersuchung der Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press 2011), 37–59.

33 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. & trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 44–45.

34 Badiou, *Logics of the Worlds*, 259.

category: of the unhuman or un-being – *Unwesen* (Marx³⁵), or in Agamben's³⁶ terms, *Homo Sacer*, namely that which is excluded by being included as the ground or base. In the alienation of production, the externalisation, something is alienated by being included as that which called the alienation forth,³⁷ but the alienated excluded is the ground or base of the alienated being. This alienation is structural and thus necessary, and therefore is universal and therefore the site of thinking, and the site of change.

If theology and philosophy can together think in this *Ortschaft* and complement each other, by dialectically responding to each other, then they become each other's *Aufhebung* – the *Aufhebung* of each other's desires. In this sense, they can offer the different worlds truth, transformation and hope. Theology could be philosophy's folly and philosophy theology's stumbling block, thereby preventing each from becoming colonial. In this sense, they can be decolonial as they will challenge the colonial essence of thought and dialectically prevent themselves from being and becoming colonial.

35 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)," in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin 1972), 343.

36 Giorgio Agamben, "What is a destituent power?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, trans. Stephanie Wakefield 32 (2014): 65–74.

37 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, *[Call] – Responding*, 36–58.

Chapter 6

Is There an Event in Biko? A Deconstructive Reading of the Dialectic of Black Consciousness

Silakhe Singata 

“This is the country Biko continues to haunt, and to inspire.”¹

Introduction

South Africa is not an easy country to describe; however, there are two myths in which it is arguably most recognisable. The first, and perhaps the most prominent, is the founding myth of the New South Africa – an egalitarian rainbow nation. However, the very designation ‘New South Africa’ implies the memory of something prior, an implicit *Old* South Africa – apartheid. The old is barely repressed within the new. Not only are there continuities and discontinuities between the two, but in many ways the two have also come to be co-constitutive.² Furthermore, the intertwined nature of these two visions has led to a situation in which even points of clear discontinuity with apartheid have unexpectedly functioned to not only undermine apartheid, but to also occasion its evolution into something more democratic.³ Additionally, it is still predominately black South Africans that are most

- 1 A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander, N.C. Gibson, “Biko Lives,” in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander, N.C. Gibson (eds.), *Biko Lives: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.
- 2 S. Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2021), 27.
- 3 An example of this in the economy is how the removal of racial apartheid laws – discontinuity with apartheid – has occasioned a sizable increase in black involvement in the economy, and yet has also simultaneously occasioned “privatization and inequality of wealth”; Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, 105.

disadvantaged, and the vast majority of the country's wealth is still disproportionally in white hands. This undermines the notion of progress that permeates the founding myth of the New South Africa. It is in this country, riddled as it is with contradictions, that a vision of the future from the past, associated with the memory of Steve Biko, did not materialise. Biko falls into the category of "dead and erased bodies which speak."⁴ The future that he envisioned has tended to have marginal purchase in the myth of a New South Africa, yet nevertheless it has continued to have an unsettling effect on the present. This chapter is intended to be exploratory in nature, and probes this unsettling memory. In it my reflection takes as its point of departure a question troublingly yet aptly phrased by the editors of *Biko lives*: "If black consciousness was a new stage of cognition that became generalised in the struggles of the 1980s, why didn't the total liberation that Biko envisioned come about?"⁵

This is a question that compels us to look at the present as a present that is disturbed by a past–future. It suggests a tragic sense that the future that Biko envisaged is a "former future stranded in the present."⁶ Rather than exploring the notion of saving the past, here I reflect instead on a radical eschatology – what can be called an *eschata*-poetics – as the possibility of saving Biko's past–future. I will closely follow the dialectical articulation of Biko's conception of black consciousness, paying keen attention to a rupture already present within it – the singularity and particularity of black consciousness. My exploration of the possibility of saving Biko's past–future will move through a keen attentiveness to what Caputo calls an event. This chapter will be a deconstructive reading of the dialectic of black consciousness in Biko. I will closely follow Biko's essentialising of blackness, with a keen focus on the implications it has for Biko's sense of time, and more specifically, the future. These concerns with time and especially the future have significant eschatological ramifications. These will become clear in the course of the

4 M.P. More *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2017), 82.

5 Mngxitama et al, *Biko Lives*, 11–12.

6 D. Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

chapter, but due to the scope of this chapter, these eschatological ramifications will not be probed. In this chapter, I will focus the theological – eschatological – thrust of the argument around the philosophical and theological issues that Biko’s dialectic opens up. Before I can directly discuss Biko’s dialectical articulation of black consciousness, I must first briefly frame this peculiar methodological choice I am making.

Reflections on Method

More precisely, the approach I am taking here is that of staging a critical encounter between the dialectical sense of temporality in Biko, and the deconstructive sense of temporality in Caputo. The approach here will not be to take Biko’s essentialism, and pit it against a notion of anti-essentialism that is (mistakenly) associated with deconstruction. I turn to deconstruction not as a way of articulating a disbelief in essentialism. On the contrary, I turn to it because it allows me to suspend disbelief, given that disbelief betrays an obsession with what is happening, and a failure to appreciate what is happening in what is happening – an event. This radical deconstructive sensitivity occasions a non-dogmatic way of reading Biko that opens up new possibilities for black consciousness in the task of reimagining the future of South Africa – and more theologically, it opens new eschatological possibilities. This requires that I read Biko with a sensitivity to his “problem-space.”⁷ The words of David Scott aptly introduce the kind of exploration this chapter will be:

Problem-spaces alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes. In new historical conditions old questions may lose their

7 Simply put, “problem-space,” as I am using it here, refers to a conceptual framework within which the issues that Biko articulates in his conception of black consciousness are historically conceivable. This is not a term I will be using in this chapter, but my sense of the temporal contingency that permeates Biko’s expectations for the future can be aptly described as what Scott refers to as a problem-space. For a fuller explanation of problem-space, particularly one that connects it with deconstruction, see D. Scott’s *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7–8.

salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant. In such conditions the old paths between questions and answers do not necessarily disappear; their cognitive connections may remain visible and intelligible as the norm or the convention, but the paths now go nowhere because the stakes involved in walking them have dissolved.⁸

Biko's expectations for the future (his past–future) emerged as an answer or response to historically contingent questions in his time (for example, the clash between his thinking and that of white liberals in NUSAS, as will be discuss below). The question then is not merely whether or not Biko's response to the problem is still correct, or whether we need to find a new way of responding to it. This thinking assumes the question itself is unchanging (metaphysics of presence). It assumes that “the problem” is fixed or static. It is not a question of whether his expected future should still be awaited. It is more radical than that. We need to probe what is happening in what is happening. The challenge here is to move deeper than a surface-level appreciation of Biko's expectations for the future (what is happening), to what happens through these expectations for the future (what is happening in what is happening), given that they long for a particular future in response to a particular (past–) present. This requires us to look more radically at the problems Biko dared to defy through his hopes for the future – what does the nature of the future for which Biko hoped, tell us about the past in which Biko longed for this future; and what does this relationship between a problematic past–time and a past–future provoke as we attempt to reimagine the future in the present?

Therefore, I draw on deconstruction because it does not dismiss on account of finding essentialism in what is read. This means that in my critical reading of the dialectic of black consciousness here, I will not be preoccupied with undermining the essentialist (and teleological) character of this dialectic –

8 D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 4.

although a questioning of essentialism is indeed an important consequence of this reading. Rather, I frame this essentialism as a historical rebuttal to an historical problem. In this way, I evade dogmatic adherence to its prescriptions for action, which inform its unrealised predations of the future, while simultaneously evading the option to dismiss it on account of those unrealised predations. Methodologically, this approach is an *eschata*-poetics: I can suspend the question of whether or not the predicted future came to pass; I can suspend the question of whether or not to dismiss a discourse on account of the essentialism it espouses, upon which its predictions for the future are predicated; all this so that I can focus on what is happening in what is happening (event): namely, a rebuttal of concrete historical circumstances that occasions a way of looking to the future with hope. I will now proceed to offer my reading of Biko's dialectic.

Black Consciousness

Black consciousness is not merely a cerebral philosophical reflection, but rather an existential philosophy that is radically grounded in a very particular black experience. Therefore, it is ill-advised to neglect the historical conditions under which the philosophy of black consciousness, as we find it expressed in Biko, emerges. This brings us to South Africa after the time of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960.⁹ Prior to this point, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were the dominant movements that led, and gave voice to, the concerns of black South Africans in the struggle against apartheid. However, after the Sharpeville massacre, and the political uproar that followed it, the apartheid government opted to ban the ANC and PAC, with many of their leaders being sent to Robben Island, going underground, or going into exile.¹⁰ This created a political void – there was now no black-led organisation in opposition to apartheid that exerted an influence on black South Africans at a scale anywhere near that of these two movements. The only remaining group that then filled this void were white

9 Mngxitama et al., *Biko Lives*, 4.

10 Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books 1990), 20.

liberals.¹¹ This means that for the first time, the primary voice of opposition to apartheid in South Africa was not led by black people themselves. Rather, white people were leading, and as a result, even with the quest for black freedom from white determination, white people were still determining things. The approach of the white liberals was that of non-racialism via racial integration. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was one of these white liberal organisations.

At the NUSAS meeting held at Rhodes University in the year 1967, black and white students were given separate accommodation. The failure of the white members of NUSAS to oppose this racist incident disillusioned those black members of NUSAS who, up to that point, had still cherished the notion of racial integration as a way of resisting apartheid.¹² Biko was one of those who became disillusioned with this approach. This was when Biko and his comrades began to move in the direction of an exclusively black solidarity as a means to oppose anti-blackness. This idea is captured in the expression: “Black Man, You Are On Your Own!”¹³ This meant that white people, no matter how well-intentioned, were not capable of giving liberation to black people – by virtue of the fact that since it would be given, it would not be freedom. In order for freedom to be truly freedom, black people had to attain it out of, through, and as their own self-determination. Concomitantly, white systems, values and structures would not bring black liberation about. This realisation (“Black Man, You Are On Your Own”) is what leads to black consciousness: as I will demonstrate below, black consciousness assumes a subjectivity that is not determined by its other (whiteness), which can therefore stand over and against whiteness as its other, so that for the first time the two can confront one another on equal grounds. It is out of this confrontation that the conditions of a more egalitarian co-existence between black and white people can be possible. It would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that black

11 Danial Magaziner, *Law of Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020), 84.

12 T. A. Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1983), 7–8.

13 B.S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 1978), 100.

consciousness is opposed to non-racialism. Rather, it is opposed to the idea that non-racialism can be attained through racial integration. It is at this point that I can now engage the philosophy of black consciousness in a more explicitly philosophical manner. In what follows, I frame the discussion around Biko's dialectical articulation of black consciousness.

Dialectic of Black Consciousness

Perhaps the most well-known articulation of the dialectic of black consciousness by Biko is that given in *Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity* (1973):

The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the antithesis to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place.¹⁴

It is important to carefully follow what Biko is parsing through this dialectic. Firstly, it is primarily racial power politics that this dialectic seeks to analyse, not racial identity. Therefore, the “balance” that Biko hopes to reach at the synthesis is not primarily in terms of identity, where that would mean Biko hopes to find a balance between white racist identity and black identity, where a balance between these two would result in the emergence of true humanity. The confrontation is predominantly at the level of power politics. On the question of identity, Biko is clear that black consciousness must completely displace whiteness, and that only black consciousness has the “truth” – I will discuss this more fully below.¹⁵ To that effect, in a paper titled *The Definition of Black Consciousness* (1971), written by Biko a little earlier than this one, the dialectical analysis is given as well. As Biko builds up to the point at which he gives his dialectical reading of black consciousness, his references to whiteness focus on how it functions as a power politics, more than as an identity: he calls it

¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

“one major force” (and at that, one that “works with unnerving totality”); then, a bit later, he calls it “white power” and states that it “presents itself as a *totality* not only provoking us but also *controlling* our response to the provocation (my emphasis).”¹⁶ So, in Biko’s dialectic, the thesis is a white *racist* power, and the antithesis is a black (*racialist*) anti-racist power (black solidarity). The synthesis is a balance in which both are dissolved, but as power moves, not at the level of identity, hence Biko’s articulation of a synthesis as a reality in which there are no (racial) power politics. This notion of synthesis as a balance is not a slippage for Biko. To that effect, a bit later on the same page, Biko calls the synthesis a “*modus vivendi*.”¹⁷ In a political sense, this phrase is often used to describe a situation in which two sides reach a provisional, and temporary agreement. This is precisely the sense in which Biko used this phrase. He writes: “If South Africa is to be a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation, it is only when these two opposites have interplayed and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a *modus vivendi*.”¹⁸

The synthesis of Biko’s dialectic, therefore, is the point at which something new is inaugurated, but an ideal future is not yet arrived at – the ideal future, for Biko, being a South Africa in which “black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation.” This will become even clearer as we carefully follow Biko’s thoughts on black consciousness in contradistinction to white values. As Biko continues, a sharp distinction is drawn between black consciousness and white values, which clearly indicates that for Biko, black consciousness’s overcoming of white values benefits not only black people – who, through black consciousness, cease to be the disposable commodities of “white society” – but society at large. This is because for Biko: “white systems have produced throughout the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people.”¹⁹ Whiteness, which makes black self-determination impossible, also makes the self-determination of others who have come into contact with

16 Ibid., 55.

17 Ibid., 55.

18 Ibid., 55.

19 Ibid., 55–56.

whiteness around the world impossible. Self-reliance (“Black Man, You Are On Your Own”) is the emergence in the particular experience of black South Africans, of something more universal: a true humanity. This is the sense in which, for Biko, black consciousness is the “truth”, while whiteness is the lie.

At the synthesis, true humanity (which in South Africa, can only be realised as a land in which blacks and whites live together in harmony, without group exploitation) only appears in a negative sense – not as the future harmony Biko longs for, but as the confrontation of two clashing forces (white racism and black solidarity), which results in a reluctant truce (balance or *modus vivendi*). At this stage, both powers do not have what they deem ideal: for white racists, the black as a commodity for white society is lost, while on the side of black power, however, note that there is no indication that at the commencement of the synthesis black people gain anything other than subjectivity, and the halting and incremental eradication of white totalitarianism (and, at that, reluctantly, on the part of white racists). For example, missing from Biko’s reflections on the synthesis is, amongst other things, the resolution of the issue of the ownership of the majority of land by a white minority, while the black majority are cramped on a small portion of the land.²⁰ For Biko, the synthesis is the point where negotiations are possible for the first time. Elsewhere, when Biko describes the possibility of a future stage in which negotiation can take place, he does not employ the dialectical articulation, but it is clear that the point about which he speaks can only be the synthesis of the dialectic. For example, when criticising white liberal integration – a notion that in *Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity* he criticises through an articulation of the dialectic of black consciousness – he writes: “Once the various groups within a given community have asserted themselves to the point that mutual respect has to be shown then you have the ingredients for a true and meaningful integration.”²¹

Then again, in *White Racism and Black Consciousness* (1971), while showing that the American black power movement is not

20 This is not to suggest that Biko had no clear ideas about land. For an example of Biko’s thoughts on land ownership, see *Ibid.*, 47–48.

21 *Ibid.*, 22.

the only, or even the earliest, source of this idea, he writes – reflecting on the thoughts of Hastings Kamuzu Banda: “We knew he [the white *man*] had no right to be there; we wanted to remove him from our table, strip the table of all trappings put on it by him, decorate it in true African style, settle down and then ask him to join us on our terms if he liked.”²² This expression of the future does not neatly fit the picture painted by Biko I discussed above, and understandably so as it is Banda’s expression that Biko is recounting here. Nevertheless, the notion of a genuine egalitarian situation emerging only after a clash and conflict – and at that, possibly, though not ideally, even outright violent conflict²³ – remains discernible. The synthetic stage of the dialectic is this stage of the clash, which will occasion bargaining and dialogue between black people and white people. This synthesis, therefore, is more like a quasi-inaugurated eschatology, which strains after a future point of realisation – a South African reality without racial exploitation. It is, in a sense, the transitionary phase that leads to that point. It is important to bear in mind here that Biko need not be understood as intending the synthesis to be one definitive moment. This fact does not always clearly present itself in the writings of Biko, though it can arguably be inferred. For example, in the above quoted critique of white liberal integration, the very notion that groups must assert “themselves *to the point* that mutual respect has to be shown...” in and of itself implies a process, rather than a moment. This point is even more clearly apparent when Biko speaks in the BPC-SASO trial of May 1976:

“Now at this given moment our strength is such that we have got to deal with issues that are very very low-key. Now as you develop strength you begin to pick up issue after issue and it is all over a course of time....The process in fact may take well over 20 years of dialogue between blacks and whites. We certainly don’t envisage failure. We certainly don’t have an alternative. We have analysed history. We believe that history moves in a particular logical direction, and in this particular instance the logical

22 Ibid., 75.

23 Ibid., 168–169, 171–172.

direction is that eventually any white society in this country is going to have to accommodate black thinking.”²⁴

Seeing that the dialectical articulations discussed above were written five and three years, respectively, prior to this trial, and that they were written under far less hostile conditions than the trial, it is remarkable that they and this statement are logically consistent with one another. In both, there is a clear sense of the inauguration of a gradual progression that plays itself out as a confrontation between two groups, which will finally be realised in a more egalitarian future. The language that Biko uses here betrays strong metaphysical beliefs about history that, in and of themselves, betray a secularised theological sense of history, and as a result, cast black consciousness in something of a secularised eschatological (teleological) guise. It is this sense of history that I will discuss more directly in the following section.

Biko’s Dialectic: Idealism or Materialism?

Biko refers to his dialectic as “Hegelian” but then calls it a “dialectical materialism.”²⁵ As Mabogo P. More points out, this is clearly a confusion of terms, as Hegel’s is a dialectical idealism, and Marx’s is a dialectical materialism.²⁶ However, considering the fact that dialectical materialism is at most atheistic, and at least post-theistic, while Biko’s dialectic not only merely has a clear idealism in it, but rather an explicitly theological component to it, the claim that Biko’s is a dialectical materialism – made both by Biko and More – should be questioned. After all, *Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity* is an explicitly theological article, and the notion of true humanity there, connected to the synthesis of the dialectic, should be read in conversation with a black theological sense of true humanity.²⁷ Biko does not spell out the sense in which God factors into the dialectic; however, there are clear indications that at the very

24 Ibid., 151.

25 Ibid., 55.

26 More, *Biko*, 252.

27 G.J. Van Wyngaard, “In Search of Repair: Critical White Responses as a Theological Problem – a South African Contribution” (PhD Thesis, Vrije Universiteit December 2019), 142.

least, Biko's dialectic does not neatly fit into one or the other. At this point I will briefly argue that the dialectical logic that Biko employs has the hallmarks of a type of theological sense of history, and concomitantly is a kind of eschatology. As I mentioned above, More posits that Biko mistakenly attributes his dialectical logic to Hegel, when for him Biko's dialectic is closer to that of Marx. More argues that Hegel's dialectical idealism is theological:

Hegel believed that ideas constitute the essence of all reality and that it is the development of ideas that encourages the rest of reality towards the Absolute Idea. Thus, Hegel's conception of history is the history of the realisation of the Absolute Idea – that is, God.²⁸

In a passage that helpfully captures the theological nature of his dialectical thinking, Hegel writes:

World history begins with its universal goal: the fulfilment of the concept of Spirit – still only implicit..., i.e., as its nature. That goal is the inner, indeed the innermost, unconscious drive; and the entire business of world history is...the work of bringing it to consciousness. Thus, what we called the subjective aspect – needs, drives, passions, particular interests, as well as opinions and subjective views all this is immediately apparent to consciousness... It makes its entrance in the guise of a natural being, or of natural will. This imponderable mass of wills, interests, and activities – these are the tools and means of the World Spirit for achieving its goal, to elevate it to consciousness and to actualize it.²⁹

Hegel's dialectic is clearly teleological in that there is a necessity or a "universal goal" for the Spirit, which in its unrealised state is an "unconscious drive" to be realised by rising to the level of consciousness. (Already, with this

28 More, *Biko*, 252.

29 G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: with selections from The philosophy of right* (Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 27–28.

language of “consciousness,” we can anticipate a connection to black *consciousness*.) For Hegel, this happens in history: each stage of history is a step in the incremental unfolding of the Spirit,³⁰ in which the Spirit gradually moves from being implicit yet unthought-of by humans, to being thought; and this consciousness towards which world history is moving is freedom (the universal goal/the idea). The dialectic does not, however, progress in a linear manner. It moves through contradiction – the Spirit must see itself in two opposites which clash, with the result that both will be sublimated into some higher synthesis. What drives this dialectical movement of history – Spirit – is, for Hegel, God. Therefore, there is a sense of necessity in the dialectic – history will inevitably move in a certain logical direction – because of the theological nature of this philosophical system. Already, with the notion that history moves in a certain logical direction, a clear affinity is discernible in Hegel’s and Biko’s senses of temporality. In the reading I am giving here, contrary to what More posits, there is a clear theological thrust in Biko’s dialectic that brings it closer to Hegel – at least as far as the nature of necessity is concerned – than to Marx. I opt to make this case by probing Biko’s sense of necessity in *The Definition of Black Consciousness* rather than in *Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity*. This is because the theological nature of the latter might be construed as Biko’s attempt to describe in more theological language something he (presumably) earlier speaks of in more materialist terms, due to the theological nature of the journal in which that essay first appears. The former, however, is earlier, and the occasion in which it first appears is not at all theological. Rather, Biko delivered this paper in a SASO leadership training course, and therefore spoke “from the heart of his and their experience.”³¹ In other words, there are no reasons external to the argument itself that can be said to pressure Biko into speaking theologically.

I will not repeat the above discussion of this dialectic, but I will build on it. What I wish to focus on here is Biko’s notion of the truth and the lie, as well as how they feed into Biko’s sense

30 Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 75.

31 Ibid., 52.

of the necessity that drives the dialectic, and at that history itself. In *The Definition of Black Consciousness*, the lie is that blacks are a departure from the normal, where the normal is white.³² For Biko, it is due to this lie that there are “non-whites” who seek to emulate whites. Note the unabashedly theologically loaded language that Biko employs as he articulates an alternative to the lie (which implicitly means this is what Biko considers to be the truth): “It [black consciousness] is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black.”³³

Significantly, this very notion of a particular consciousness (black consciousness) being “a manifestation of a new realization” very easily lends itself to the Hegelian idealism mentioned above. Before Biko even begins to articulate the way in which black consciousness functions in the dialectic, which Biko articulates shortly after this, the theological weight behind black consciousness should not be missed. There is a sense in which black consciousness is a recognition of the creator’s intention at the creation. Simon Maimela’s theological anthropology that goes back to the *imago dei* therefore has very explicit and direct roots in Biko’s sense of black consciousness as we see it here: for both Biko and Maimela, white racism is, whatever else it is, a disruption of an anthropology given at creation. I posit that what moves the dialectic for Biko should not merely be thought of as necessity, but as an explicitly theological sense of necessity that has its origins in divine intention. To that effect, note the very next sentence:

Black Consciousness therefore, takes cognisance of the deliberateness of God’s plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their values, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.³⁴

32 Ibid., 53.

33 Ibid., 53.

34 Ibid., 53.

A bit later in this paper, when Biko has just articulated the dialectic, he then speaks of the truth: “This truth cannot be reversed... Someone somewhere along the line will be *forced to accept the truth* and here we believe that ours is the truth (my emphasis).”³⁵ The part I have italicised here (“*forced*”) connects truth and necessity. The significance of this connection will be clear towards the end of this paragraph. First, however, note that “truth” functions as a sort of shorthand for God’s deliberate plan as Biko articulated it earlier in the paper. This is clear when we see that at both points, what black consciousness as God’s plan, and black consciousness as simply the truth, seek to negate is the lie, which earlier in the paper is articulated as the notion that whiteness is the norm that blackness must emulate, yet to which it is a departure. Later, then, this is articulated as the notion that everywhere whiteness appears, the people it oppresses lose their subjectivity because whiteness seeks to assume the role of the best (authentic, or *true*) way of life.³⁶ In both cases – both before and after the articulation of the dialectic – the lie does not become a lie with the emergence of black consciousness. Something precedes the lie: earlier articulated as God’s original plan in creation, then later articulated as the truth. By virtue of the fact that white racism is a lie from the moment it emerges, there is an implicit, still unconscious truth that must (necessity) rise to the level of consciousness. Black consciousness, as a negating intervention, is the way in which that truth moves from unconsciousness to *human* consciousness, and concomitantly this process leads to true humanity. The point is that it is very clear here, when we hold everything Biko says in the paper together, that the necessity that drives Biko’s dialectic is explicitly theological: he refers outright to the necessity not only as a “who” but as God. To the extent to which Biko speaks in explicitly theological language, he looks back to God’s original plan in creation. However, due to the fact that the dialectic is a teleology – a foreword progression – there is an implicitly eschatological sense to what Biko is doing here. Takatso Mofokeng’s notion that the damage caused by white racism runs so deep that we cannot go back to the original creation, but

35 Ibid., 55–56.

36 Ibid., 56.

must move forward to a new creation, has very clear roots in this implicit eschatology of black consciousness.³⁷ I mention this to say that the fact that what I see as implicit in Biko unintentionally appears explicitly in an articulation of black theology – Mofokeng is primarily concerned with Christology, not eschatology – for which black consciousness is a primary interlocutor is evidence that I am not bringing this to Biko. This implicit eschatology is precisely what comes through in the italicised part of the quote above in which truth and necessity go together. Necessity can be seen here as the way in which God's original intention moves history forward towards its own "realisation."³⁸ In a sense here, the negation of black consciousness functions as what in theology is called inaugurated eschatology. In this sense, Biko is closer to Hegel than Marx: Biko's truth significantly overlaps with Hegel's Spirit, and for both they are where God features in their respective dialectics.

The point of this section is to highlight the fact that whatever else it is, Biko's dialectic is theological; and that due to its teleological nature, there is an implicit eschatology in it. This necessity that I have probed by way of theological sensitivity is precisely the point at which I will read Biko's dialectic deconstructively, by staging a critical encounter with Caputo's radical theology of the event. Biko's notions of necessity, truth, and the progression of History also betray a God that is not dead. Through Caputo, I move towards explaining how Biko's articulation is freed, and given a fresh sense of futurity when it moves through something of a death of God. This is a perfectly legitimate way to read Biko, as Hegelian dialectic is an important development in the intellectual genealogy of radical theology more broadly, and Caputo's radical theology of the event more specifically. The importance of Hegel for both Biko and Caputo is the point at which this critical encounter can be staged. After all, in Hegel's own articulation of dialectic, the synthesis is reached

37 Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers*, 228; J. N.J. Kritzinger, *Black Theology – Challenge to Mission* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1988), 252.

38 Biko, *I Write what I Like*, 53.

through a double death of God.³⁹ Seeing that dialectical thinking is already implicated in some sense of the death of God, Biko is implicated.

Radical Theology

This section will not be an introduction to Caputo's radical theology. Rather, it will focus on the sense of temporality in Caputo radical theology, and how it can deconstruct the temporal necessity that permeates Biko's dialectical articulation of black consciousness. I will do this through a brief discussion of *différance*. My focus will primarily be on the temporal sense of *différance*. I will contrast this sense of temporality with the Hegelian dialectical sense of temporality discussed above. From there, I will be in a better position to speak to Caputo's notion of an event more directly. I will then reach the final part of this chapter in which I read the cry of black consciousness deconstructively through a weakening of the notion of black consciousness (from an absolute black subjectivity, imminent in its own eyes, to the singularity of black subjectivity in an antiblack context).

Différance as Temporal Deferral

The term "radical theology" is reminiscent of the death of God theology of the 1960's. In the beginning of the radical theology phase of Caputo's work, with the publication of *The Weakness of God* (2006), Caputo did not use the term "radical theology," but referred to his project as a "weak theology." It is clear, however, that even this early Caputo was aware of the affinity between his thought and death of God theology. For example, in *The Weakness of God*, he writes:

Suppose we dare to think of God otherwise than metaphysics and metaphysical theology allow? Suppose we say there is at least this much to the death of God: that the God of metaphysical theology is a God well lost and that

39 Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practice* (Farnham: Asgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 3.

the task of thinking about God radically otherwise has been inescapably imposed upon us?⁴⁰

We see here that Caputo is acknowledging the affinity between his weak theology, and death of God theology, while simultaneously hinting at the differences. The differences are not minor. This is because Caputo's sense of radical theology seeks to avoid the notion of the ontological truth of theism, but not by asserting in its place a notion of the ontological truth of atheism.⁴¹ Both of these, conceived as metaphysical truths, are avoided. This comes out very clearly in Caputo's critique of Žižek's notion of the death of God.⁴² Caputo's critique of Žižek has implicitly eschatological, and therefore also temporal, ramifications: where for Žižek there is, never was, and never will be a God, for Caputo God does not exist, God insists – whether there will have been a God stands to be seen. Caputo's God is not eternal (theism), nor is Caputo's God dead (atheism), but is instead mortal – is not a being, but a maybe(ing), and therefore radically exposed to the future.

Caputo arrives at this theology by inscribing God into the play of *différance*. *Différance* is a word coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, through which he retrieves something that is repressed in the meaning of the word "difference." Both English and French borrow the word "difference" from the Latin *differre*.⁴³ This Latin word has both a spatial (differ) and a temporal (defer) connotation that is repressed in both the English and French words. English and French privilege the spatial sense, and through his coinage (*différance*) Derrida retrieves the forgotten, or minor sense of the word (defer) and holds both senses together. It is important to note here that Derrida's coinage of this word is not intended to replace the word "difference." This is because *différance* is neither

40 J.D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 23.

41 Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology*, 4.

42 J.D. Caputo *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)

43 J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 7.

a word nor a concept, but is instead (1) the spatial opening that makes it possible for different words, concepts, beliefs etc. to exist – it itself does not exist, so that these things can exist – and be co-constitutive on account of difference⁴⁴; as well as (2) the temporal difference (deferral) that can be seen in the fact that whatever the present state of things – such as words, concepts, and beliefs – is, it is never eternally fixed, but is always in flux, endlessly changing as these things repeat themselves forward in time and space. For the purposes of this chapter, it is the temporal sense of *différance* that I give attention to.

To follow Caputo's critique of Hegel, it is important to note that both Caputo and Hegel inscribe God within time, but according to two different senses of temporality. Simply put, in Hegel, God is the force (idea) that drives the movement of History, and that very same historical movement is the process through which God moves from unrealised to realised. In other words, history has a goal – the realisation of God (Absolute Idea, Spirit, or Truth). This goal is bound to be reached because it is already present prior to its realisation, as the unrealised truth that moves history forward in the *quest* for realisation. When Hegel refers to this view of history in more explicitly theological language, he calls it a *Vorstellung* – a symbolic representation. By viewing religion as such, Hegel shifts away from a supernatural view of religion and more importantly, God, to one where the strange and miraculous aspects of religion – the trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension etc. – should not be affirmed or dismissed as literal supernatural events, but should instead be read more radically: as fantastical representations in which what matters is not the representations themselves, but what is happening through these representations, namely, the above mentioned “unconscious drive” – which, for Hegel, is Truth, Spirit, or God as that which moves history.⁴⁵ Caputo follows this Hegelian move, in that for him religion should be read radically in a similar way to Hegel. The crucial difference is that for Caputo,

44 The differences between names, concepts, beliefs, etc. is what makes them sensible: for example, atheism makes sense in relationship to what it negates, namely theism, and vice versa. Therefore, difference is an integral part of meaning.

45 Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 88.

what is happening in the symbolic representation that is religion (or, for Caputo, theopoetics) is not something conditional (necessity), but is instead unconditional: “My own idea is that religion is a *Vorstellung* of which there is no Concept, a figure that does not admit of metaphysical elucidation. My *Vorstellung* is headed for decapitation not recapitulation, having nowhere to turn for a Final Explanation of itself...”⁴⁶

Where, in Hegel, the representation depicts something with ontological weight, that is therefore bound to be realised in history, in Caputo what the representation seeks to depict, or rather to construct, is unconstructable. It is without ontological weight, but is instead a *hauntological* possibility. It cannot be realised in any final concrete sense because it is radically messianic – it is always (permanently) to come. So, Caputo’s thought is almost like a dialectic, but is without Hegelian Spirit or Absolute idea, and concomitantly also without synthesis, as it were. Where the movement of Hegel’s dialectic has all the assurance that comes with the movement of Spirit (God) in and through human history, from unconsciousness to consciousness, movement in Caputo’s radical theology comes without guarantee since it is movement, not according to the logic of Spirit (God), but to the (il)logic of the event (God, *perhaps*) – God inscribed in the play of *différance* without remainder.

For Caputo, there is no “Truth,” but there are truths (truth without Truth).⁴⁷ As a result, there is no guiding logic (Truth) in the development of any given truth. Truth has no essence that can function as a blueprint according to which it can be constructed. What interests me, for this chapter, is what this shift in the meaning of truth does to the movement of time. We can easily see this when we look at time as the temporal movement in the process of the becoming true of truth. If there is a Truth that determines the process, as in Hegel and Biko, then the movement of time is inevitable, predictable, and foreseeable (necessity); meaning that time itself is something closed. This is why for Biko,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 93.

as we saw above, failure could not be envisioned.⁴⁸ However, with the becoming true of truth, where truth is truth without *Truth*, the movement of time becomes undetermined, undecidable, contingent, chancy, unpredictable, and unforeseeable; meaning that time itself is something open. This, then, presents us with two different senses of history: where time is closed, history is something steady, and where time is open, history is fluctuating (flux). If history is steady and predictable, there is a sense in which change is an illusion. This is because change is really just an unfolding of the same. As an unfolding, there is no real change. Every stage of the unfolding is something that was essentially there before, but imperceptible. Movement therefore progressively untangles what is essentially already there, yet imperceptible (unrealised). Nothing new comes. Novelty is really an illusion, a consequence of our own limitations (our inability to perceive the essence) as well as the limits of what was essentially always there (its own imperceptibility). This is Caputo's critique of a Hegelian sense of history:

Hegel made a show of embracing time and kinesis even while subverting them to his own purposes. Hegelian time is not authentic, radical, Christian temporality, in which everything hinges on the "instant," the decision. It is a time which is not exposed to flux and contingency but precisely insulated from their effects. It is a time made safe by eternity, underwritten by reason, regulated by necessity. In Derrida's terms, Hegelian mediation wants to arrest the play even as it appears to affirm it. Hegelian time lacks what is truly proper to time: contingency, freedom, exposure to the future. It pays public homage to history and temporality while in private it subverts them, subordinating them to a rational teleology which monitors and controls their movements. Hegelian time is time reworked by metaphysics, made over into its image and likeness, and in which the

48 "The process in fact may take well over 20 years of dialogue between blacks and whites. We certainly don't envisage failure. We certainly don't have an alternative. We have analysed history. We believe that history moves in a particular logical direction, and in this particular instance the logical direction is that eventually any white society in this country is going to have to accommodate black thinking." Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 151.

groundlessness of radical freedom, which belongs to the essence of time and kinesis, is revoked.⁴⁹

What is being brought to the fore here is that the Hegelian sense of necessity is invoked as an attempt (whether intentional or unintentional) to be protected from contingency. It is an attempt to be spared from a reality in which there are no guarantees. It is this that I posit must be probed. The notion that history is permeated with necessity, and at that, a necessity that renders a favourable outcome inevitable, also falls under Marx's sympathetic critique of religion as an opium of the people – the paradox being that Marx's dialectical materialism is also implicated, as it invokes teleology to render a classless society inevitable. This casting of history retains what Marx rightly criticised as an attempt to give a heart to a heartless world. In other words, it is an attempt to flee material reality, to escape the original difficulty of life. For Caputo, we get the best results when we face up to the original difficulty of life. Considered in connection with the movement of history, this means that nothing about reality renders what we deem a favourable outcome inevitable. This forces us, more radically, to fall back on hope rather than certitude, on faith rather than belief. The sense of hope that is approached in this manner is one in which hope is only possible when there are no grantees; hope is only possible when it is *impossible* – when it is hope against hope. Rendered thus, hope is released from necessity, thus rendering hope unconditional. This framing of hope – as the impossible, or the unconditional – is a framing of hope as an event. This then indicates a shift in how God is conceived: God is not necessity (the conditional), but rather, the name of God is a name for the unconditional – a way of thinking about God that can be seen in both Derrida and Paul Tillich.⁵⁰ In what follows, I bring the thrust of this Caputian deconstruction of Hegelian temporality to bear on Biko's dialectical conception of black consciousness, to explore the possibility of a release of Biko's past–future by way of a Caputian open temporality.

49 J.D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutical Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 18.

50 See J.D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2013).

A Theology of the Event

Where for Hegel religion is a *Vorstellung*, for Caputo theology is a poetics (theopoetics). It is a hermeneutics of the event that the name of God harbours.⁵¹ There is a particular relationship between God and a particular event. In a manner that, on the surface, resembles how Hegel's *Vorstellung* contains the Absolute Idea (Spirit), the name of God harbours an event; however, unlike with Hegel, an event is not an Idea or an essence. In the case of an essence contained by a name, the essence would precede a name, and functioning like a blueprint, would occasion the construction of that name, as well as determine its meaning (how it should function). In this conception, essentialist thinking is a form of idealism. As discussed above, this is how God and Truth function in Hegel's – and Biko's – dialectic. An event, on the other hand, does not give rise to a name, but rather a name – and its history in the traditions of historical communities that have used it – gives rise to an event.⁵² An event is an effect that is occasioned by a name, which is discernible when a name is unable to exhaustively capture its own meaning, resulting in an unending deferral of a complete actualisation of the meaning of a word. An example of this is the word "democracy" – nothing anybody has ever meant by this word has been met with unanimous recognition. Something is always left to be desired, always deferred to a future that is ever receding with every attempt to actualise it. It is important, however, to bear in mind that it is not that an exhaustive meaning is possible, even in theory, but escapes us because of human limitation. Such a conception would not be an event, but a Kantian ideal.⁵³ An event is not just an unrealisable absolute meaning, but the *impossibility* of absolute meaning as such – the secret is that there is no secret. Impossibility here means that an event is the irreducible unrealisable state of absolute meaning (Idea) that is due to the fact that there is no essential core that can be realised

51 Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

52 Ibid., 3.

53 C. Ullrich, "Theopoetics from Below: A South African Black Christological Encounter with Radical Theology," *Black Theology: An International Journal* (2021), 5; M. Hågglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 2008), 9.

in the first place, as a result of which an unending movement of provisional constructions is occasioned. This unending deferral is the temporal effect of *différance*.

So, in a theology of the event, theology is not merely a *Vorstellung* that can be discarded once the Spirit has been absolutely realised in human consciousness. Rather, it is a theopoetics that constructs without a blueprint – the impossible/event – and is therefore indispensable to what is being constructed. So, when the name of God is inscribed into the play of *différance*, it becomes a symbol, but not one that points to something outside of it – thus rendering it completely disposable – but one that points to what is trying (insisting) to come true through and as “God.”⁵⁴ If the name of God is too hastily discarded, there is an event that this name harbours that will be lost.⁵⁵ This radical openness occasioned by this weakening from the Hegelian Spirit (God) to the event (God, *perhaps*) is precisely what renders black consciousness irreducibly singular and particular. In what follows, I will search for the event in Biko’s conception of black consciousness by inscribing Biko’s sense of temporality into the play of *différance*.

Black Consciousness as an Event

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the objective of this deconstructive reading of Biko is not to dismiss Biko’s thought on account of essentialism. It is instead to suspend the epistemological questions of belief or disbelief so as to be exposed to what is happening in Biko – the event. If, indeed, there is a possibility of an event in Biko’s hope for the future, then an open temporality, which is the only sense of temporality in a Caputian conception of event, frees Biko’s past–future – a future he thought was inevitable (necessity), which, however, did not come

54 This is similar to how Bonhoeffer thinks religion should be interpreted: “...the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of universal truth, but this mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself....” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 420.

55 It is important to note, however, that in the ongoing process of the deconstruction of this name, at some future point it might be replaced by other names.

to pass – by exposing it more radically to the future. What Biko invokes Hegelian dialectical necessity to protect – the future that black consciousness seeks to actualise – is where I search for the possibility of an event.

Seeing that, as I argued above, an event is occasioned by the particularity of a historically contingent construction rather than a universal absolute, I posit that within the realisation that led to the inauguration of the black consciousness movement, captured in the expression “Black Man, You Are On Your Own,” the possibility of an event is discernible. This is because, as argued above, this realisation emerged as a rejection of a white liberal absolute universality – colour-blind racial integration as the antithesis of a dialectic – in favour of the historically singular and particular experience of blackness. The notion of singularity is a crucial one in any understanding of event. To bring this point to bear, the idealism in Biko’s thought must be deconstructed. What I identify here as the idealism, or essentialism of Biko – the truth (authenticity) of blackness – is not an obstacle, but is already a first step in a deconstruction. To make this point clear, we must return to Biko’s dialectical articulation of black consciousness. In turning back to Biko’s dialectic, it is important to bear in mind here that Hegelian dialectical thinking was mediated to Biko through Sartre and Fanon. Sartre and Fanon, however, differed on the dialectic of black consciousness. For Sartre, black consciousness, as an antithesis to white racism, is a means to an end (teleology) – its goal is a more universal humanity. This means black consciousness is a provisional, temporary measure meant to be dissolved in the synthesis. Fanon’s response to Sartre’s dialectic does not straightforwardly reject Sartre’s dialectical logic as such. What Fanon laments is that this dialectical – teleological – conception of black consciousness renders it a means to an end rather than an absolute, and thus undermines its singularity:

The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still, in terms of consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No

probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower.⁵⁶

Fanon's lament exposes a problem with dialectical thinking that my recourse to deconstruction seeks to address: as a means to a greater end, blackness continues to be, not for itself, but for another. Here, black consciousness's immanence in its own eyes is covered over. Teleology maintains the crossing out of the being of the black, and then projects that erasure to the future. Framing black consciousness as a teleological ontological intervention renders blackness non-essential in the here and now – it is merely a minor term in the dialectical progression, that will pass – and in the future synthesis it will dissolve into something greater or more universal (Sartre). Blackness is then erased both in history (by antiblackness), and in history's goal (by being dissolved in Sartre's synthesis). Put differently, one of the implications of Fanon's critique of Sartre's dialectic is that teleological necessity undermines the singularity of blackness. This, for Fanon, kills black zeal for liberation. Biko somewhat follows Sartre's dialectical logic, however, as was argued above only in relation to racial power politics. In other words, as with Sartre, something about black consciousness is dissolved at the synthesis – namely, racial power politics. Unlike Sartre, however (and therefore closer to Fanon), black identity is not dissolved. In the egalitarian future that Biko envisages, black people do not become one race with white people. They exist together in harmony, and without race-based exploitation – this is what Biko means by non-racialism. For Fanon, a dialectic that moves from below completely calls into question the existing humanism that grounds white racism, and as a result brings forth a "new humanism."⁵⁷ We see this in Biko too – hence the notion of a quest for a true humanity, or the idea that the path of black consciousness leads to the gift of a more human face. However, Fanon states that the romantic illusion of black consciousness, not as a means to an end in a teleological progression, but instead by being its own end, is necessary.⁵⁸ In the conceptual framework of Caputo's radical theology,

56 F. Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 103.

57 N Gibson, *Fanonian practices in South Africa: From Steve Biko to Abahlali baseMjondolo* (Scottsville: KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), 9.

58 Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks*, 103.

however, what is deconstructed in the dialectic is the sense of necessity. Necessity is replaced with contingency, thus rendering what in a conceptual framework of dialectical necessity is a necessary romantic illusion, as in fact being the reality. With this deconstruction of the Hegelian-Marxist metaphysics of dialectical progression (teleology), blackness in its historical singularity and materiality becomes precarious, but also all the more “absolute,” if by absolute we mean singular and unrepeatable. To be more precise, this deconstructive openness to event is a weakening of the conception of blackness as absolute. Rather than conceiving blackness outside of dialectical thinking in order for blackness to be absolute, this search for an event thinks of blackness outside of the dialectic in order for black subjectivity to be singular. This is already the eschatological or rather messianic sense of the event.

So, *différance* does not mean only deferral, delay, procrastination, but the spacing out, the extension between memory and promise or *à-venir* [to come], which opens up the here-now in all its urgency and absolute singularity, in the immanence of the instance. The call for what is coming calls for action now. There is the *gage*: engagement, promise, injunction and response to injunction, the pledge that is given in and for us before any concrete decision, the time of the promise, the response to the demands of justice, which is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional.⁵⁹

In an antiblack context, such as Biko’s, where the subjectivity of blackness is undermined, Biko envisions justice as a situation in which black people will be full subjects in relation to white people. In the deconstructive reading I am giving here, black subjectivity as conceived in black consciousness is an “impatient” response to this promise to come. This singular occurrence, without the guarantees of necessity, is a more precarious *modus vivendi*, not merely one that is primarily between black power and white supremacy, as Biko argued, but a more radical condition: all interventions – including the cry of black consciousness, which I am reading here as the singularity of blackness – are irreducibly provisional arrangements out of the distance between the promise

59 J.D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 124.

of a justice to come and an unjust present, with an acute sensitivity to the lack of any guarantees (dialectical necessity). The impatient and uncompromising nature of the unconditional call for justice requires concrete responses in the present, with or without an ultimate conclusion. When we read black consciousness with *différance*, we evade the Hegelian metaphysical fortification with which Biko's reflection on blackness is insulated from the original difficulty of life. This releases the event in black consciousness: the affirmation of black subjectivity in a world that erases black subjectivity, in the absence of a big Other (history as logically progressing towards black liberation) is the possibility of the impossible – an event. It is the affirmation of blackness without why – it is the unconditional.

Lastly, this intervention also staves off the error of lapsing into a form of ethno-nationalism. This situation that Biko describes as a *modus vivendi* is universal, in that it forces two ethnical power political interventions into a situation where they have to negotiate a national situation in which these different ethnic groups can co-exist without race being a political or even economic factor – non-racialism. In other words, the intervention of black consciousness is intended as a means towards a genuine democracy, by creating a situation in which no racial group can overwhelm and over determine another. Only out of this condition is a genuine, democratic, and non-colonial exchange of ideas amongst different cultures even possible for Biko.⁶⁰ The difference between this and deconstruction is that deconstruction is an unending work, while Biko sees the *modus vivendi* as a transitional situation that will come to an end. This, as we have seen, is due to Biko's certainty with respect to the future ("We certainly don't envisage failure. We certainly don't have an alternative. We have analysed history. We believe that history moves in a particular logical direction, and in this particular instance the logical direction is that eventually any white society in this country is going to have to accommodate black thinking."⁶¹) However, Caputo's more precarious sense of time as unprogrammable and radically open to an undecidable future is more appropriately

60 Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 26.

61 Ibid., 151.

met with a movement towards the future that undermines “unfair, exclusionary” discursive measures, rather than one that positively states an ideal intervention.⁶² Deconstruction “does not provide [us with] criteria” that can either guarantee a favourable outcome, or guarantee that with or without a favourable outcome, a particular criterion is correct.⁶³ Deconstruction does, however, unendingly pursue the conditions under which we can openly and fairly perpetually debate and negotiate the way in which we will continue to co-exist in more just ways, within this risky situation without guarantees.⁶⁴ In this sense, then, this more deconstructive temporality is a more radical *modus vivendi*. It, therefore, is more universal in that it seeks a situation in which all can be part of the difficult task of debate and negotiation. It values the notion of democracy as radical disagreement. This condition requires the intervention of black consciousness as a measure that undermines the unfair exclusion and undermining of the personhood of black people, so that a truly non-racial situation can emerge, even if only in the negative – as a space where antiblackness will never exist unchallenged. Deconstruction here does not give us a solution to the problem of antiblackness, but is a praxis that unendingly seeks to create the conditions under which antiblackness, where it exists, is always being challenged. This is where the search for an event overlaps with black nihilism.⁶⁵

62 Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 197.

63 *Ibid.*, 197.

64 *Ibid.*, 197.

65 I have in mind the closing remarks that Calvin L. Warren makes in his book, *Ontological Terror*: “Continuing to keep hope that freedom will occur, that one day the world will apologize for its antiblack brutality and accept us with open arms, is a devastating fantasy. It might give one motivation to fight on, but it is a drive that will only produce exhaustion and protest fatigue. What is the solution? What should we do? How do we live without metaphysical schemes of political hope, freedom, and humanity? I would have to suggest that there are no solutions to the problem of antiblackness — there is only endurance. And endurance cannot be reduced to biofuturity or humanist mandates. Endurance is a spiritual practice with entirely different aims. *Ontological Terror* seeks to challenge metaphysical and postmetaphysical solutions. The paradigm of the free black teaches us that such solutions sustain the metaphysical holocaust. Let our thinking lead us into the “valley of the shadow of death,” and once there we can begin to imagine an existence

Conclusion

In this chapter I have closely read Biko's dialectical articulation of black consciousness, clearly following the theological nature of this dialectic. From there, I have deconstructively read the Hegelian sense of temporality in this dialectic through a search for what Caputo calls event. This has occasioned both a sense of the historical singularity of black subjectivity, and a radical openness to the future that renders a pursuit for open, fair and robust debate – *modus vivendi* – as part of a larger, unending search for more just ways of living together.

anew”; *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 172.

Chapter 7

Black Theology and Radical Theology: The Case for a Critical Encounter

Obakeng Africa 

Introduction

In recent years, several theologians have contemplated the possibility of,¹ made the case for,² or staged a critical encounter between Continental philosophy of religion and South African theologies.³ This shows that there are intersecting points of concern that have gained purchase for both discursive measures. These considerations coincide with the disconcerting observation that black theology is experiencing a discursive malaise. Different diagnoses have been given for this phenomenon. Mokgethi Motlhabi points to the lack of a paradigm as one of the key causes of this discursive malaise.⁴ Urbaniak, on the other hand, points to the co-optation of theological discourse by politicians as one of the causes.⁵ Though both discourses described above are concerned with improving the state of South African theology, none of them explicitly brings these concerns together.

- 1 Khegan M. Delpont, "Philosophical Theology in South Africa?" *Journal of Systematic Theology* 1.3 (2022): 1–60.
- 2 A. H. Verhoef, "The Relevance of Continental Philosophy of Religion for Contemporary South Africa." *Acta Theologica* 37,2 (2017): 160–187.
- 3 Calvin D. Ullrich, "Theopoetics from Below: A South African Black Christological Encounter with Radical Theology." *Black Theology: An International Journal* 19.1 (2021): 53–70.
- 4 Mokgethi Motlhabi, "Phases of Black Theology in South Africa: A Historical Review." *Religion and Theology* 16.3–4 (2009): 162–180.
- 5 Jakub Urbaniak, "Faith of an Angry People: Mapping a Renewed Prophetic Theology in South Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 157, (March 2017): 7–43.

In what follows, I will make the case for staging a critical encounter between black theology and radical theology. The central claim I am making here is that there is historical precedence for a critical encounter between black theology and radical theology, and this historical moment has lessons that can lead to fruitful developments in South African theology. To this end, I will draw on Daniel Magaziner's historical account of the early stages of the development of black theology. In this account, I will draw attention to the fact that black theology was developed in the University Christian Movement, an organisation that fostered a discursive environment that had both postcolonial and the postmodern impulses.⁶ The postcolonial impulse is represented by black theology and the postmodern impulse is represented by secular theology. The polemic thrust of this historical account lies in the fact that it clearly demonstrates that both the postcolonial and the postmodern impulse sought to undermine the socio-political and the theological imagination of apartheid that was underpinned by a metaphysics of presence.⁷ Commenting on those early stages of the development of black theology, Magaziner observes that "just as SASO's philosophy of liberation broke with the political theories of the past, so too did black South African Christians open a space for a radical rethinking of the faith."⁸ I seek to revisit the assortment of theological influences that were on the table as the space was being opened for "a radical rethinking of the faith." This will all be in service of exploring the possibility of a generative encounter between black theology and radical theology.

The Hegemonic Ideo-theological Orientation

In an effort to understand the interpenetration of the theological and political discourse that congealed between black theology and black consciousness philosophy in the 1970s, Magaziner

6 Daniel Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2010), 8.

7 Joel Modiri, *The Jurisprudence of Steve Biko*. Unpublished Dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2017, 135. I draw on Joel Modiri's characterisation of colonialism and apartheid as being a metaphysics of presence here.

8 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 57.

invites us to take a “detour from student struggle to consider wider debates about the relationships between church and state that conditioned this discourse’s emergence.”⁹ This choice is in epistemological and methodological agreement with Mofokeng’s own assumptions. He would call Magaziner’s historical account a study of the “epistemological ruptures in the hermeneutic circle [of theology].”¹⁰ Magaziner notes that the church, particularly the Dutch Reform Church, gave its unfettered theological sanction to the apartheid government. The Christian mythos was crucial to the development of the collective political identity of the Afrikaner people. As a Calvinist community, they made use of Calvin’s doctrine of election to style themselves as a people chosen by God. The irony of this identity construction is that it draws from the Hebrew mythology but is also anti-Semitic. “This is because,” Derrida explains, “the ‘Hebrewistic’ mythology of the Boer people, coming out of its nomadic origins and the Long Trek, excludes any other ‘Chosen People’.”¹¹ The Calvinism that the Afrikaner community drew from was a peculiar kind. Mabogo More’s account of the institutional history of philosophy and theology in the country signals to us the source of these peculiarities. He writes, “from the outset, the dominant tradition in most Afrikaans universities has been Kuyparian neo-Calvinism combined with neo-Fichtean nationalism, both of which provided the bases for the apartheid system.”¹² Interestingly, both Magaziner and More turn to Bantu Affairs minister, M. C. de Wet Nel’s 1959 House of Assembly speech to flesh out the official ideo-theological self-understanding of the Afrikaner community. In this speech, he says:

The philosophy of life of the settled white population in South Africa, both English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking in regard to the colour or racial problem . . . rests

9 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 59.

10 Takatso Mofokeng, “The Cross in the Search for True Humanity: Theological Challenges Facing South Africa Today.” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 3.2 (1989): 38.

11 Jacques Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word.” *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 297.

12 Mabogo More, *Looking Through Philosophy in Black* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 204.

on three basic principles . . . The first is that God has given a divine task and calling for every People in the world, which dare not be destroyed or denied by anyone. The second is that every People in the world, of whatever race or colour, has an inherent right to live. In the third place, it is our deep conviction that the personal and national ideals of every individual and every ethnic group can best be developed within its own national community. Only then will the other groups feel that they are not being endangered. *This is the philosophic basis of the policy of apartheid...* To our People this is not a mere abstraction, which hangs in the air. It is a divine task, which has to be implemented and fulfilled.¹³ [my emphasis.]

The first of the above-stated principles demonstrates that they were not only the philosophical basis of the policy of apartheid, but also its theological basis.¹⁴ Operating out of the conviction of the veracity of this first principle, “white theologians were doing their best at theological dehumanisation of blacks – their ideological task as theologians at work on behalf of the Christian oppressor class to which they belong.”¹⁵ The white theologians in question embraced this neo-Calvinism that is articulated above by de Wet Nel. Magaziner further explains: “The DRC followed the lead of the prominent Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, whose “neo-Calvinism” proclaimed that *God’s will manifested itself in the maintenance of “diversity of nations, tongues, etc.”*”¹⁶ [my

13 M.C. de Wet Nel, quoted in More, *Looking Through Philosophy in Black*, 205.

14 Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” 296–297. Derrida gives an example of this theological imagination unfolding in political life when he cites the Institute for National Christian Education’s position on the role of Christianity on public life and in education. Their policy recommendations for education were informed by this Kuyperian neo-Calvinism.

15 Takatso Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers: Towards a Black Christology*. (Kampen: Kok, 1983), 1.

16 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 61. A qualification I would add to this assertion is that the theological discourse in the DRC was not monolithic. Ernst Conradie’s account of the reception of Kuyper’s theology provides some caveats that are important to highlight. First, not every DRC theologian was a proponent of apartheid theology; Ernst Conradie, “Revisiting the Reception

emphasis.] Where Kuyper's theology gave theological justification for the development of apartheid, Fichte's influence was felt philosophically. More writes:

Fichte invoked the concept of 'nature' to justify the maintenance of the separation between groups of different 'origins' or 'languages.' Coupled with his view that the individual is subordinate and only an aspect of the self-development of the Absolute Spirit as that which reveals itself historically in the life of a community, Fichte's philosophy found favour with apartheid ideologists.¹⁷

These were the intellectual foundations of the apartheid political philosophy and state theology that the black theologians and the philosophers of the black consciousness movement contended against. It was a theology and philosophy that "was built on a binary or dualism that not only separated whites from Blacks but also established a hierarchy between them that privileges whites and devalues Blacks."¹⁸ Interestingly, Modiri follows this description up with a footnote where he says: "This resembles what Jacques Derrida in the *Margins of Philosophy* refers to as the 'metaphysics of presence'¹⁹ in the way that it 'installs hierarchies and orders of subordination in the various dualisms it encounters' and 'privileges one side of an opposition and ignores or marginalises the alternative terms of the opposition'."²⁰ This characterisation brings to relief the significance of this historical account for the purposes of my argument.

It should be noted that even though black theology and black consciousness responded to apartheid, they did not see the government as their interlocutor. Instead, both black theology and black consciousness philosophy directed their energies to empowering black people as opposed to directly entering

of Kuyper in South Africa," in *Creation and Salvation: Dialogue on Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 15–53 (29).

17 More, *Looking Through Philosophy in Black*, 204.

18 Modiri, *The Jurisprudence of Steve Biko*, 135.

19 *Margins of Philosophy* (Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), 195–196.

20 Modiri, *The Jurisprudence of Steve Biko*, 135.

into fruitless debates with these Kuyperian neo-Calvinist theologians and neo-Fichtean nationalist philosophers. This attitude is wonderfully captured by Biko when he says, “we tend to dismiss ASB [Afrikaanse Studentebond] as an incorrigible group with whom no worthwhile contact can be maintained.”²¹ Despite avoiding direct engagement with the government in their theologising, black theology faced considerable resistance and censorship. Mofokeng recounts that the development of the fundamental concepts, methods and epistemological assumptions of black theology took place under extreme conditions. “This very important element of theological reflection,” writes Mofokeng, “was done in an atmosphere of extreme tension which is characteristic of black existence in South Africa. It was done in an ideological battleground...”²² What follows is an account of the intellectual environment of resistance to the above-described ideo-theological orientation.

The Dissenting Theological Voices

There was a variety of theological voices that dissented to this political state of affairs. Among these was the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society, the South African Council of Churches, and the University Christian Movement. The stated intention of the SPROCAS project was to present “a conscious attempt to get beyond the elusive simplicity of the established party positions and to formulate a theory of change which, by a multiple-strategy approach, takes account of the complexity of the South African political dilemma.”²³ This intervention represented the sentiments of the liberal church that saw the alliance between the DRC and the apartheid regime as a disastrous state of affairs. Magaziner notes that some of the English churches refused to bow to the pressure of the State that they cede their schools to the government. But to some extent, this really amounted to window dressing because, in the final analysis, there

21 Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like: A Selection of his Writings* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 15.

22 Mofokeng, *The Crucified among the Crossbearers*, 1.

23 A. S. Mathews, “Report of the Spro-cas Political Commission.” *Black Sash* (August 1973): 18. https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/BSAug73.0036.4843.016.006.Aug1973.10.pdf.

was very little, if any, substantive political support lent by these churches to blacks involved in the struggle. Magaziner observes, “during the 1960s, then, English-speaking church authorities typically conceded the theology-politics debate to the DRC’s extant achievements, and most black Christians accepted this state of affairs.”²⁴

Another major liberal theological intervention in South African politics is represented by the South African Council of Churches’ 1968 *Message to the People of South Africa*. In this message, “It asserted that ‘Christians are called to witness to the significance of the Gospel in the particular circumstances of time and places in which they find themselves,’ and it argued that this necessitated speaking out against apartheid.”²⁵ This message was an appeal to the liberal Christians to reconsider their loyalties so that they first lie with God, followed by the state. Two years later, another major liberal theological intervention came in the form of *Twelve Statements: A Christian Election Manifesto*. It reminded Christians of the moral obligation they have to use their vote to build a government that is in accordance with the precepts of scripture. This intervention was met with some resistance, especially from the Afrikaans community. One of the objections levelled against it was that it drew religious matters and political matters too closely together and it was too prescriptive in that it all but pushed Afrikaner Christians to vote for the Progressive Party. Magaziner notes that the commitment that the *Twelve Statements* was calling for was already being shown by the likes of Beyers Naude; a rising star in the DRC who made the choice to give up his position in the church so that he can continue with his work of critiquing the DRC and the state through the Christian Institute and *Pro Veritate*, the institute’s magazine. *Pro Veritate*, according to Magaziner, “had emerged as one of the few Afrikaans voices against apartheid.”²⁶ Such efforts caught the government’s attention, and the government sought to enforce strict censorship through a crackdown on any of the proponents of the above messages and their sympathisers. Government sought to enforce

24 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 65.

25 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 65.

26 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 67.

a strict demarcation between religious affairs and politics. Not only did this affect the Christian Institute, but the crackdown also affected the black theology project that was running under the aegis of the UCM. Basil Moore recounts:

Black Theology from the beginning was subjected to severe harassment. Many students who participated were suspended from their universities and/or banned. Academics were not infrequently dismissed from their posts and/or banned. Clergy were deported, banned, imprisoned and in various ways hounded by their own church establishment.²⁷

The state characterised dissident theological voices such as the UCM and the CI as “spiritual terrorists who aimed to destabilise the state.”²⁸ This is why it was the security branch that acted on behalf of the state to undermine these efforts.²⁹ Despite these being the consequences, there are people who continued to support resistance against the state’s intimidation. An example cited by Magaziner is that of A.Z Mzara, who sought to impress it upon his readers that it is nonsensical to try to make a clean demarcation between religious life and political affairs. In his letter to the newspaper editor of *World*, “Mzara blurred conceptual lines in search of wholeness.”³⁰ Mzara’s argument sought to do away with the demarcation that was created between the secular and the sacred. This blurring of lines was part of a larger trend in theological discourse the world over, but also in South Africa more specifically. The UCM was another such example; the most radical of all the examples given up to this point. What made the UCM particularly radical is the fact that while all the other organisations that we have discussed up to this point drew from

27 Basil Moore, “Black Theology: In The Beginning.” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 4,2 (1991): 27.

28 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 68.

29 Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” 297. Derrida points out the irony of the situation where the name of Christ is used to both support and to condemn the state. He also calls attention to the hypocrisy of formally having democratic governance and yet excluding almost three quarters of the population from the democratic processes.

30 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 69.

the same metaphysical well as the hegemonic ideo-theological orientation, the UCM sought to destroy it.

Secular Theology in the UCM

Magaziner describes a religious sensibility that not only challenged the secular/sacred distinction, but collapsed it. He writes, “the UCM sought to change the meaning behind the very terms *sacred* and *secular*.”³¹ This is seen in the liturgical practices and theological reflections that came out of the UCM from its inception. From the outset, there was a call for a relevant faith; faith that responded to the concrete conditions that the people lived in. They called this a secular faith. “Secular faith meant fully aware subjects working in a world made free by the breaking down of old structures.”³² As a result, some members of the UCM began to embrace talk about the death of God. According to Magaziner, “They created an environment in which the avowedly Christian treasurer of a Christian organization could write to a Christian general secretary and sign off ‘God is dead, Love, Rob’ without raising doubts about his faith.”³³ This is where the postmodern impulse I noted above is at its starkest. Where apartheid developed a politico-theological discourse that rested on a “Calvinist reading of Scripture [that] condemns democracy...,”³⁴ the UCM’s response was “God is dead.”

The UCM drew inspiration for their theology of secularisation from Harvey Cox, the author of *Secular City*. In this book, Cox argued that secularisation is in fact a good thing. According to him, secularisation should be seen as an indication that society is ready to assume responsibility that God had all along charged it with. “For Cox, the central message of the Gospel was a call for people to become ‘mature and responsible stewards’ of the world by constantly seeking social change.”³⁵ This, according to Cox, expresses itself in a variety of political

31 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 70.

32 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 71.

33 Daniel Magaziner, “Christ in Context: Developing a Political Faith in Apartheid South Africa.” *Radical History Review* 99 (2007): 90.

34 Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word,” 297.

35 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 71.

modalities. He sought to impress upon his readers that answering questions about how we ought to live together in this world was also talking about God and the Kingdom of God. The underlying message that attracted the UCM to Cox's theology is, "Faith was concerned with human relations, and politics was its business."³⁶ This led some of the figures in the UCM, with Moore leading them, to rethink the idea of God. "Moore made God concrete, seeing 'it' exclusively in human affairs. 'It' was not something a mature person sought but something that a mature person 'did' by participating in 'ethical behaviour,' choosing and living to bring more liberating experiences into the world."³⁷ This theology had its detractors both from outside the organisation and from within. For the purpose of the argument this chapter seeks to make, we will only consider critiques from within the organisation, specifically critique from black members.

Black Theologians' Response to Secular Theology

There was a variety of responses to secular theology among black theologians. We will consider two responses from black members of the UCM, Mokgethi Motlhabi and Gabriel Setiloane. Motlhabi represents the positive response among the students. According to Magaziner, he found secular theology to be a breath of fresh air. Secular theology was a welcome alternative to the conservative theology that he was taught. It provided one with the latitude to use practical wisdom when assessing the ethics of a given situation. Put differently, Motlhabi felt liberated from the strictures of the prescriptive and inhibiting theology he was being taught. Setiloane, by contrast, rejected the propositions of secular theology. By his assessment, "it was pernicious – yet another foreign concept designed to separate the black man from his God." "We are smothered to death by Western theologies," he wrote, "vying with each other in seeking so much to cut God to size that some have now actually got rid of Him (I mean the God is dead thing!)." ³⁸ Setiloane was not the only one who held these sentiments. The likes of Sabelo Ntwasa and Barney Pityana

36 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 72.

37 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 75–76.

38 Setiloane, quoted in Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 76.

also share this outlook. Consequently, secular theology was condemned to irrelevance, particularly among black students in the UCM. That said, Magaziner does note that, secular theology “transformed the relationship between faith and politics for many South African students. Secular theology had opened new possibilities for articulating what it meant to be a Christian, and even its critics bear witness to its legacy.”³⁹ According to him, the three benefits to its existence include that it undermined the hegemonic position that the DRC enjoyed theologically. Second, it found a language to incisively describe the problem with the English churches’ liberal response to apartheid policies. Third, secular theology’s call to turn to your neighbour or one’s community allows it to be contextualised and therefore creates the opportunity to temper its Euro-American influence.

Concluding Thoughts

This leads us to several conclusions that are important for the theoretical encounter I wish to make the case for between black theology and radical theology. First, the above history shows us that black theology did not have fully formed ideas from the start. The development of black theology’s fundamental ideas arose from a confluence of responses to a set of historical circumstances and debates about the appropriate theological response to the circumstances in question. One of the possible directions that black theology could have taken is that which was proposed by secular theology. Second, black theology was not an isolated theological response, but was developed in the midst of an array of theological positions that represented a wide variety of ideological orientations. For some orientations, it was easy to see why they had to be dismissed. Others, particularly the liberal and the radical theological orientations, required a more nuanced engagement and more deliberate efforts at distinguishing themselves from them. Third, the UCM, the organisation that opened discursive possibilities for both black consciousness and black theology, turned to secular theology in response to the incestuous relationship between the church and the state.

39 Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 77.

Even though secular theology never gained traction within black theology circles, it influenced black theology in ways that matter. In Magaziner's words: "Secular theology might have been dismissed as foreign by some black South Africans, but its insights were keenly felt."⁴⁰ The most important of these influences was the development of the hermeneutical gesture of destabilising the distinction between the secular and the sacred. While secular theology took this in the direction of embracing the death of God, black theology took to reconsidering the thought forms of their ancestors that did not make a distinction between the secular and the sacred.

The Case for Radical Theology

Magaziner's historical account represents a meticulous history; what Caputo would call a "micrological"⁴¹ history. The intention of this micrological reading is to reopen a crucial debate that was closed in the early stages of the development of black theology; a debate that opened some futures and foreclosed others. In the introduction, I situated my intervention between two discourses: that of the theologians that see the potential fecundity of a critical encounter between black theology and Continental philosophy of religion, and theologians concerned with the discursive malaise of black theology in post-1994 South Africa. In what follows, I will respond to two theologians, each representing the above-mentioned discourses. Concerning the discursive malaise of black theology, I will respond to Mokgethi Motlhabi. For the black theology/radical theology discourse, I will respond to Calvin Ullrich.

On the Discursive Malaise of Black Theology

In his essay, "Phases of Black Theology in South Africa: A Historical Review," Mokgethi Motlhabi argues that black theology has had five phases in its development. By his observation, black theology in post-1994 South Africa has experienced a lull. "So far

⁴⁰ Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, 79.

⁴¹ John D. Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 25.

there has been no recovery from the latest lull, which is attributed mainly to the need for a new paradigm.”⁴² My response to this diagnosis is two-fold. First, it is not so much that black theology in post-1994 lacks a paradigm. Instead, a greater appreciation for the programmatic character of Biko’s call for the development of a black theology would open a space that could create the possibility of developing a paradigm.⁴³ By this, I mean that each time Biko called for the development of black theology, his call was always subtended by discrete aims.

Let us examine two instances where he calls for the development of black theology. In the first instance, his essay titled “We Blacks,” Biko argues for a more nuanced understanding of apartheid. By his assessment, it is not just a mechanism for socio-political oppression; it also has a psychological element. He names the impact that apartheid machinations have on the psychological level “spiritual poverty.”⁴⁴ In response to this problem, he suggests a programme that would address both the socio-political and psychological oppression, i.e., black consciousness. This program has multiple vehicles to execute its goals. One of these is black theology. Principally, black theology needs to make religious concerns to speak to the lived experience of oppressed blacks. To achieve this, Biko proposes that black theology must have four objectives: 1) to address the problem of spiritual poverty; 2) to contest the assumption that Christianity is superior to African traditional religion; 3) to demonstrate how contextualizable the Christian faith is; and 4) to portray Jesus as one who fights against oppression.

42 Mokgethi Motlhabi, “Phases of Black Theology in South Africa,” 162.

43 See Malesela John Lamola, “The Thought of Steve Biko as the Historico-philosophical Base of South African Black Theology.” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 3.2 (1990): 1. I single out Biko because of his stature and influence in the project of South African black theology. On this matter, John Lamola comments, “no historical account of Black Theology, or of the debates accompanying its development, would be complete without taking account of the philosophy of Steve Biko, which was seminal in the development of Black Theology in South Africa.”

44 Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like*, 30.

Another occasion wherein Biko called for the development of black theology is in his essay, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity." In this essay, his central contention is that whites subjugate black people and yet they also want to dictate how blacks must respond to this subjugation. Part of the way whites attempt to control black response to subjugation is by dictating to them how to appropriately analyse this problem. To this, Biko's response was, "We believe we know what the problem is, and we will stick to our findings."⁴⁵ By this, he meant that white dialectical analysis was inadequate to deal with their situation, and blacks had developed their own dialectical analysis which they were happy with. Part of this dialectical analysis included a theological element. This is where black theology came in. Like the previous occasion, he identifies four key objectives: 1) to reconcile God and Jesus to the black experience; 2) to portray Jesus as a God who has a preferential option for the poor; 3) to be a theology that addresses the existential problems that come out of the black experience; and 4) to re-introduce the divine element to the black person's lived experience.

When looking at these two instances, several things stand out. First, the objectives articulated in each instance are unique. This indicates that Biko's invitation has theoretical mileage that has not yet been exhausted and calls for further engagement. Put differently, there is a theological research programme in Biko and not enough has been done to fully engage it. Second, inasmuch as his programmatic invitations suggest a variety of loci of reflection, there is also thematic coherence. This means that theologians who take up this research programme would be contributing to a variety of theological disciplines, but their contributions would amount to a coherent conversation. Third, much of what he raised as concerns that black theologians should take up still applies to the lived experience of many blacks in South Africa today. That said, we cannot simply take Biko's invitation to develop black theology and repeat it without alteration. More on this below.

My second response to Motlhabi's diagnosis is that one of the reasons black theological discourse in South Africa has

45 Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like*, 99.

stalled is because the socio-political context of post-1994 South Africa is more complicated than in South Africa in the apartheid era. To elaborate on this, I turn to Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh's text, *The New Apartheid*. The central thesis of this book is simple: *apartheid* did not die, it was privatised. He further explains, "for *apartheid* to be privatized, it also had to be marketized, de-legislated, denationalised, digitised, fractalized, internalised, deracialised, and de-territorialised."⁴⁶ He explains how each of these features buttressed the emergence of a privatised apartheid. For the purpose of brevity, I will only pay attention to two of the listed features, the marketisation and deracialisation of apartheid. I choose these because race and class are the two dominant analytical categories that informed black theological discourse in apartheid South Africa.⁴⁷

On the marketisation of apartheid, Mpfu-Walsh explains that apartheid was a system of racism that was codified by laws and enforced by the state. Post-1994, financial barriers have replaced legal barriers. Furthermore, this shift comes with benefits, a financial and a moral benefit. Now that it is pricing and not legal statutes that regulate access, there is a profit to be made by private entities. Also, this type of regulation does not carry the moral stigma of apartheid laws. With rhetorical flare, Mpfu-Walsh asserts that, "[b]y replacing legal barriers with financial ones, segregation is transformed from a public burden to a source of private profit. In classic neoliberal fashion, apartheid oppression now works on a 'pay-as-you-go' basis."⁴⁸ Since exclusivity is no longer legislatively regulated, it means

46 Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2021) 17.

47 See Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock 1989) 94. The following remarks from Frank Chikane support this claim: "Although the division on the surface seemed to be between the Black Consciousness Movement and the progressive democrats [the non-racial, Freedom Charter adherents] based on a play between the class and race models or the combination of these models in trying to understand the South African society, it seems that the really decisive matter was the attitudes of these groupings to the historical liberation movements African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)."

48 Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, 18.

that black people who have the means can participate in the logics of apartheid domination. This leads us to Mpofu-Walsh's second observation. Apartheid was deracialised. He qualifies this characterisation by explaining that "*Some Black South Africans can now participate in its spoils, though most still experience the vast disproportion of its evils.*"⁴⁹ Where apartheid strictly used the rubric of race for both inclusion and exclusion, the new apartheid complicates things by continuing to exclude based on race but no longer strictly using the rubric of race for inclusion. Here lies the rub: "Black enmeshment in the system of privilege is *a key feature of the new apartheid.*"⁵⁰ [My emphasis] This is where the complication is painfully brought to full relief. Black enmeshment, according to Mpofu-Walsh, serves two functions in the new apartheid. First, it serves to turn attention away from the continued vitality of this system of oppression. Second, it encourages black people to be silent in the face of oppression. The great success of the new apartheid lies in its ability to decouple self-interest and social interest. Mpofu-Walsh observes that "[t]oday, self-interest and social interest diverge, as Black South Africans are increasingly torn between contradictory desires for spectacular wealth and revolutionary equality."⁵¹ By my assessment, black theologians need to sincerely confront these complications and others if they are to develop a paradigm that speaks to post-1994 South Africa.

On the Radical Turn of Black Theology

As stated above, Ullrich stages a critical encounter between black theology and radical theology. This intervention comes out of his conviction that the social issues we are faced with force us to re-think theology in South Africa today. He notes that public theology has been the most prolific theological respondent to this state of affairs. Part of what made this to be the case is that public theology is in constant conversation with other theological traditions. However, several theologians have shown the limitations of the contribution that public theology can make. This calls for a search

49 Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, 19.

50 Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, 19.

51 Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, 19–20.

for alternative theological interlocutors. This is where Ullrich then makes the case for a critical bi-directional supplementation that can happen between black theology and radical theology. His case study for this critical supplementation is that of Takatso Mofokeng and John D. Caputo; the former representing black theology, and the latter radical theology.

Before engaging with the substance of his argument, it is necessary for me to explain why I believe that Caputo's radical theology represents a compatible conversation partner for the discursive intervention that Ullrich and company are advocating for. In the historical account discussed above, we see Magaziner attributing the radical theological tendencies of the secular theologians in the UCM to Harvey Cox's influence – specifically his text *The Secular City*. The influence of secular theology on black theology in its incipient stages forms the basis of my case for reconsidering the radical turn of black theology. Why then, turn to Caputo instead of Cox for this radical turn? Jeffery Robbins' genealogical account of postmodern theology provides a helpful answer.

Robbins locates Cox in the radical “death of God” theological movement, a movement that had a variety of voices that addressed a wide range of concerns. “What they all shared in common,” writes Robbins, “was a collective sense that the Western culture in general, and the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, had entered a profound ‘ideological crisis’.”⁵² This was a crisis of meaning. “Either religious language lost its meanings or, even worse, the inherited meanings had grown perverse in the wake of a long list of modern atrocities.”⁵³ This discourse, broadly speaking, provided a language to describe the limits that religious language and practice had come up against in the face of the undeniable suffering of the oppressed and the existential threat that nuclear weapons represented. This movement, according to Robbins, “helps establish the genealogy that would develop into

52 Jeffrey W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God,” in Jeffrey W. Robbins (ed.), *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1–26 (2).

53 Jeffrey W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God.” 2.

what we now know as postmodern theology.”⁵⁴ This is why Ullrich situates Caputo within this very tradition; a tradition that Mark C. Taylor would characterise as “the hermeneutic of the death of God.”⁵⁵ This ideological crisis brought into relief the distinction between Christendom and Christianity. This distinction was essential for creating the milieu that gave birth to radical theology. The legacy of this theological tradition is that it laid the groundwork for the critical intuitions of postmodern philosophies and theologies against the onto-theological God.

Theologies of secularisation may have inaugurated the radical theological movement, but there has been a marked transition from secularism to post-secularism. This is because the imagined future predicted by this cohort of theologians has “given way to a new “postsecular” understanding of the postmodern condition in which the return of religion is more determinative than the collapse of Christendom.”⁵⁶ One could even argue that the problem-space has shifted from the circumstances that occasioned the development of theologies of secularisation. It also becomes understandable why black theologians in South Africa rejected secular theology. The chances are that in their assessment, black theologians concluded that secular theology’s problem-space was not compatible to that of black theology. Mofokeng intimates as such when he avers that, “[t]he interlocutor of classic theology is an individual modern man (bourgeois) or a collective of modern men who have come of age. In Black Christology as in Black Theology the one whose questions and concerns are given priority is the black community which is struggling to remove all the obstacles which prevent it from coming of age *in its own way*.”⁵⁷ This brings to relief the incompatibility of secular theology and black theology on two fronts. First, the historical circumstances and political conditions that gave theologies of secularisation their salience and discursive purchase in the Euro-American discourse no longer hold.

54 Jeffrey W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God.” 3.

55 Taylor quoted in Jeffrey W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God,” 3.

56 Jeffrey W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God,” 11.

57 Takatso Mofokeng, “A Black Christology: A New Beginning.” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 1.1 (1987): 7.

Second, even though they both sought to subvert the colonial metaphysics of European modernity, there remains an enduring incompatibility between the critical intuitions of theologies of secularisation and the critical impulses of black theology. This is best articulated by Gayatri Spivak when she laments the unfortunate fact that the most critical interventions to come out of the Western philosophical tradition tend to – wittingly or unwittingly – reinscribe the tendencies they aim to subvert.⁵⁸ In the case of secular theology, the effect of its attempt to undermine the metaphysical infrastructure of apartheid's Christian nationalism unwittingly reinscribed the same tendencies that destroyed the African onto-metaphysical infrastructure as well.

The above reflections demonstrate two things. First, there is value in returning to the historical moment when the influence of secular theology on black theology was still an open question. For one thing, it reopens futures that, for complicated reasons, were foreclosed for black theology. These are futures that have the potential to provide an appropriate theological response to today's complicated context. Second, a retrieval of this historical moment cannot be a wholesale, uncritical retrieval. Instead, it needs to be one that shows sensitivity to the shift within radical theology from secularism to postsecularism, and one that shows a critical awareness of the discursive currency that religious language still holds in South Africa.

With all this in mind, let us return to Ullrich. We have already noted above that the motivation for his intervention comes out of his belief that the problems that South Africa is faced with require a theological response. He has a specific kind of theological response in mind: one that facilitates a critical, bidirectional supplementation between black theology and radical theology. Before discussing the value of this critical supplementation, let us explore Caputo's relationship to theologies of secularisation/death of God theologies. The purpose of my description is not so much to give a substantive definition of Caputo's theology – Ullrich has done good work on that front.

58 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan Education, 1988), 66–111 (66).

Instead, it is to situate his theology in a manner that makes legible its salience for South Africa today.

Ullrich genealogically associates Caputo's theology with the death of God theologies of the 1960's. But he quickly differentiates Caputo from that cohort of radical theologians by noting a key limitation that they have that Caputo avoids. That is, these theologians "ended up in the process of killing the God of metaphysics, also killing the possibility of God altogether..."⁵⁹ The unfortunate consequence of this limitation is that it reinscribes the very tendency they sought to subvert. This is why Caputo draws from the death of God theologies but does so in a qualified sense. He qualifies his association with death of God theology in three ways. First, death of God theology makes a valuable contribution to the extent that it implies the death of an all-powerful God. Second, the death of the *deus omnipotens* creates room for what Caputo calls "the birth of God."⁶⁰ Specifically, the birth of the suffering God. Third, death of God theology remains valuable to the extent that it is understood to be the never-ending task of deconstructing the God that anchors sovereignty. That said, he also has some reservations about this theological tradition.

Caputo's key objection to death of God theologies is that they end up falling into the same trap of classical theology by producing a grand narrative. This happens because they tell a linear story of religious progression from Judaism to Christianity to modernity or postmodernity, which comes at the expense of Judaism. He sees this to be a problematic schema. He criticises the way these theologies present the death of God as a completion of a metaphysical narrative, transferring being from the religion of the Father (Judaism) to the advantage of Christian incarnation. He even criticises Mark C. Taylor, who disregards the broader context of deconstruction and its scepticism towards such periodising and incarnational frameworks. He writes, "[d]espite the fact that Taylor is telling us deconstruction spells the end of the Book and of History, he does not resist this schema. Indeed, he completes

59 Ullrich, "Theopoetics from Below," 4.

60 He fleshes out the implications of this expression in his book, *The Insistence of God*.

or perfects it.”⁶¹ Briefly stated, Caputo identifies with the polemic thrust of death of God theologies against the metaphysical God. But he sees their critical gestures to be somewhat ham-fisted. Consequently, these theologies end up reproducing the very thing they seek to subvert. So where does this leave Caputo in relation to death of God theologies? Ullrich answers this question in the following terms, “[f]or Caputo, God ‘is’ not (God is dead) but we can still speak of God, justice or faith, insofar as these names ‘name’ an undeconstructible event.”⁶² So how does this theological posture contribute to black theology?

Positive Identification

Ullrich argues that radical theology can critically supplement black theology’s hermeneutic of positive identification by constantly accentuating its potential risk to become an “act of classification and stratification [that] might be in fact a re-enactment of the gaze of the ‘White Face’.”⁶³ A good example of this risk materialising is in the work of Albert Cleage. Allan Boesak describes Cleage’s theology in the following terms: “Cleage’s theology is determined by his belief that Jesus was a *black* leader of a *black* people struggling for national liberation against a *white* Rome”⁶⁴ (my emphasis). My italicisation of “black” and “white” in the preceding quote seeks to underscore that Cleage’s use of these terms denotes race. Unlike Cone, Cleage’s identification of Jesus as black is not simply a hermeneutical gesture of Jesus’ identification with, and a preferential option for the poor. Instead, it is a phenotypic characterisation of Jesus.

This has ethical implications that Cleage himself draws out. Boesak uses two examples of Cleage’s interpretation of the Bible to make his point, namely, the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the Good Samaritan. Both of these instances serve to concretely delimit what Cleage calls the Black Nation. From these

61 John D. Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” in *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffery W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 47–88 (69).

62 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 5.

63 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 14.

64 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Economic Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1976), 117.

two examples, Boesak concludes that Cleage's contention is that "[f]or Jesus, the whole idea of brotherhood and love had to do with love *within* the Black Nation."⁶⁵ We see the risk that Ullrich identifies and cautions against in the hermeneutic of positive identification starkly unfolding here. In his words, "it is important to be reminded that any and all identification or naming is an act of othering made possible only by a distinction between 'us and them'."⁶⁶ Cleage most explicitly articulates his brand of positive identification in the following terms:

Nobody can love everybody. The white man does not love you... You have less reason to love him than he does to love you... [To love the enemy] is ridiculous. We have to concern ourselves with justice, not love. We can't go to the white man and ask him to love us... It's futile. We want justice, we are going to fight for justice... Love is only something for *inside* the Nation.⁶⁷ (my emphasis.)

Not only do we see the act of othering unfold in this brand of positive identification, we also see the ethical implications this "us and them" dynamic comes with. This is why Ullrich asserts that "this first area of supplementation that refers to 'positive identification' is not merely a linguistic exercise in responding to the exigencies of nomination, it also has concretely felt implications."⁶⁸ Boesak shows sensitivity to these concretely felt implications in his judgement of Cleage's theology. He writes, "Cleage's total identification of the gospel with his particular brand of Christian Nationalism is totally unacceptable."⁶⁹ The source of his recalcitrance to Cleage's theology is that "[h]is concept of an 'ethic of the nation only' is disturbingly reminiscent of the 'for the Volk only' theology black South Africans must reject."⁷⁰ Put differently, Cleage's theology evinces the very metaphysics of presence that black theology seeks to overturn in its quest for justice. Further still, Ullrich's turn to Mofokeng

65 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 118.

66 Ullrich, "Theopoetics from Below," 14.

67 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 119.

68 Ullrich, "Theopoetics from Below," 14.

69 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 119.

70 Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 119.

also shows us that this risk that the hermeneutic of positive identification comes with does not only unfold between groups, but also *within* a group. He notes that Mofokeng sees the limitation of his nomenclature of “crossbearers.” This is why Mofokeng further differentiates between “crossbearers” and “the crucified people.” Ullrich’s contention is that the acknowledgement of this limitation “reveals the importance of Derrida’s formulation that ‘every other is wholly other,’ because it assigns infinite value to anything and anyone that is excluded.”⁷¹ The stakes of this caution, Ullrich asserts, are most trenchantly revealed by the womanist critique on the place of the black woman in black theology.

The Theodicy Question

Ullrich goes on to adumbrate a second area of supplementation of black theology by radical theology. He points out that Mofokeng remains concerned about the problem of the Long Good Friday. The strength of this preoccupation, in Ullrich’s assessment, is that it does not glorify suffering. Instead, it evinces a sensitivity to the tragic character of the condition of the crucified people. In his words, “Mofokeng goes a long way to avoid entering what radical theology would call an ‘economy of redemption,’ that somehow sinful structures are to be endured for a justice to come.”⁷² That said, Mofokeng’s tragic sensibilities do not go far enough. Ullrich demonstrates this by asking a pointed question, “what are we to then do with these ‘crucified people’?”⁷³ This question accentuates the exigencies of suffering in the here-and-now. This second area of supplementation is an enactment of one of the key tenets of radical hermeneutics. That is, “hermeneutics as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics.”⁷⁴ Mofokeng’s treatment of the question of theodicy is akin to Caputo’s description of the tendency of the metaphysician who opens the question of Being as presence and

71 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 14.

72 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 15.

73 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 15.

74 John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

then quickly forecloses this line of questioning when things get tough. It falls back on the metaphysical theology of “the God of classical ‘two worlds’ Augustinianism.”⁷⁵ This is seen with stark clarity everytime Mofokeng uses the word “glory” in his work.

In effect, this critical supplementation is an invitation to “[unleash] a radical force in [the question of theodicy], a deeply critical power which [is] intent on keeping the question of [theodicy] open, on letting [black theology] to tremble so that the whole would shake (solicitare) and give way to movement (*kinesis*).”⁷⁶ This takes the black consciousness maxim “Black Man (sic) You Are On Your Own” to a whole new level. It transforms the self-understanding of the crossbearers so that they see themselves as what Caputo would call the messianic generation: a generation that does not wait for the Big Other to save them from the Long Good Friday. Crossbearers who take this critical supplementation seriously would describe themselves by declaring:

We are the ones who have all along been expected – by the dead. We occupy the messianic position – to make right the wrongs that have been done to them. But our messianic powers are weak. We cannot make the dead live again. We cannot alter the past and restore them to a life in which they will not have suffered these wrongs or will have been compensated for them. So we can at best remember them, recall them, mourn them with an impossible mourning, by righting the unjust conditions now from which they suffered then, by seeing to it that... their death will not have been in vain.⁷⁷

Idealised Discourse

Ullrich argues that black theology can supplement radical theology’s idealised discursive register. By his assessment,

75 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 5.

76 See, Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 2. This is a rephrasing of Caputo’s description of Heidegger’s intervention in *Being and Time*.

77 John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional*. (Polebridge Press: Salem, 2016), 57–58.

radical theology runs the risk of “[operating] potentially as an Anglo-American theology of *abstraction from lived experience*”⁷⁸ [my emphasis]. I italicise the phrase “abstraction from lived experience” to underscore the strained relationship between Caputo’s theology and the question of materiality, in his critics’ account of his work. What gives credibility to Ullrich’s proposed area of supplementation is the fact that he does not only address this concern in response to the potential criticism of epistemic colonialism of black theology by radical theology. He also raises this concern in other places in his work. A good example of this is his article *Theopoetics to Theopraxis*. Where Mofokeng provides a critical supplementation in *Theopoetics from Below*, Simon Critchley provides a critical supplement in *Theopoetics to Theopraxis*. In the latter, Ullrich articulates the central objection against Caputo in the following terms, “... the political-ethical implications of Caputo’s radical theology are seen for some to be too compromising in the face of the hegemony of the neoliberal order. A theology of event on this reading still dreams of a ‘world-disclosure’ that appears to denigrate the materiality of the particular because too much distance is created in the passage from undecidability to decision.”⁷⁹ Ullrich’s evaluation of this criticism is that it has credence, but in the final analysis, it is not a completely fair representation of Caputo’s theology. That said, Caputo himself does concede that the political/material implications of his theology are still nascent. Ullrich’s intervention, then, is an attempt to push past this nascent phase into a better developed and explicit political theology.

Read in this discursive context, the Mofokengean supplement opens discursive forays that can fully ground Caputo’s theology in the political register. Such a critical supplementation is a more rigorous enactment of what Caputo calls “the political reduction.” In his own words, “[t]his is the reduction of theology to theopraxis, which is *theo-poetics* in the most literal sense of God-making (making), making God happen here and now,

78 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 4.

79 Calvin D. Ullrich, “Theopoetics to Theopraxis: Toward a Critchlean Supplement to Caputo’s Radical Political Theology.” *Forum Philosophicum* 25,1 (2020): 164–165.

making the kingdom of God happen come true.”⁸⁰ In Ullrich’s account, a Mofokengian supplement reminds radical theology of two things. First, its particularising gesture supplements radical theology by reminding it of the importance of the concrete aspects of a community’s identity. Second, a hermeneutic of positive identification “is a part of the very calculus that makes it possible for a radical theopoetic reading to occur.”⁸¹ Put differently, Mofokeng’s historicising hermeneutic serves as a crucial reminder that it is the material conditions of the lived experience that give occasion to the desire to turn to the activity of making the kingdom of God happen here and now. In Ullrich’s words, “irreducible particularity [has] to be entered into.”⁸² Also, Mofokeng’s insight that the anthropological question is embedded in the Christological question, opens the conditions of possibility for the Caputian chiasm to congeal. Beneath this hermeneutic of positive identification lies the Fanonian whisper that, “black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality for something, I am wholly what I am.”⁸³

With all that said, it seems that Ullrich himself is in need of a Mofokengian supplement. By this, I mean his hermeneutic needs to more fully enter into the irreducible particularity of the South African situation. There is an insufficient acknowledgement of the spectre of whiteness in his critical reflection. This should not be conflated with the vacuous performance of acknowledging one’s positionality in service of superficially demonstrating reflexivity. That is virtue signalling and it is unhelpful. What I am referring to comes out of his own stated motivations for staging a critical encounter between black theology and radical theology in the first place. He names two South African social issues that underscore the potential fecundity of this critical encounter, i.e., gender-based violence and xenophobia. I read Ullrich’s hermeneutical choices as a black theologian; a theologian who is black and a theologian who is doing black theology. The key theological contribution that black theology makes is to show how

80 Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology*, 19.

81 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 15.

82 Ullrich, “Theopoetics from Below,” 16.

83 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 103.

race irreducibly conditions the lived experience of black people and how theologically significant race is. This is not to say that Ullrich must do black theology, but when engaging black theology, the fact of blackness and the spectre of whiteness need to be more explicitly acknowledged. That would be truly engaging black theology on its own terms. This does not reduce the value of his contribution to the conversation; to the contrary, it demonstrates how important it is. I highlight this limitation simply to caution those who, like me, are sold on his argument for the critical supplementation between black theology and radical theology. Our shared investment in the reinvigoration of black theology in South Africa, and making radical theology to have contextual significance for South Africa, must carry with it a sensitivity of the risk of hermeneutic colonisation of black theology.

Lessons from an Historical Moment

My turn to the historical moment that Magaziner so meticulously sketches comes from my belief that historical conditions give rise to the development and articulation of ideas. When this is done well, these interventions give conceptual clarity to the exigencies of the historical moment in question. In this instance, I argue that the call for the critical engagement between black theology and radical theology in post-1994 South Africa is an astute and historically sensitive suggestion. Magaziner's historical account affirms this argument in two ways. On the one hand, it shows us how the concretely felt pressures of life that gave rise to the development of black theology and radical theology in South Africa still persist today. On the other hand, the very same historical sketch shines a light on the (obvious and not so obvious) way in which present historical conditions differ from those of the past.

Viewed in this light, Magaziner's historical account assist us in a few ways. First, it provides a conceptually rigorous reconstruction of the past that serves as a helpful backdrop for constructing a useful picture of South Africa's political present and concomitantly anticipated future. Second, it presents, with consummate clarity, the epistemic contours that the theologians in question were operating within. Third, it convincingly draws

connections between the historical conditions of the period it is investigating, the questions these conditions gave rise to, and the answers proffered by the participants of the discourse.

In short, it gives us a reliable starting point to construct what David Scott calls a *problem space*. That is, “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.”⁸⁴ Toward the end of his book, Magaziner reflects on the different relationships that blacks across the political spectrum have with the past. He sees an impasse that all these groups come up against. To explore this impasse, he turns to David Scott, who cogently identifies a limitation that most postcolonial responses are beset with. Magaziner expresses full agreement with Scott’s contention that our engagement with discursive contexts of the past run the risk of amounting to an uncritical retrieval of the interventions of a given problem-space. Scott asserts that “an adequate interrogation of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) depends upon identifying the *difference* between the questions that animated former presents and that animates our own.”⁸⁵

It is my contention that a theological intervention that facilitates a critical engagement between black theology and radical theology will provide adequate conceptual resources for identifying and responding to the animating theological questions of South Africa today. The particularising gesture of the hermeneutic of positive identification provides us with the critical sensibilities and conceptual resources to adequately interrogate the post-1994 present. Radical theology, on the other hand, gives us the critical resources to facilitate the task of “identifying the *difference* between questions that animated the former presents and our present.”⁸⁶ This is the value of a theological disposition that is intent on exposing the historical contingency of any given community of believers together with their beliefs and practices.

84 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

85 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 3.

86 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 3.

Conclusion

This chapter is an attempt to demonstrate that there is historical precedence to the efforts of facilitating a generative conversation between black theology and radical theology. This argument is made in service of buttressing the claim that revisiting this historical moment can lead to fruitful developments for both theological traditions in South Africa today. The historical account details the philosophical and theological foundations of the apartheid regime and the array of theological responses to this hegemonic ideotheological orientation. Of particular interest are the theological responses that came out of the UCM, namely, black theology and secular theology. For complicated reasons, black theologians chose not to entertain the possibility of a critical engagement between the two theological traditions. Turning to the present day, I then call for the reconsideration of this historical moment in light of the discursive malaise that black theology is experiencing today. I nuance this call by engaging two theologians, Motlhabi and Ullrich. Magaziner's historical account brings into sharp focus the discursive potential that both theological traditions have to respond to the animating questions that South Africa has today. A critical encounter between the theological traditions that draws lessons from this historical moment can benefit both traditions. For black theology, it will facilitate the construction of a new paradigm that is both relevant and sustainable. For radical theology, it will improve its contextual relevance in South Africa today.

Chapter 8

Making Sense of the Two Versions of Secularism as Public Policy: A Perspective from Philosophical Theology¹

Patrick Giddy 

Introduction: Shift in Philosophical Framework

My starting point is James Leatt's recent theological memoir *Conjectures* (2021), outlining his journey from Methodism to a non-Christian spirituality. The context is our secular culture, one in which, on his account, the cards are stacked against any version of the Christian faith. Leatt has to confront: a concept of God that is, for Analytic philosophers, problematically vacuous; the impossibility of justifying divine benevolence in the face of the Holocaust; the scandalous supposed particularity of Christianity in a plural culture; and an awareness, through the sociology of religion, of the social (rather than truth-linked) determinants of anyone's faith.

Given the weakening pull of traditional Christianity, any attempt to develop a secular spirituality must be welcomed. But one can question whether Leatt² has adequately interrogated how the religion at issue here is put to one side in contemporary secular culture, pushing him to go east, to find symbols that allow people to reach beyond themselves.³

1 A version of this chapter was published as "A Theological Response to Secularism as Public Policy." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88.4 (2023): 340–356.

2 James Leatt, *Conjectures. Living with Questions* (Cape Town: Karavan Press, 2021), 172–173.

3 Leatt, *Conjectures*, 137.

This chapter will suggest, in contrast, that at the heart of secularity are symbols that draw us towards the transcendent, a transcendence that has much to do with the Christian religious traditions from which the culture emerged. This point could be missed if one buys into the exclusive secular picture. In the face of this, the struggle would be to bring out the transcendence central to the humanist project. This will mean, as argued in section three below, interrogating the oversight, in secular culture, of the value of solidarity. The vision of a secular society governed not through force but by democratic consensus presupposes the commitment to solidarity on the part of the citizens. This would imply a widespread attitude that puts the community of dialogue above simply getting one's own way. This, as will be argued, reveals a specific religious dimension in "ordinary" secular culture.

Paradoxically, we can trace the neglect of this dimension to the oversights of the religious traditions themselves from which public society seeks to distance itself. And this in two different ways, corresponding to the two versions of the Christian religion which the public body puts to one side. Very roughly, this is the Protestant and the Catholic, but in each case carrying the burden – precisely because it attempts to be authentic and orthodox – of a philosophical framework that no longer has purchase in contemporary culture. It is crucial, then, in any theology that seeks to speak not only to "insiders," to uncover the philosophical issues at stake.

First, however, it is important to highlight the mostly overlooked transcendent dimension that attaches to the secular culture, its elements of re-enchantment. For the broad background to the emergence of secularity is the shift from a cosmological frame of thinking to the frame of subjectivity. This shift is associated with the rise of science, in particular Galileo's turn from a geocentric to a heliocentric model, bringing to the fore our critical awareness of our perspective, our subjectivity. This critical awareness arguably has its remote origins in the emergence of a more humanist understanding of religion in the Axial Age of the major world religions, 800 – 200 BCE and taken

further after that. For Charles Taylor,⁴ this move of the Axial Age is complemented by a transcendent understanding of the divine, by the development of second-order thinking, and by a globality of vision. Among the examples are the post-exilic Hebrew prophets, Gautama's simplification of the Hindu tradition, and the breakthrough in the classic Greek philosophical culture.⁵ This can lead to seeing secular society precisely as emerging *from* Christianity, as for example Marcel Gauchet does,⁶ describing Christianity as, in his phrase, "la religion de la sortie de la religion," the religion that exits from religion.⁷ For this reason it is plausible that along with what appears as "disenchantment" there will also be, in contemporary culture, much "re-enchantment"; one commentator points to Heidegger, Rilke, and Musil, as examples of writers giving expression to this.⁸

The shift in philosophical framework has a crucial impact on theological reflection. What we are talking about is a new horizon for such reflection, which we can provisionally refer to as that of "interiority." We are no longer spectators of a world already there, but internally co-creative of the world; we are also self-consciously historical. The new horizon takes shape as an awakening to this interior world of meaning in terms of which our freedom of self-determination is given expression and put into effect. A random quote from the point of view of the art of painting gives the flavour of the new orientation, shifting from observing to participating. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' Romantic Movement this frame of reference is "discovered," as Coleridge formulates it: "In looking at objects of nature... as at yonder moon, dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane,

4 Charles, Taylor "What was the Axial Revolution?" in R. Bellah and H. Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2012), 30–31.

5 Cf. Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* (Anchor Books, 2006); Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2011).

6 Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du Monde* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985), 197.

7 Cf. Patrick Giddy, "Is the Essence of Christianity a Disenchanted World? A Critical Discussion of Marcel Gauchet." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2019): 313–329.

8 Peter Watson, *The Age of Nothing* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 243.

I seem rather to be seeking a symbolic language for something within me that forever and already exists, than observing anything new, a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature.”⁹

The divide between subject as observer on the one side and observed object on the other, is challenged by the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, associated with Hegel. In this view, consciousness is never simply closed in its subjective self but is always reaching out to the world. Suzanne Langer, again, affirms this whole shift in mental approach, seeing reality not simply as “there” but in terms of symbolic transformation.¹⁰ This “new key” to philosophy, in her book’s title, describes her research into “the symbolism of reason, rite, and art.” The “view from above,” the cosmic view of “man” as below the angels, above the beasts, is here superseded. A new slant on the normativity of human lives is called for, one that still has to be properly thematised in secular culture.

All this throws up a problem for the religions. The defining doctrines and the rules constitutive of how the religion takes institutional form, are now seen as relative to the personal journeying that is our new horizon of reflection. Of the religious symbol it is noted by Eugene Webb: “To call it by a name and speak of it as though it had a specific entative status is not to know it as an entity, but to give metaphysical expression to an aspiration; it is to aim toward and seek to ‘evoke’ fidelity to the goal of the dynamic process.”¹¹ What can be lost in the process of institutionalising the religion is clarity about the analogical character of the symbols and their limitations. Voegelin phrases the problem in terms of “the general deformation of experiential symbols into doctrines.”¹²

9 Quoted in Peter Quennell, *Romantic England. Writing and Painting 1717–1851* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 174–174.

10 Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

11 Eugene Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard* (Seattle, Wa.: University of Washington Press, 2014), 93.

12 Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* 4 in Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 107.

Similarly, Karl Jaspers: what is being sought, he says, is a way to structure our lives, *Existenzerhellung*, elucidation of our *Existenz*, not of a general “I at large”. Jaspers explains the religious symbol:

Not everyone will recognize himself in it, but each one does so more or less, both in adoption and rejection, by translating it into his own reality as this very individual. Its communication has many meanings and may be misunderstood. Its appeal to the man to whom it appeals at all will be to involve his self.¹³

If one goes along with this, a big shift is in order for the way the religions present themselves today. Of any religious person we are now more self-consciously aware of the dimension of their psychological reality, something unpicked by countless novelists. The case of the Baptist missionary in Barbara Kingsolver’s (1998) *The Poisonwood Bible*, or, earlier, that of the pastor in Gide’s (1919) *La Symphonie Pastorale* are well-known examples. Similarly, taking now the case of Catholic Christianity, religious communities may be found, as one does the necessary research,¹⁴ to harbour real psychological abuse; an example here would be those bodies – properly seen as sects – that flourished under the papacy of John-Paul II, Liberation and Communion, Neocathecumenate, and Focolare, now being investigated by the Vatican.¹⁵

The distancing of ourselves from our “spectator” view of the world, our cosmocentrism, takes institutional form as empirical scientific method. Theology must therefore come to terms with this. In the first place we can note that the sciences offer not certain objective truths but hypotheses verified by the data so far as is at present known. That is to say, the active and collaborative judgement of the scientists is foregrounded.

13 Quoted in Webb, *Philosophers of Consciousness*, 119.

14 For example, G. Urquhart, *The Pope’s Armada* (Corgi Books, 1996).

15 *National Catholic Reporter*, “Spiritual abuse occurs more frequently than believed, Vatican official says.” From: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/spiritual-abuse>. Accessed 15th November 2021.

Secondly, the sciences, by virtue of their own nature, do not thematise the scientist themselves as agents, formulating the methods, affirming the value of evidence-based conclusions. For this, a different kind of discipline is needed. Philosophy finds its role in thematising our self-awareness, unpacking what is presupposed to any particular science, namely the scientist as self-conscious agent, deliberately deciding on their research topic and standing by the reasonableness of their findings. From the data of this intentionality there is described a phenomenology of taking up one's life, an outline of the necessary conditions for growth in self-understanding and in integrity of will. The secular context would thus seem to call up philosophy as a necessary and central frame of thinking. Whatever the findings of the particular sciences, biological, sociological and so on, these cannot, without an internal self-stultification, conclude to a picture that is reductionist, that denies this capacity to take up our lives in this partially self-determining way – and this includes any psychological unpacking of religious faith. Self-transcendence is part and parcel of an authentic secular approach. The fragile nature of the actual achievement of self-transcendence gives rise, as we shall see below, to the discipline of theology.

Two Versions of Secularist Public Policy

Secularism as public policy is an ethical move, associated with the value of free and democratic consensus, putting religion to one side. But we can distinguish, as mentioned above, two different ways of conceiving this policy. The version of secularity best known in our own context – which I am going to term Version B since the religious culture associated with it came on the scene later – is typical of Anglophone cultures and is based on a scepticism about any version of absolute truth; rather, each person has the right to put forward their understanding of personal truth, and so do the religions. The key principle is that of the equality of all such claims. Ethics is a matter of the principles of fairness. There is an imperative to act in a way that you can will it of any person, the principle of your action should be universalizable. For Kant, it is in this attitude that lies the dignity of the human person. The approach of the Enlightenment, central to Kant's

thinking, is summed up by the idea that each person should stand on their own feet: *sapere aude*, dare to be wise, is how Kant puts it. For this reason, there can be no determining religious authority in society. But at the same time, the state has no jurisdiction over what the religion holds to be true and of value. The slogan for this version of secular policy could be, “Leave them alone.”

The blind spot in this ethical approach has to do with the problem of motivation. Without sanctions or framing of the kind that religion offers, there might not be the necessary motivation to follow those principles of fairness if one can flout them with impunity. In the secular-adjusted version of the religion, God may be seen as the ultimate fair judge. But this in turn throws up the problem of natural disasters such as plagues, by the nature of things not at all “fair” to the innocent victims. The “problem of evil” questions how this is possible and this has spawned the intellectual field of theodicy. The failure of theodicy would put the whole religion in doubt.

The second version, Version A, more typical of Francophone countries and termed *laïcité*, focuses on the human potential for free self-determination and on hence on the free formation of conscience in order to actualise this potential. This is the duty of the secular state, re-emphasised recently by Emmanuel Macron in a debate with Marine Le Pen, taking care to distinguish this from the citizen’s free choice of religion and religious symbols in the civic public space: veil, soutane, turban, saffron robe, religious habit, and so on. (The near-complete covering of the face, as in the burka, is forbidden for reasons of public security¹⁶). Democracy is seen as resistance to heteronomy, and heteronomy is associated with religion. Which symbols will prevail, in the minds and hearts of the citizens, remains open, those of liberty and equality (symbolised in the recent pantheonisation of Josephine Baker), or those of religion (symbolised, for example, in the canonisation of John–Paul II). In this sense, *laïcité* can be seen in terms of the slogan, “Leave us alone.”

16 As explained in Michel Miaille, *La Laïcité. Solutions d’Hier Problèmes d’Aujourd’hui* (Paris: Editions Dalloz, 2016), 76–77.

The blind spot of this ethical approach has to do not with motivation as such, but with the *quality* of such motivation: without the proper symbolisation of the capacity for self-determination, for transcendence, the culture will become shallow. But there is a problem, because the *normativity* of the freedom or self-transcendence (the basis for any judgement that the culture is “shallow”) would seem bound up with the framing of a cosmic hierarchy – which is precisely what is being *resisted* in democracy. For this reason, one can expect a drift into the extremes of a transhumanism and, in reaction, a shift of citizens to the political right.¹⁷ It leads also to philosophical theological critiques of modernity and the secular state as such.¹⁸

The two versions of secularity can be seen as derivative of the two distinct understandings of the religion that is now put aside. In Version A, that of *laïcité*, the classic religious perspective was founded on an understanding of the god as fully transcendent, answering to the anxiety of the Ancient World, felt to be at the hands of powers beyond their control, the anxiety of “fate.” In the framing normative order now newly established, the natural human potential to flourish is given and brought into actualisation by divine grace, working through normal human capacities, and takes institutional form in hierarchies of power that reflect and symbolise the god’s founding position.

In Version B, the religious perspective – now in the context of the rise of the new middle class and greater individualism – answered to the anxiety not of the cosmic order as such but of any person’s particular place in the order of salvation: are they matching up to what is demanded of them as an individual. The old hierarchical order is seen as a block to this kind of critical self-awareness. It is an anxiety of guilt and condemnation and is founded on an understanding of human “fault,” but God is the power that brings about a reversal of this, through – the central emphasis here – the believer’s reorientation, made possible by

17 See, for example, Bertrand Vergely’s discussion of transhumanism in French culture and law; Bertrand Vergely, *Transhumanisme: la Grande Illusion* (Paris : Le Passeur, 2019).

18 For example, discussed below, those of Remi Brague and Alasdair MacIntyre.

God's gratuitous and intervening gift of Christ. The key point is that of "justification" (by faith alone); the religion is in a sense defined by its opposition to the Catholic hierarchical picture.

In both cases, as we will see, there are elements of re-enchantment – in a secular frame of thinking. The secular upshot of the changes is not devoid of transcendence. But this is not the case with a third version of religion, Deism (influenced by Newtonian science and the new ethic of commerce). Deism has it that human beings function autonomously in a more or less closed system of physical and moral transactions; the distant God is there as a guarantee, a security blanket, as it were, for counter-examples to or failures of the system.¹⁹ This is religion justified through theodicy, and it is a justification found inauthentic, and indeed to be resisted, by the central character in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (Dr Rieux in dialogue with a priest)²⁰ and likewise, more recently, in *Snow*, the novel by Öhran Pamuk (Ka in dialogue with an Islamic activist).²¹

If you subtract the religious dimension from this third version, you get to a secular culture of "closed immanence." Various forms of reductionism are seen as plausible: there is an absence of the validity of personal knowledge, an *Absence of Mind*, in the title of M. Robinson's short book.²² If knowledge properly speaking is of objects (something we have suggested above is self-stultifying, leaving out the scientist as *agent*), then, as Hume argued and Leatt links to Buddhism, there is no "self" to be known as such. That means there is no subject of a possible re-enchantment. This impersonal and "closed" world is the dismal vision of Daniel Dennett.²³ It lurks in the background of the secular culture.

19 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap, 2007), Chapter 6.

20 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Vintage, [1947] 1991).

21 Öhran Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. M. Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

22 Marilynne Robinson, *The Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

23 Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

We turn now to the two more helpful versions of secularity. I start with the Version B religion. Eliding the religious dimension here, you arrive at the “Anglophone” version of secularity, described above: human beings are essentially blocked in the exercise of their intellect and of their power of willing, hampered in what they can know and in the scope of their willingness. There is a default scepticism about “grand narratives” (Popper). Religions have, of course, themselves an equal “right” to be respected in their beliefs, and not judged.

For Paul Tillich, from whose writings I have sketched the two versions of the Christian faith, neither of these has purchase in contemporary culture. “The contents of the tradition, however excellent, however praised, however loved once, lose their power to give content today.”²⁴ But he points, in particular, to the Version B religion as problematic in putting to one side a philosophical anthropology that could ground a new expression of the tradition. The upshot of this (he is speaking of some Protestant theologians) is that “the doctrinal concepts of the biblical message were preached as objective truth without any attempt to mediate the message to man in his psychosomatic and psycho-social existence.”²⁵ The choice of a “yes” or “no” to God is too abstracted from the actual intersubjective conditions of human growth.

The oversight is shared by the culture *and* the version of the religion associated with it. The take-away point here is then to see how, within these frames of thinking, one could integrate the “yay” or “nay,” the basic orientation, in a philosophical anthropology. For example, Lonergan has argued that there is an ineluctable existential dialectic thrown up by the human condition, as one moves into the world of meaning and of value, issuing in moments of “conversion” on an intellectual and also psychic level.²⁶ Staying with our frame of interiority, the centrality of our symbolic world, we may point to the cross as a symbol of

24 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962), 55.

25 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 131–132.

26 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (2nd ed. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), Chapter 10.

persons facing down rejection, and by a difficult inversion of one's immediate trajectory, giving hope.

Turning to Version A, if you elide the religious dimension, you arrive at the "Francophone" version of secularity: human beings have a natural capacity to determine their own lives. A good example of this kind of thinking is that of Luc Ferry's *La Révolution de l'Amour* (2010), "The Revolution of Love," subtitled, *Pour une spiritualité laïque*, Toward a secular spirituality.²⁷ Religion is set aside as obstructing this through its heteronomous point of view, and its hierarchical forms of social arrangements. Growth in human self-understanding and in a more whole-hearted orientation towards true flourishing seem to be blocked by the hierarchical expressions of God's role and of the cosmology. But, as mentioned, without the proper symbolisation this orientation (to truth and charity) tends to evaporate; culture becomes shallow, the most marketable products tend to swallow up all the rest. Shrove Tuesday morphs into the Rio carnival.

The take-away point here, to be discussed in detail in the following section, is not to see normativity as inevitably linked to a pre-modern cosmology and theology, but to embrace its re-articulation within the new frame of thinking.

Religion and the Blind Spot of a Secular Culture

We have identified a blind spot in secular culture, of either kind: the difficulty of articulating, in a culture that has gone beyond the cosmocentric, "theological," framework, the human powers of self-determination and transcendence, the foundation of any commitment to solidarity. Lonergan compares the situation to that of the Trobriand islanders as described by Malinowski. While in matters of practical living the islanders exercise their rational faculties, Malinowski observes, beyond that realm intelligence yields to magic and myth. Our own scientific culture has similarly been content, Lonergan writes,

27 Luc Ferry, *La Révolution de l'Amour. Pour une spiritualité laïque* (Paris: Plon, 2010); *Vaincre les Peurs* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007).

merely to make more cultivated and more civilized the intelligent and rational part of Trobriand living, while maintaining a surrounding no man's land which used to be inhabited by myth and magic but which is now empty – we do not admit, Here be strange beasts; we simply do not bother about it.²⁸

The Version A religion can be said to offer a positive contribution to this neglected dimension of the modern secular project, as envisioning for persons the growth of holiness. This contribution is, however, blocked by the inappropriate “fit” of the symbolisation of such holiness, namely in a hierarchical and authoritative – or authoritarian, heteronomous – idea of the actual genesis of such holiness. On the other hand, in Version B religion we have a recognition of the centrality of personal choice as a key element in the religion, but this contribution is hampered by a supernaturalistic framing of such authentic choice, bypassing the psychology of personal growth, as pointed out by Tillich.

We can now focus on this fundamental problematic of secular culture. The cosmocentric theological frame of thinking prescribing what the telos is of human “nature” has been dethroned in favour of the idea of the human person's self-creation through the world of symbols. Humans are *pour-soi* (for-itself) rather than *en-soi* (in-itself). There is no fixed mould into which we must fit, as argued at the very start of the modern period in Pic della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. God is here addressing Adam:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other things is limited and constrained with the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, unconstrained by no limits, in accordance with thy own free will, in whose hands

28 *Understanding and Being*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 5 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990), 101.

we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.²⁹

To this, because of the neglect of the reenchanting, and transcendent, dimension to secularity, there has been a reaction, thinkers who would turn back to the pre-modern articulation of “human nature” given from above. As showing where Mirandola’s picture tends towards, Remi Brague quotes Marlowe’s Dr Faustus:

O what a world of profit and delight
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisans!...
A sound magician is a mighty god.
Here, Faustus, tire thy brains to gain a deity.³⁰

The unconstrained freedom described by Mirandola is going to lead to the fantasy of a god-like power. Brague comments on the loss of all cosmological or theological context for understanding human nature: “Instead of the claim that it is man who ought to receive his norm from an external authority, it is he who determines what can claim authority over him. The relationship between man and the divine takes on the form of ‘it’s either him or me.’ Humanism must thus tend to become an atheism.”³¹

MacIntyre makes a similar point to that of Brague about the loss of normative human nature, exemplified in the eighteenth century in Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, representative of modernity’s hubris. Rameau’s nephew cannot be persuaded to follow his uncle’s set of norms: he simply appeals to a different set of desires. “What divides them,” MacIntyre suggests, “is the question of precisely which of our desires are to be acknowledged as legitimate guides to action, and which on the other hand are to be inhibited, frustrated or re-educated; and clearly this question cannot be answered by trying to use our desires themselves as

29 Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. trans. A. R. Caponigri (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, [1496] 1956), 7.

30 Cited in Remi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 58–59.

31 Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*, 30.

some sort of criterion.”³² Later, MacIntyre again refers to this text of Diderot as “the classic statement” of the problem. He comments that the unity of the self demands that one assent to some or other more or less arbitrary hierarchy of preferences, even if this requires the repression of inner conflict.³³

But we have been introducing a frame of thinking that sees what it is that one has to become as discerned gradually through engagement with the world of symbolic meaning. The content of the normativity is not prescribed from the start by our reason, as the “correct desires.” One discovers not a “what” but a “who.” “Who is a man?” asks Lonergan,³⁴ “Who is to be a man? The answer is ‘I’, ‘We’. ...What has to be a man is not just any instance of rational animal....” It is the journey that creates one’s identity, and given the right intersubjective conditions, an ethos of solidarity, it can lead towards what makes for a flourishing life. Such an ethos cannot be said to be imposed from “above,” for in this religious tradition the “above” is seen as fully transcendent, and the idea of an “external” as contrasted with an “internal” determination is not pertinent here – a point made by Bishop Hippolyte Simon.³⁵ God’s “ought” cannot rival man’s free choice. So, *pace* Brague, there is no necessary slide into atheism.

If the blind spot of post-secular religion B is a tendency to non-foundationalism and to a supernaturalism (seeing the “above” as able to countermand a determination from “below”), the blind spot of post-secular religion A is a tendency to see any normative human flourishing as to be rejected because it is necessarily bound up precisely with that pre-modern cosmology. It is important, therefore, for our project of philosophical theology in a secular context, to suggest how ethics may indeed have a foundation, a “natural” one, but not linked to an ontology that commits one to a premodern approach. Only if this is so, will there be solid grounds for eschewing the non-foundationalism and the supernaturalism of post-secular religion B.

32 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 46.

33 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 346.

34 Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993), 81.

35 *Vaincre les Peurs*, 182.

What is “natural” to human persons, in our secular framework, is the demand on oneself to make something of oneself, the world of interiority and self-discovery described earlier by Coleridge. But how does one judge the quality of any such self-making? The very question presupposes a commitment to developing a community of meaning. Walking down a crowded street I feel a sharp pain in my side and see a stranger had tripped and tried to correct his fall; or I see hurrying away the colleague with whom I had harsh words at this morning’s departmental meeting. From the point of view of “what happened” (my pain) the intention makes no difference. From the point of view of what it means, that is to say ethics, the intention makes all the difference, qualifying the act as mean or vindictive – or else simply clumsy. No *external* account of ethics is strictly speaking possible – for example, conforming to “human nature” thought of in terms of biology or as value-neutral. The ethical terms picking out the “quality” of the act, only make sense in a community of meaning.

The upshot is that the condition of possibility of ethics is that I must be able to “get” the other’s intention and vice-versa. This means that implicit in my ethical intentionality is a commitment to this community of dialogue. It is this commitment that is the foundation for ethics rather than anything “objective,” “human nature” as thought of in the cosmological frame of reference. The foundational act is affirming myself as a participant in co-creating our common world of value. It is a question of identity but not in the sense of a conflictual “identity politics.” It is also and foremost a natural response to the other person’s commitment to a community of dialogue.

Secular culture, tainted by the post-religion oversights of A and of B, neglects this basic need for such commitment to solidarity (Habermas). This is the dimension that Taylor refers to as the need for recognition, and its neglect spawns the unhelpful “politics of identity.”³⁶ That need for solidarity and for recognition was met in a pre-secular culture by the given

36 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

social roles in a hierarchical society.³⁷ The need would now have to be met through the fostering of every person's journey, informed by the conditions for such journeying uncovered by the social and psychological sciences. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is identified by Mary Clark³⁸ and by Zenon Szablowinski³⁹ (2020) as a welcome anomaly to secular public policy.

But this is not just a question of an institutional or ecclesial dimension: this approach can be delineated, finally, as highlighting a specifically religious need. This is because the recognition of the other, and the attitude of forgiveness that can "restart" the solidarity, points to a predicament: each person, needing recognition, cannot by virtue of that all-consuming need, give it. Yet recognition does occur, as evidenced in persons' growth in integrity of will and in overcoming self-deception. That gives us good grounds for a reasonable trust in a power transcendent of all finite powers, all powers blocked by the impasse referred to above. Religion, appropriately symbolised in its person-directed and aspirational aspect, would seem central to a more consequential secular culture. The symbol of sacral hierarchy needs to be replaced by embodied symbols of participative journeying. And this would seem to fit in with the transformation, in the life of Jesus and the subsequent narratives of his life, of the messiah-symbol, the Christ.

The Self-understanding of the Christian Faith

Finally, is it possible that the religious traditions could be authentically reframed in a secular context? In principle, it seems so, *pace* Leatt. We have described above the secular frame of a world of symbols by which we live our lives, a world of interiority, a community of meaning entailing transcendence. An integral element here is an implicit affirmation of a non-finite power presupposed to the drama of personal growth and community.

37 See Claire Morin, *Être à sa Place – Habiter sa Vie, Habiter son Corps* (Paris: Observatoire, 2022).

38 Mary Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2022).

39 Zenon Szablowinski, "Religion (Un)wanted in a Secular Age." *Heythrop Journal* LXI (2020): 595–606.

But how, if at all, would this fit with the dogmatic formulations of the faith?

In answering this, the role of philosophical theology is crucial. We have introduced the idea that human self-transcendence is an overlooked but central dimension of a culture understood as secular. It enables citizens' recognition of and consent to a pluralism in the culture. In its absence, furthermore, we could have no idea of what it is for God, in the traditional way of formulating the faith, to take up and perfect human form. For example, under the influence of Wittgenstein's scepticism about our ability to unpack such transcendence, Rowan Williams wants to put strict limits on any project that gives an interpretation of the Christian faith in the terms of a philosophical psychology. For Williams, "we do not have available the criteria that would help us settle what is and is not a plausible or persuasive narrative account of the basic claim" of God taking human form.⁴⁰

On our account, however, it makes no sense to follow Wittgenstein here, who sees no possibility of a philosophical psychology in general; for him, there is nothing to be identified, in any action or behaviour, as "willing." "What is left over," he asks in his *Philosophical Investigations*,⁴¹ para. 621, "if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" The trying, the willing, he points out, is nothing else but the action itself (para. 615). This view is, however, firmly refuted by the narratives in the global traditions of literature where the central character's "willing" is convincingly problematised by, for example, uncovering elements of self-delusion. This could equally be the case in the gospel narratives. So, the normativity of the human person, the human form, as seen by religious faith is

40 Rowan Williams, "Imagining Christ in Literature." In Francesca Arana Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 488–489, quoted in Khegan Delpont, "The fall and rise of King Oedipus: On sacrificial logic and 'Proto-Christology'." *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2021.v7n1.a2> Online ISSN 2226–2385.

41 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

not something that must necessarily be introduced from outside the human psychological drama.

Delport notes⁴² that for Williams, whereas Christ's human nature may well be unpacked in terms of "a recognizable human psyche" (quoting Williams), this cannot be the case with his divine nature. Something therefore has to be said about this traditional dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith. The key point is to note how this formulation, so taken for granted, reflects a very different cultural frame of reference to the one we have been evoking above.

It is useful to distinguish here, as Lonergan does, three different realms or frameworks of meaning.⁴³ First, we can pick out the common-sense frame of thinking of the biblical story telling, and contrast it with the theoretical frame of thinking that was introduced so memorably in the classical Greek philosophical period. Even as the evangelical narratives were being composed in their language of story and metaphor, a more theoretical interest was at hand, concerned to formulate the nature or essence of Jesus as the Christ. The influence of the Greek philosophers is palpable. Theory looks for internal coherence, as Socrates does, challenging the common-sense answers of his interlocutors. But of any "common sense" cultural framework, a similar point may be made. The traditional wisdom traditions of Kenya have been canvassed by Odera Oruka. To the question, "Why is there death?" the wise answer is given, "To make room for the young." This, however, is susceptible of the critical question, "What about sparsely populated areas such as deserts?"⁴⁴ With theory there is a new realm of conversation. Mass and temperature are not objects in the world of common sense. Mass is not how heavy it is and temperature is not the same as how hot or cold it feels (metal feels colder than wood).

So, one asks, which is the real table, the hard surface I touch, or the atoms and molecules described in physical

42 Delport, "The fall and rise of King Oedipus," 19.

43 *Method in Theology*, 85–100.

44 Gail Presbey, "African Sage Philosophy and Socrates: Midwifery and Method." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (2002): 177–192.

theory? One lives in two worlds, the one I must deal with for my biological survival (the table's hard surface), and the one I grasp through understanding the terms and relations of physics and which I can verify. In this way, my mind becomes the site of a differentiated, rather than compact, consciousness. The third realm of meaning, interiority, centres on my relation to my own cognitional operations, so that I do not mistake the theory by itself as giving knowledge of the thing. Through theory, I make sense of the data, as patristics make sense of Jesus. But I must also be reasonable in judging the possible completeness or otherwise of the theory. Does it cover all the evidence? In the final analysis, there is a demand on myself to be responsible in applying my powers of knowing, in appropriating my subjectivity. Within the frame of interiority – which takes many cultural changes to come to consciousness – theory is relativised. A man or woman, for example, is now seen not simply as an instance of “rational animal” (the theory), but rather has to become someone, the burden of existentialist philosophy.

The achievements envisaged in any normative appropriation of human willing – the new frame of thinking – amount to growth in the quality of one's actual self-transcendence. This is the quality of life that can be seen, analogically, as sharing in God's non-finite transcendence. It is a quality that is described in the biblical texts in terms of the “wisdom” and “word” of God. The “Logos” idea, employed in particular in John's gospel narrative, can be seen as holding that such self-transcendence is sourced in God's self-communication; the idea of “Spirit” as a co-eternal reality can be seen as affirming that such self-communication is in fact effective in the recipient.

We can, in contrast, take one example of how the theoretical frame of thinking has determined the form in which the Christian faith has come down to us. Christ must be divine, argues Irenaeus, because otherwise it would not be the actual presence and power of God we are taking about in the case of Jesus; and he must be human, to sum up our human flesh and blood life.⁴⁵ These descriptions are in terms of “nature,” human and divine. Roger

45 Cf. Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (New York: Orbis, 1999), chapter 9.

Haight argues, discussing the Nicaean formulations, that this way of putting it is not central to the faith. “The language of a hypostasized Logos constituted the milieu of the discussion. But that very framework has become part of the problem; it has lost its plausibility and power in a postmodern intellectual culture.”⁴⁶ For Haight, the meaning of Nicaea is, simply, “that no less than God was and is present and at work in Jesus.”⁴⁷ Unpacked in this way, he argues, we have a language of faith that is not a mythological way of speaking, but nor is the Logos hypostasized.

Conclusion

The debate on religion in a secular culture is about our understanding of autonomy. Does autonomy exclude anything “higher?” Or is autonomy, on the contrary, very much what a religion in a secular culture is all about? Is religion at the heart of the growth of freedom in human history? This is what we have been suggesting. The suggestion is supported by the Axial Age theory, the push to transform the religions towards a focus on humanity and its fulfilment. In understanding what that fulfilment could mean, we have the witness of the grand tradition of storytelling, which, if we follow Christopher Booker,⁴⁸ contrasts the “below the line” challenge of personal growth with the ostensive plot (“above the line”).⁴⁹ This challenge, and the internal world of the characters, is a matter of the symbols one lives by, the ideas and values charged with significance that give meaning and motivate action. We create the world we live in, by symbolising it and then living through these symbols, whether the cross or the swastika. The discovery of the absolute transcendence of the creator goes along with the discovery of the human psyche. Faith will henceforth always include this journeying dimension towards responsibility for our world. Voegelin, doyen of the Axial Age researchers, in his wide-ranging *The New Science of Politics*

⁴⁶ Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 281.

⁴⁷ *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 284.

⁴⁸ Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots. Why We Tell Stories* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁴⁹ Patrick Giddy, “Jack and the Beanstalk: The human plot in narrative traditions and contemporary global culture.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2020): 361–370.

puts it this way: “Not only does one discover one’s own psyche as instrument of the transcendent, but at the same time divinity in its radical supra-human transcendence.”⁵⁰

When we unpack how Jesus’ listeners understood what he was doing and saying, it is our psychic life that seems to be addressed. The parables are instructive. Each one gives us a trajectory that brings us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. The long global tradition of storytelling does something similar. In each case the hero has to learn something of themselves, and the listener participates in this learning. “The rich fool,” “the seed growing secretly,” “the mustard seed,” all seem to reflect a “below the line” meaning of the narrative, addressed to anyone taking up their task to make something of their lives, but in a way that contradicts the “normal” way of society, the “worldly” way (the plot “above the line”). “The workers in the field” and “the prodigal son” make similar points. In these narratives, the good of social order (equal pay for equal work; just desserts) is superseded by the value of self-gift. Beyond the dignity due to the father, lies the self-gift that overcomes sin, going beyond the trajectory of the dutiful. In the Good Samaritan, the “obvious” hierarchy of good persons is put to one side in favour of the challenge to make oneself a neighbour, to anyone. That is the self-learning that has to take place, in the older, dutiful sibling in the case of the prodigal son, or in the Jewish listeners to the narrative of the incident on the road to Jericho. Jesus’ own life is the central parable, overturning the received idea of the messiah, now rooting human hopes in a journey that draws on resources beyond the calculation of benefits, of “getting and spending,” and beyond death as a block to flourishing.

All this fits very well with the approach of Haight’s *Jesus, Symbol of God*: “Jesus is the historical mediation of God for the Christian imagination,” he writes. “This is why the ideal presentation of Jesus as the medium of God will assume a

50 Eric Voegelin, *Die Neue Wissenschaft der Politik*, trans. I. Gattenhof (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004).

narrative form.”⁵¹ In the narrative, the listener undergoes a shift of their hierarchy of values.⁵²

What is presented here is not a matter of giving a watered-down or relativist interpretation of the Christian faith. The affirmation of human transcendence as the exact “place” of God’s action in the world – negating the negation that death seems to be – has in principle no further possible development. If this affirmation is identified with the person of Jesus, then that solidarity with Jesus is unsurpassable. At the same time, this leads to a depopulating of the “other” world above, a diminishment of its effective energy or reality in people’s lives. In cultures influenced by this religion it is going to provoke a secularisation process (as Gauchet and others have argued). That solidarity with Jesus is an open centrifugal, rather than a closed centripetal, attitude. Along with this affirmation is an affirmation of all religious expressions as participating in something positive and to be respected, as manifesting that very human transcendence in a plurality of ways outside of the Christian churches as well as within them. It is an interpretation that can speak to a secular culture and contribute towards modifying the standard public policy of secularism or *laïcité*.

51 *Jesus, Symbol of God*, 112.

52 In his discussion of Haight, (“Symbolism in Weakness: Jesus Christ for the Postmodern Age.” *Heythrop Journal* LVIII (2017): 64–77), Jean-Pierre Fortin misrepresents the idea of reality as accessed through symbols as tied into an epistemological scepticism, a factor constraining any possible revelation. “All theology can do,” he writes in a tone critical of this frame of thinking, “is to mediate the transcendent symbolically, via the use of some empirical reality having the capacity to convey, alongside its own being, the presence of the transcendent.” (p. 70). On the contrary, it is only through our entering into the world of symbolic meaning with its unlimited horizon that we are able to receive revelation.

Chapter 9

The Body (Dis-)incarnate: Notes on a Subterranean Theological-Phenomenology

Calvin D. Ullrich 

*“Consciousness does not fall into a body—
it is not incarnated; it is a disincarnation”.*
Emmanuel Levinas

Introduction

On a recent blistering high summer afternoon in Cape Town, I attended a Jewish funeral. Perspiring uncontrollably, I observed, as the mourner’s kaddish concluded, the unadorned wooden casket being lowered into the ground. One by one, members of the large group of friends and relatives made their way customarily to the designated shovels and began casting piles of soil into the burial site. I recalled the sensation witnessing the ritual: the cadenced vibrations of the ground underfoot as the darkness of the earth submerged the wooden coffin. There was something provocative in this slow acquiescence to death; in the fading geometry of the casket that beckons the imagination to a call – a call not so much from a realm *beyond* but from the tremors of the *underground*. The body in the subterranean and the body *as* subterranean. Had this body already reached the advanced stages of decomposition into the organic matter from which it came? A literalisation of the famous formula from Ecclesiastes: “from the dust and all return to dust” (מִן־הָעֶפֶר וְהָכֵל יָשׁוּב אֶל־הָעֶפֶר) – I wondered.¹

1 Ecclesiastes 3:20, BHS.

Perhaps none other than the German-Swiss artist of the Northern Renaissance, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543), could capture this scene beneath the earth with more exacting horror, than in his life-sized piece, *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521–22). There Holbein opens the casket for all to see in a detailed depiction of the emaciated body stretched out in grotesque realism. As if on an operating table, wounds of the putrefying flesh, blackened-green face, gaunt hands, and feet, hang on a form of protruding bones held together only delicately by a thin veil of skin. The artist's vision of death is so lurid that Dostoyevsky, upon seeing the painting, had to be dragged away by his wife lest he succumb to an epileptic fit.² He later declared through the character Myshkin that by this image "some people might just lose their faith."³ As if in anticipation of this final word, one might be tempted to see in the open mouth and extended finger a sign of the struggle for life even in this dense and weighty form and thus, perhaps, for the coming resurrection. To rush to this conclusion, however, would be to miss the inescapable finitude and materiality of this organic encounter with death. As one commentator has it, "there is nothing Christlike about this body, nothing sets it apart. It is anyone's corpse."⁴

In the eyes of the modern viewer, this does not appear as the incarnated Christ, but rather as a body discarded, disregarded, and indeed *disincarnated*. For a South African philosophical theology in particular, the importance of this body lies not in the view espousing piety and humility through guilt among the faithful (*devotio moderna*),⁵ but rather in one which radically affirms God's and, therefore, humanities' material and organic quality.⁶ According to a traditional reading of the Gospel of St.

2 See Oskar Bätschmann and Pascal Griener, *Hans Holbein: Revised and Expanded Edition* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 136–38.

3 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 255.

4 Jonathan Jones, "Holbein's dead Christ delivers a shock." *The Guardian*, 18 June 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2009/jun/17/holbein-dead-christ-jonathan-jones>.

5 Bätschmann and Griener, *Hans Holbein*, 138.

6 Perhaps another appropriate depiction would be that of the religious wood carvings of the South African artist, Jackson Hlungwani (1923–2000), who presents a Christ in "a theology

John, the incarnation of the “Word becoming flesh” (John 1:14) serves a reparative function with respect to sin: i.e., God is made *manifest* in the ordinary man as the *extra*-ordinary incarnated Word in the flesh. Such a view, however, performs precisely the opposite function of what St. John, who was battling the Gnostics, attempted to circumvent: namely, that the kenosis of God is by design not a display of a more fully extra-ordinary quality but denotes rather his complete ordinary-ness – those material aspects of the human condition which are also exposed to bodily change and corruptibility. Whatever the theological dynamics contained here, we can at least concede that in the doctrine of the incarnation one always presupposes *some* conception of embodiment. In adopting this orientation, which is far closer to Christian theology’s own self-understanding in antiquity,⁷ theological reflection must always start in the middle of this embodied life which we *are*. This body becomes, thus, both what the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdsson calls an “existential precondition” for theology as well as a topic for theological reflection.⁸ Or perhaps to put this another way: embodied finitude is always the horizon for doing theology just as theology has something to say about the very nature of this horizon of embodied finitude.

The question then arises as to what precisely is the character of this embodiment which accounts for the body’s materiality and organic quality – a dimension which is not *just* objectively-extended (*res extensa*)? To provide an answer which *theology* must

from below, as a theology for the below...engaged and embodied.”

See Khegan M. Delpont, Marthinus J. Havenga and Calvin D.

Ullrich, “Guest editorial.” *STJ Supplementum* 6 no. 4 (2020), 10.

For a further discussion, see also Marthinus J. Havenga’s, “On theological aesthetics, decolonization, and doing theology through the arts.” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7 no. 1 (2021), 13–17.

7 Christoph Marksches, *God’s Body: Jewish, Christian, and Pagan Images of God*, trans. Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019). See also Gregor Etzel Müller, *Gottes verkörperter Ebenbild: Eine theologische Anthropologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

8 Ola Sigurdsson, “Theology in the Middle of Things: Existential Preconditions of Systematic Theology.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 22 no. 4 (Oct 2020): 473–93. See also Sigurdsson’s *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

provoke – that is, if the truly corporeal dimension of Christ's (dis-)incarnation is considered – is to begin *within* the horizon of finitude which philosophical thought allows. In this context, it is well known that the philosophical preoccupation with the body finds its pride of place within the tradition of phenomenology. However, while it is this domain which has sought to unify experience of the body with consciousness (*in*-carnating the latter into the former), its materiality has paradoxically come to be neglected by virtue of a logic of incarnation that reinscribes the dualism of spirit–matter. That this is particularly pronounced in modern theology is easily discernible. For, is it not the case that in the emphasis on the *activity* of the living experience of Christ before and after the resurrection, or simply, the experience of Christ in the *passive* mode to register the consequences of violent affliction in the passion and crucifixion, a picture emerges which ties the body to a Self *without* its distinctive visceral corporeality? That is to say: with little consideration being given to the breathing, eating, perspiring, instinctual, driven, or decaying body.⁹

If one no longer only detects but, indeed, registers a consensus that there is a discernible Gnostic drift within theology toward spiritualisation, then things cannot be said to be as clear in phenomenology. And if phenomenology is supposed to act as a conversation partner to help theology recover its own best insights (as some suggest),¹⁰ then it is necessary to see where phenomenology itself succeeds as well as fails in this endeavour. It is, therefore, through this investigation into the 'Gnostic problem' in phenomenology that this chapter wishes to contribute, perhaps

9 See Gregor Etzelmüller, "Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie." in Gregor Etzelmüller and Annette Weissenrieder (Hrsg.) *Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 219–242. Etzelmüller here cites this dualist tradition in modern theology by way of example in the work of Rudolf Bultmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

10 Etzelmüller, *Gottes verkörperter Ebenbild*. Etzelmüller adopts an "interdisciplinary anthropology of embodiment" that includes phenomenology. However, while beyond the scope here, it should be noted that his approach relies heavily on the "embodied mind" perspective, which depends on problematic presuppositions about the status of culture, the subject, and its overall harmonious relation to reality.

indirectly, to the appropriation of phenomenology in the context of a South African philosophical theology. In short: it will not be enough for theology to uncritically adopt an incarnating formula from phenomenology (*Leib* as lived body or flesh), especially when a doctrine of the incarnation wishes to take the materiality of the body seriously. Theology should rather be sensitive to the tensions within phenomenology about the limits of the *experience* of one's own body, for it is only in this way that we can see the *underground depths* of Christ's (dis-)incarnation and thus of our own.

We shall proceed in three sections: First, attention will be devoted to the founding phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and in particular his influential constitution of the "lived body" or *Leib*. While Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* cannot be disputed for its value for the subsequent tradition of phenomenology, the "lived body" nevertheless is reduced to my own conscious experience (*Erlebenis*) thereof. Husserl can surely be credited for the additional latitude he places on the nature of intersubjectivity and the life-world, but the body itself – at least in its reception – remained a correlate of consciousness; uprooted from its organic processes and the matter from which any conscious activity could come to be in the first place. The Husserlian body is, as it were, always floating *above ground*. Merleau-Ponty (section two), however, comes much closer to a vision of embodiment that acknowledges its vital pre-constitutive accomplishment as well as the intimacy of intertwinement between our bodies and nature.¹¹ For Merleau-Ponty, the body

11 Situating this discussion of the "materiality" of embodiment within the context of phenomenology is a part of a larger project of the author to bring together theological phenomenology, which maintains a certain priority of the first-person perspective as well as an over-emphasis on transcendence, together with the so-called "affective turn" or "new materialist" philosophy. If the former still maintains anthropocentric and idealist prejudices, then the latter also too easily covers over the phenomenological perspective – i.e., the importance of the subject – as well as its contributions to materialist discourse. The present chapter begins to raise these tensions through the fulcrum of Falque's intervention. This also explains, perhaps, why this "philosophical theological" approach to the body does not take its starting point from, say, the tradition of deep incarnational theologies and their cosmic metaphors, though there is certainly theological contiguity with their aims. See for example, Niels Henrik Gregerson (ed.)

is not something one *has* but something one *is*, and this for him, especially in his earlier work, takes the form also of the lived-body (or *le corps vivant*), and later as flesh (or *la chair*). While Merleau-Ponty relinquishes the authority afforded to the Husserlian Transcendental Ego, it is doubtful whether his concept of flesh and its “chiastic” relation to the world can conceive of the materiality of the body which always resides outside of perception. The body in Merleau-Ponty seems to be *grounded everywhere* and thus, paradoxically, is nowhere to be found. However, this is not the whole picture, as the third and final section hopes to demonstrate, in a radicalisation of Merleau-Ponty through the work of Emmanuel Falque. In a provocative reading, Falque illustrates, especially in the later work, that Merleau-Ponty was embarking on a project to discover the alterity of embodiment; one that was animated not by nameless transcendence but by a textured absence and a brute wildness of being that took the subject into the depths of existence, both into the chaos of ourselves and wildness of nature. This figure of the body in Merleau-Ponty is one that reaches into the *underground*, the place where Christ took upon this descent into the subterranean element so that he might dwell and journey with us there. In the conclusion, we briefly gesture back toward theology and consider some of the political–ethical implications of this exploration.

The material and organic body which we are, is, to be sure, not simply extended matter in space, but nor is it only a body incarnated with consciousness. As the *heuristic* example of Holbein’s Christ indicates,¹² the body of Christ is also disincarnated – “spread” in Falque’s terminology – and affectively constituted by a manifold of forces that form the existential precondition *for* incarnation. To think through the body (dis-)incarnated is neither to romanticise chaos nor to discount the orders of conscious

Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) and Aurica Jax and Saskia Wendel (eds.), *Envisioning the Cosmic Body of Christ: Embodiment, Plurality, and Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2020).

- 12 The *heuristic* value of the experience of Christ in culture is here more important than the *didactic* value; see Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 22, 84.

reflection, and nor is it still to celebrate a supposedly debased human condition which receives its organisation in an exclusively theological resolution.¹³ It is first and foremost to connect us to the primordial material elements which we are and remind us that these are a part of the conditions for transformation.

The Husserlian Body

The underlying flirtation with Gnosticism (read as a logic of incarnation) in contemporary theological phenomenologies, such as those found in Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien (the connection and elaborations of which are not the aim of the present chapter),¹⁴ is prefigured in the French responses to Husserl, attempting to unify the experience of the body beyond the so-called *Leib-Körper* distinction. In this contribution, we will only encounter Merleau-Ponty, but a part of this tradition one would also have to consider Emmanuel Levinas. In either case, nevertheless, the figure of Edmund Husserl looms large.

Following the so-called “transcendental turn” beginning already with the publication of *Ideas I* in 1913, the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, has often been criticised as renewing a form of the Cartesian dualism between mind and body.¹⁵ Phenomenology’s supposed primacy on the structures of logic, the inner workings of internal-time consciousness, especially the Transcendental Ego,¹⁶ are said to devalue the

13 I have elsewhere engaged extensively with Falque’s notion of the spread body. See Calvin D. Ullrich, “The Spread Body and the Affective Body: A Discussion with Emmanuel Falque.” *Religions* 15.1 (2024), 30; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010030>.

14 This claim of continuity and influence of what one might call these “first generation” phenomenologists on the so-called phenomenology of “theological turn,” is of course a moot point, but the more interesting question is rather the extent to which their respective theologies come under the sway of certain gestures which de-materialise the body.

15 For example, see J. N. Mohanty, “Roman Ingarden’s Critique of Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology,” in *Phenomenology: Between Essentialism and Transcendental Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 32–45.

16 For some clear distinctions on how Husserl understands this transcendental idealism as a new form of egological science, see §40–41 in Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction*

materiality of the body with all its concomitant complexities, such as those of race, gender, or sexuality.¹⁷

Those familiar with Husserl will know that the fundamental goal of *Ideas I* was to inaugurate a move from the earlier realist paradigms contained in the *Logical Investigations* and the lectures *On the Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, to a more explicit transcendental approach; “back to the things themselves” (*zu den Sachen selbst*) or to those phenomena which give themselves to pure consciousness.¹⁸ Insofar as the body, for Husserl, is a kind of omni-presence for our perception – that “zero-point” for all perceptive experience – the problem to be solved for phenomenology is whether the body is necessary to provide access to pure consciousness. The answer given in *Ideas I* is an emphatic “no,” as the infamous thought experiment of the imagined destruction of the world in §49 demonstrates. The implications for the body are made explicit in §54; for if non-Being were to be imagined – i.e., if the whole of physical nature were to be “annulled,” then “there would be no more bodies [*Leiber*] and therefore no more men ... But my consciousness... would remain an absolute stream of experience.”¹⁹ Husserl believes at this stage he has established the phenomenological possibility of a disincarnated consciousness.

Matters are made considerably more complex in *Ideas II*, where these earlier accounts of the body are extensively supplemented; on the one hand, Husserl does not seem willing to let go of the foundational insight that the body is distinct from the Transcendental Ego but which is further understood in terms of mine-ness or property,²⁰ and on the other, the body is also

to *Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1973), 81, 86.

17 For example, Levinas critically asserted that Husserl’s theory of intentionality was “neutralized and disincarnate.” See Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 27–28.

18 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 74.

19 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 107.

20 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book, Studies in the*

not simply a constituted object in the spatiality of the world but now becomes a *medium* – i.e., a condition of possibility for the appearance of objects in the world as such.²¹ However, perhaps in no other place in Husserl’s oeuvre is the identification of the Body’s manifestation made more explicit than in the widely commented-on section two of the third chapter of *Ideas II* in his discussion of the hand touching the hand.²²

When we speak of the “hand” touching the “hand” we are abstracting the experience of the body (*Körper*) into objective extended space.²³ But when we recognise the “double-way” of the *Leibkörper*, that is, the body as both a physical thing in the material world that touches *and* the hand’s relation to the sensations that “I find on it, and I sense ‘on’ it,” when it is touched, then the body’s constitution is just as primordially related to this (tactile) modality of sensation. To put this another way: what distinguishes the lived-body from the thingly-body is that the former is capable of possessing sensations that are localised and incorporated by various hyletic “sensation-fields” (like touch, sight, hot/cold, etc.). When these sensation-fields work together with kinesthetic sensations (the eye, or the hand touching), they are apprehended in a passive synthesis which Husserl names “sensings” or in the German neologism, *Empfindnisse*, that is, the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of sensation (*Empfindung*).²⁴ Thus, contrary to the “natural attitude” or “naturalistic attitude,” the body under the phenomenological attitude (*Einstellung*) is apprehended as a “practical kinaesthetic horizon” of possibility for both activities of perception and for day-to-day activities that can either be original or acquired over time.

Phenomenology of Constitution, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 223, 224, 259. Hereafter: *Ideas II*.

21 A point which has been recently emphasised by Richard Kearney; see “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics,” in Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 26–29.

22 Husserl, *Ideas II*, 152.

23 Ibid.

24 Alia Al-Saji, “Bodies and sensings: On the uses of Husserlian phenomenology for feminist theory.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010):13–37, 18.

It is not possible to provide a fully composite view of the Husserlian Body, since indeed, many of Husserl's insights remain scattered throughout his corpus as a whole and are picked up upon and expanded by various subsequent thinkers in different ways. Nevertheless, one can arrive at a summary position if one registers that within the context of the problematic set by *Ideas II*, as the subtitle of the volume reminds us – “Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution” – the aim is to show “how the givenness of a certain kind of experienced object [in this case, the Body] is correlative to certain tacit and explicit operations and achievements of consciousness.”²⁵ Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that despite the ambiguity between the Ego and the Body as being constituted, on the one hand, through passive localised sensations and the synthesis of sensings, and on the other hand, as a necessary component in “the constitution of Objects as spatial things,”²⁶ Husserl will nonetheless not grant the latter a special subjective significance. It is, in the end, just “Ego-like.”

The character of this tension is revealing demonstrated in Supplement VII of *Ideas II*, where Husserl develops the distinction between the Ego and the “over-and-against” or “non-Ego,” that is, the constituted stratum of Objectivity. The Body falls within this stratum and therefore is non-Ego, it ultimately “belongs” to the transcendental Ego, which is distinct and independent of it.²⁷ This language of property permeates *Ideas II* and gives the lie to the fact that the subjectivity of the Body is to be understood as a contingent act bestowed or “gifted” to it by the Ego: “the special status of the Body is by grace of the Ego.”²⁸

Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Flesh

The French reception of Husserl sought, through a unique generation of thinkers, to systematically de-centre Husserl's conception of the transcendental Ego from phenomenological discourse and to re-emphasise the Body's own immanent

25 Husserl, *Ideas II*, 136.

26 Ibid., 160.

27 Ibid., 330–31.

28 Ibid., 224.

manifestation. This reception occurred almost exclusively through the *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), translated into French by Gabriella Pfeiffer and Emmanuel Levinas, a publication that emerged from two lectures Husserl delivered at the Sorbonne in 1929. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of this text, not only for Husserl himself but for the tradition which followed. Presenting phenomenology for the first time in France into a Cartesian idiom, Husserl would later call it his *magnum opus* and it would shape phenomenology uncompromisingly as an “egology” – a philosophy of the subject in the shadow of its Cartesian and Kantian antecedents.²⁹ However, it seems almost precisely in reaction to this over-compensation of the Ego that much of the French tradition would seek its diminishment and erasure in favour of the body.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the first to visit the Husserl Archives in Leuven, continues Husserl’s trajectory carried out in *Ideas II*, though he explicitly rejected any primacy afforded to the Transcendental Ego.³⁰ The Body, or what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *le corps vivant*, and variously as *corps propre*, and importantly later on as *la chair*, is not something one has but something one is.³¹ In his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) – still entertaining his ongoing dialogue and critique of Sartre and Husserl carried out in *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) – *la corps vivant* or lived-body becomes the central term and is contrasted, like Husserl, to the objective body. This forms part of the central and but also broader thesis of the book, namely, that “perception”

29 See Didier Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, trans. Joseph Rivera and Scott Davidson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 14.

30 For a comprehensive overview of Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Husserl, see Ted Toadvine, “Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview,” in *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 227–86.

31 “I must even set aside from myself my body understood as a thing among things, as a collection of physico-chemical processes. But even if the *cogitatio*, which I thus discover, is without location in objective time and space, it is not without place in the *phenomenological* world.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), xiv. Emphasis added.

is to be equated with the primacy of embodiment; that we grasp the world not just through vision but via a sensorimotor intentionality, which is both ambiguously pragmatic as well as pre-thetic.³² To articulate his phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty deployed an ingenious strategy to uncover what was not apparently transparent to reflection, that is, to observe the break-downs in bodily functioning. His well-known case of the phantom limb demonstrated how, despite the objective-body missing an arm in the case of an amputation, there was still a “felt” presence which the body experiences in the place of this absence. The experiment showed that the body and our perception of the world involve not just objective measurements of quantifiable space but of felt relations between our body and environment. Thus, like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty also wanted to ground the lived-body in sensation and movement, but unlike him, he refuses to reduce this constitution to tactile sensations alone and also includes the field of visual perception in a circular relation: hands don’t just feel, they see, words are not just spoken into the world by an I, but the I is spoken from the words of the world, and so on.

While reading Merleau-Ponty there is often a neat and underlying unity that describes *le corps vivant*. The “becoming-body of my senses and the becoming-world of my body,” indeed, often strikes of a symmetry between nature and the human being, where such a perfect circulation of sensing and being-sensed instantiates, what Jacques Derrida called, a “hapto-centric closure,”³³ the effect of which is to eliminate the body as other. As Merleau-Ponty himself later conceded in his posthumously published *The Visible and Invisible*, this was “due to the fact that in part I retained the philosophy of ‘consciousness’.”³⁴ It is at this later juncture that Merleau-Ponty introduced and more deeply developed his notion of *la chair* (flesh), precisely to move beyond what could be construed as an ontologisation of the perceptual faculty of embodiment – the body as *perceiver* which becomes

32 Ibid., 83, 87, 171.

33 See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 190.

34 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 183.

the site of all phenomenological givenness.³⁵ Nevertheless, while there is much to learn from Merleau-Ponty and especially in the enigmatic formulations of his later work, it is doubtful whether he succeeded in this endeavour of moving beyond a scheme of embodiment which prioritises the “I-can” of voluntary movement or the perceiver-perceived structure. Even in *The Visible and Invisible*, as Claude Romano has shown, the elaboration of a firmer ontology of flesh which departs from the hangovers of transcendental idealism still issues in a “theoreticism of the flesh.”³⁶ In the endless reversibility and double-movement that becomes characteristic of the ontology of flesh and world (what he famously called “chiasm”), flesh undergoes a “prolongation” into the world just as the world returns to flesh.³⁷ The result, as Romano concludes, is that:

the flesh, as origin of the world, can have no contours in the world; its limits are those of the world itself...Being without limits, it has no skin, either; its ubiquitous presence is a radiance whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. Nor does it have matter. It is without beginning or end. It is that ‘glorified body’ that stands opposed to the ‘momentary body’ and of which we should probably say, as of the pure Husserlian ego, that it has neither birth nor death.³⁸

Any cursory reading of Merleau-Ponty will leave no doubt that the notion of *flesh* is deeply intertwined with the world. However, it has for its primacy a reflexivity that first and foremost determines it as a site for the openness of Being without limitation. In short, the flesh presents a “glorified body” since it appears incarnated everywhere in a radiant plenitude, without a properly defined finitude (“neither birth nor death”) and of what must remain concomitantly foreign and exterior to it. On this reading of Merleau-Ponty, the body is captured by an idealism of the

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- 35 Franck, *Flesh and Body: On the Phenomenology of Husserl*, 23.
 - 36 Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 140.
 - 37 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 255.
 - 38 Romano, *There Is*, 141.

perceptible,³⁹ which, paradoxically, renders it not simply “above ground” in the same way as Husserl, but rather *groundless* in its ubiquity. One must here abandon the ontology of flesh, or at least radicalise it, to encounter the impossibility of coincidence and of an originary bodily exterior-dehiscence by which the body can appear to itself. The precise character of this radicalisation would have to include, in part, the discovery of alterity in Merleau-Ponty – and of a recovery of the principle of “brute being”⁴⁰ in a “phenomenology of the underground.”⁴¹

Falque and the Merleau-Pontian Underground

We have been claiming that the tradition of twentieth-century phenomenology, here in the form of Husserl and his reception in Merleau-Ponty, despite its noble attempt to incarnate the body beyond the Cartesian dualism of soul and body – which has its counterpart in contemporary theological Gnosticisms – has in several ways only updated the duality to a higher level: namely between the lived experience of the body as flesh and the body in its organicity. Through this (dis-)incarnation, the materiality of our body which also makes up our existence is forgotten. Taking up the body as (dis-)incarnated, not only as ‘lived’ in the intentionality of the flesh, no doubt a vast and certain improvement, is not a simple return to the *res-extensia* of Descartes. Rather, it is a deepening of incarnation. This position comes to a head in the contemporary work of Emmanuel Falque, together with whom we discover a radicalisation of Merleau-Ponty toward the limits of phenomenology in Falque’s concept of

39 Romano, *There Is*, 122. “The concept of the flesh does not break with idealism, even if it may at times threaten its internal equilibrium.”

40 “If being is to disclose itself, it will do so before a transcendence, and not before an intentionality, it will be the engulfed brute being that returns to itself.” Merleau-Ponty, “Note from September 1959,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 210.

41 Emmanuel Falque, *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), chap. 2.

the “spread body”⁴² and in a phenomenology of the *underground* or *subterranean*.⁴³

In the context of our discussion, this has to do with a continued investigation into the “Limitation” that constitutes our humanity as created creatures. For Falque, this is to do phenomenology *to its limit*, for the phenomenon of the organic, chaotic, materiality, of the body as revealed in the “lowly God,” is that which lies *beneath* signification or is not simply “given” in the phenomenological sense. Merleau-Ponty, according to Falque, had, just before his untimely death, begun this radicalising project of a “phenomenology of the underground.”⁴⁴ A project which progressively sought to pursue what phenomenology had not taken into account, through an integration of sources as different as psychoanalysis, Existentialism, and French Spiritualism. What “grounds” the *flesh* (*corps vivant*) is the subterranean body; a “descending underground in a sort of katabasis or kenosis

42 Emmanuel Falque, “Toward an Ethics of the Spread Body,” in *Somatic Desire*, 91–116.

43 Emmanuel Falque is the doyen of the third generation of thinkers in the so-called “theological turn” in Continental philosophy coming out of France in recent decades. Based at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*, he is “first and foremost a philosopher” but given the ongoing profusion of theological language and themes in his writing and the fact that he is explicit about his confessional Catholicism, it is easy to misread his primary task. Falque is a Christian thinker, but he wants to understand how to think with Christianity in a philosophical way in a world that is no longer exclusively Christian, or at least beset with new cultural conditions of secular life. These details are not incidental, but crucial to understanding Falque’s methodology, which departs significantly from the initial protagonists of the “theological turn.” Whereas thinkers like Jean-Luc Marion or Emmanuel Levinas begin from an almost reactionary gesture that posits the infinite and then derives the finite, Falque begins from a positive account of the human as such: following Heidegger, this is not finite as privation, but the position of “finitude.” See Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 25 and Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 16–19. Emmanuel Falque, *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 104, 129.

44 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 45–75.

into the ‘cellar’ of our existence.”⁴⁵ To reach and commend this underground for a philosophical theology that departs from uncritical readings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as have seen above, we progress; A) through a renewed humanism, which is not just “about” the human as such, and engages a non-irenic realism that a phenomenology of the body must confront; B) a corporeity which expands the notion of “flesh” to its “element” beyond common conceptions of embodiment; and C) an increasing resistance to incorporation in terms of a physicality that ventures outside of phenomenology and into the depth of our (brute) being-there, connecting us to a latency within the materiality of “Nature.” After this itinerary, we will then be in a better position to see what is at stake in both a phenomenology of the body as well as a theology that takes the subterranean as a necessary site for reflection.

Renewed Humanism

Unlike the “above ground” and the “groundless” in Husserl and a traditional reading of Merleau-Ponty, the *underground* first presupposes a humanism that is realistic about the forces that are both exerted by and on the body. Life is, in this sense, not only an aspiration for transparency and ideality. It entails a “coefficient of adversity” which expresses a “preference for blurred lines over orderly divisions, the depth of obscurity to the radiance of luminosity, the humility of interdependence to the philosophy of assuredness.”⁴⁶ Falque’s interpretation here is harnessed against what he considers an “irenicism of origins” in phenomenology, whereby the methods of its founders presuppose a purism, whether of consciousness, the natural attitude, or Being, denying an essential obscurity in humanity. Unlike Descartes and the bifurcation he inaugurated, the mind and body are in fact less distinct and consist of a “mixture” of each other – a prescient insight which now finds its vindication even in neuro-, cognitive, and affective sciences.⁴⁷ Drawing on Maine de Biran, for Merleau-

45 Ibid., 47.

46 Ibid., 51.

47 See Donovan O. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism After Darwin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

Ponty, humanity is seen less by the divine rights of rationalism and expresses, rather, the primitive fact “of combination, blending and mixture,”⁴⁸ perhaps even by an unacknowledged “animality.”

To speak of the animal in a new humanism is not a *reduction* to animals, as if we were guided by mere instinct; it is rather based on the conviction, often forgotten, that animality is a *part* of the human – as if on a continuum, whose material force or power (*Puissance*) is felt in its intensity, aesthetically captured by the butchered paintings of Francis Bacon but also in work of Chaim Soutine who preceded him.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Falque had described this “animality” and “chaos” of humanity by recovering both its Greco and Judeo-Christian senses, revealing the anthropological from the cosmological: the Greeks spoke of an originary chaos and the biblical tradition of the Tohu-Bohu, where we learn of the “descent into the abyss” of our existence,⁵⁰ not so much to escape it, nor to falsely moralise about sin or culpability, but instead to acknowledge what the limits of our humanity entail. Indeed, a humanity whose corporeity not only refers to an intentional flesh (*Leib*) also considers the “elements” outside of reflection. Contrary to canonical formulations of the body-incarnate within phenomenology, connections are thus here made possible for phenomenologies of embodiment to relate to the non-human as well as other animate organisms.

The Elements of a New Corporeity

With this vision of humanity – decentred, opaque, mixtured, animal – the lines of embodiment are re-drawn, no longer only circumscribed by an ontologised notion of *flesh*, as that point where the body is felt as the living-body *that I am*. Merleau-Ponty is instead in pursuit of an alterity that is more material,

48 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 53.

49 Falque, *The Wedding Feast*, 15. Falque refers to Bacon’s butcher shop paintings with reference to Deleuze’s commentary from *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2005), 32. “But the lived body is still a paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable power.” Falque does not mention Soutine, but his influence on Bacon is well known.

50 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body, and the Eucharist*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham, 2016), 5–10.

natural, or in his language more “textured” and “sensible,” than simply characterised by non-sense (Derrida), and which despite being discovered in all places is not easily placed, though also not place-less. This suggests that while a new corporeity is beyond what can be expressed, it is not a denial of reflexivity in favour of a resignation to an asymptotic apophaticism. On the contrary, embodiment is to be found in the *underground* elements that precede subject-object dichotomies, that is, a conception of *flesh* or corporeity rooted imprecisely in the “old” (though not nostalgic) language and terms of the “elements.” The pre-Socratics’ water, air, fire, and earth, “speak” not so much of the place-lessness of the body in “textual” signification, but offer rather the “textures of flesh” or “styles” of thought to denote a dynamic density utterly removed from the firm phenomenological associations of *Leib* or *Körper*. As such, the elements of this corporeity are less abstract in a customary alterity of openness and difference; texture points rather “towards human community rather than the extremity of absolute otherness.”⁵¹

Although Falque does not mention Emmanuel Levinas in this context, one can also call upon a subversive reading of the philosopher of extreme alterity *par excellence* and refer to the “alimentary function” of sensibility.⁵² Often-overlooked in the jump to the rupture of ethics, is the *passage* of the subject which precedes its subjection to the ethical-Other, namely, through a so-called material genesis out of the elemental substance of life.⁵³ Levinas, thus, like Maurice Blanchot, spoke also of a neutral *there is* (*il y a*) made up of a field of “impersonal ‘field of forces’” which sought concretisation in elemental nature.⁵⁴ In an affective-milieu which surrounds us like an atmosphere, the elemental is that

51 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 58.

52 See Tom Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation After Phenomenology* (London: Open Humanities, 2015), 169 and John Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental.” *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 152–59.

53 See Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979 [1969]), 131–33.

54 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other: And Additional Essays*, trans. Richard H. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 46.

which we live from (*vivre de*). For Levinas, this sensible alimentary function is not just a background horizon for an intentional act, nor is it ever intended or apprehended, but is rather an objectivity that must be *lived through*, while such living-through is not just an effect of objectivity on subjectivity. The element of flesh, to return to Merleau-Ponty, is then a description of Being not as substance; it is “subdued being, non-thetic being, being before being”⁵⁵ and, we could say, being *underneath* being.

The (Dis-)Incarnate and the Natural

If the body is not incarnated in phenomenology, or rather, phenomenological incarnation does not fully, and indeed often fails, to account for the body (the disincarnate) as that which is not always experienced in consciousness or even in its mundane practical use, then what may seem impossible to incorporate precisely because it is “*outside of phenomenology*,”⁵⁶ is an alterity that is nonetheless one that I have, or in some cases an alterity which *has me* (as in the experience of hunger or bodily pain). This is to approach the *resistance* of the body in its organicity, the body as “the flesh and blood” (dis-)incarnated, but this time caught between my own flesh and the flesh of the world. As Falque writes: “Merleau-Ponty thought it just as critical to see the ‘blood of things’ flowing in the world or, at the very least, running in our veins, in order that we abolish the dichotomies with which we have understood the world...by this common ‘injury’ that might serve as a unifying principle.”⁵⁷

The name Falque gives to this body – the body which is resistant and active in its struggle for life – is the “spread body”: “it is not totally objective because it cannot be reduced to a geometric form. Nor is it totally subjective, because it does not fully correspond to the ego when we examine it in terms of consciousness.”⁵⁸ Falque frequently uses the image of the

55 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cited in Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 59.

56 See Emmanuel Falque, “Outside Phenomenology?” trans. Victor Emma-Adamah in *Open Theology* 8 (2022): 315–30.

57 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 60.

58 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 13.

operating table, and writes: “The body extended on the operating table is not there in length, breadth, and depth—as we might describe a Cartesian geometric space. It is there in heartbeats, respiration, and intestinal rumbles—qualitative attributes of biological life.”⁵⁹ Between the lived body (*Leib*) and the extended body (*Körper*) resides the spread body, which is an “abyss and mixture of passions and drives that our biological flesh retains.”⁶⁰ This description of the Chaos of our physiology that feels invasive, Falque further describes as the “limited phenomenon,” not because it is a nothingness or because it saturates intentionality but because it shows the limit of what is overflowed without ever being received into consciousness.⁶¹

Is not this limit of overflowing at once a description of the body as an *experience* of the body as Nature and as *our* nature? “To accede to nature...is always at the same time to collaborate with it: ‘[b]ecoming-nature of man [is] the becoming-man of nature’.”⁶² For Falque, this experience in Merleau-Ponty, i.e., as a body made of nature but also a body that “makes” nature insofar as it is situated in a cultural field, reveals only one dimension. The other aspect is that the social-historical production of nature is preceded, as it were, by a more originary Nature: the underground (*Urgrund*) of “brute being” – which denotes its inaccessibility and sheer “thereness.” Crucially, this is not an underground onto which a ground could be built, nor is it a substructure onto which a justification for a superstructure can be made. The “brute being” of Nature is rather the attempt to seek a positive concept beneath subjectivity and nature – a “material ontology” – that is not simply rendered by my own determination (*Eigene*) and neither is it completely foreign (*Fremde*). We are inextricably tied to it even as it is “outside”: “Merleau-Ponty’s exhaustively researched ‘brute nature’ designates less a being that is ‘set apart’ (*hors*) than it does a thought of the ‘outside’ itself (*dehors*).”

59 Ibid. This has some continuity with what Drew Leder once referred to as “viscerality.” See Drew Leder, “Flesh and Blood: A Proposed Supplement to Merleau-Ponty.” *Human Studies* 13 (1990): 209–219.

60 Falque, *The Wedding Feast of the Lamb*, 16.

61 Ibid., 22.

62 Falque, *The Loving Struggle*, 62. Falque is quoting Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 185.

It is never a matter...of ‘overcoming’ (philosophy, metaphysics, humanity, etc.) but, instead, of ‘digging deeper...until we discover this common ground, this ‘wild region’ that makes us ‘ourselves’ without being properly ‘ours’.”⁶³

Conclusion: The Lowly God and Subterranean Anarchism

To conclude this chapter, let us briefly consider the theo-political implications of this “phenomenology of the underground.” What, if any, are the political-ethical consequences of a phenomenology of the body which follows the (dis-)incarnate into the subterranean? If we began with the image of the body of the (dis-)incarnated Christ in the tomb, then this provocation for phenomenology, as we have developed above, cannot be said to have borne fruit if we are simply content with hording the discoveries of our exploration into yet another solipsistic description of the Self. Thus, having begun with theology, let us first now return to it, systematically, in terms of the creature unfolding its creatureliness in relation to its Creator. Indeed, it is the connection to this “relation” which distinguishes the character of the “lowly God.”⁶⁴ For, in a radical incarnation, where Christ comes to dwell in the very depths of our material existence, there is such a kenotic movement of God which reveals a historicity that is at odds with a distant Creator. The Creator relates to its creation not as its cause, but nor beholden only by and through the creation, as if God could be reduced to our own immanent experience. God, rather, is *with us* in a relation of horizontality such that God’s being is manifested *among us* and *in the world*.⁶⁵ By invoking the axial metaphor of horizontality, it should be clear that a “lowly God” is not a simple counter-point to a God “on-high,” as if it would establish itself as a new principle

63 Ibid., 65.

64 Ibid., 69–71.

65 There is much continuity here with John D. Caputo’s notion of the “weakness of God.” See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006). For a detailed exposition see Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo’s Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

or ground. Indeed, the same follows from a phenomenology of the underground: while it defers saturation or auto-affection, it is not a new “ground” for a phenomenology of embodiment – it is precisely outside phenomenology.

The lowly God is thus a figure of non-sovereignty that is materially incarnated into the world in an unceasing relation of incompleteness and entanglement between Creator and creature. It follows that such a God retrieves and materially inaugurates a world in which all things are mutually constituted by the same “textures of flesh” – found in a renewed humanism, in the elements of a new corporeity, and in the “flesh and blood” of all Nature. This issues in a political-ethical configuration that we could now call “subterranean anarchism.” We can only offer a gesture at this conclusion, but as someone like Catherine Malabou has recently shown, the philosophical understanding of a “politics of horizontality” is amplified by geographical language.⁶⁶ She does not consider the subterranean, as such, and is instead critical of thinkers like Derrida, Levinas, Agamben and Rancière, for failing to think not the ungovernable but the *non-governable*.⁶⁷ Anarchism, for Malabou, is to think not anarchy and disorder, but the outside of governability and order – whether in representation, politics, any hierarchy, or, for example, in the incarnated body that forgets the (dis-)incarnated. In its refusal of verticality, a subterranean anarchism that accompanies the lowly God of a phenomenology of the underground is not an aimless wondering in the plains of place-lessness. On the contrary, it is non-statically “rooted” in the particularity of the sub-terra of our own existence, one that is connected and shared in ways that escape the logic of governing and is thus always open to the “plastic forces” of its own immanent habitat.⁶⁸

66 Catherine Malabou, *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shred (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

67 Ibid., 23.

68 For a discussion on Malabou’s concept of plasticity in another context, see Calvin D. Ullrich, “The Future of Nothingness: Plastic Apocalypticism or an Insistent Messianic?” in *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 8 no. 1 (2022): 1–22. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2022.v8n1.a13>.

Chapter 10

Wiredu's Empirical Metaphysics: The Political Nature of Becoming and Understanding

Justin Sands 

Introduction: The Consequences of Translation

Kwasi Wiredu begins his philosophy with a moral anthropology by drawing upon his Akan heritage and its communalism. For Wiredu, he finds that there are some cultural universals – namely, the need to communicate and a fundamental “Golden Rule” morality – which then are expressed through cultural particulars such as language and mores and norms. The key to this moral anthropology is that personhood is a status to be achieved, and it is done so through the community's esteem of an individual's actions and, consequently, their character.

The notion that “one becomes a person through community” is a widely explored African moral concept, but it often gets “cogitocized” in the process; meaning that its ontological elements – what makes a being a *human* being – gets repackaged into a Western framework. This is why this chapter is pivotal for our exploration on how African philosophers like Serequeberhan and Wiredu need to be read in their own right before being brought into conversation with Western Philosophy, and especially Western phenomenology.

Take, for example, the concept of Ubuntu, which in Zulu is spoken as “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” and literally translates as “a person is a person through others.” Ubuntu is translated/practised differently across multiple Southern African language and cultural communities, but it is often rendered into English as

“I am because we are.” Note the contra-Cartesianism at play here: rather than “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), we have “I am because we are” (*ego sum quia sumus*). Though this may be a well-intentioned way to convey African philosophy, in its translation it creates a dichotomy with (or worse, a dialectic with) the Western notion of the self and its ontology.¹ For one, note how “I am because we are” lacks any linkage to thought or self-reflection – this is why I provided cantilevering Latin translations to make this issue clear. Returning to the West’s problematic historical denial that African peoples possess a sufficient rationality to philosophise, this translation of Ubuntu into English betrays its complicity.

Given that Ubuntu has a wide-ranging and developing scholarship of its own, it is too unwieldy for our scope to explore it further.² I raise it here because, although Wiredu’s moral anthropology does not fall under Ubuntu, it shares the same communalist ethos and relational logic. What this brief discourse on Ubuntu shows is how difficult it can be – racially problematic even – to translate African thought into Western frameworks; especially given that these frameworks’ language and structure are built from fundamental metaphysical concepts and its presumptions.

- 1 For more, see Uchenna Okeja, “Justification of Moral Norms in African Philosophy,” in *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, Edwin Etieyibo, ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 213–220.
- 2 There is rich and developing scholarship in this area. For what many see as keystone text on Ubuntu and African philosophy, see Mogobe Romose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, (Harare: Mond Books Publishers, 2005), 38–44. For a critique of Ubuntu as philosophy and an argument for developing a stronger moral-philosophical foundation to African philosophy, see: Aribiah David Attoe, *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 65–73. For Ubuntu’s role as a relational ethics, and the implications thereof, see: Thaddeus Metz, “Towards an African Moral Theory (Revised),” in Isaac Ukpokolo, (ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 105–112; Anke Granness, “Concepts of Justice in Africa: Present and Past,” in Isaac Ukpokolo (ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 310–315.

Wiredu notices this and urges caution when comparing African thought to other Western philosophies and its languages.³ Moreover, as Edwin Etieyibo argues, when trying to bring African philosophy *into* a Western discourse, one side or the other needs to be modified and often that side is African philosophy. This is what he calls a “Western Universalism,” whereby the West still dictates how far and how much African philosophy is allowed, if you will, into the discourse.⁴ This is also why Tsenay Serequeberhan states that African Philosophy and Continental philosophy typically “dialogue at a distance,” where Continental philosophy engages African philosophy so as long as it is useful to Continental philosophy’s projects.⁵ In short, the West’s discourses often pick and choose what they like within African philosophy, neutering these concepts from their broader implications. It is a hermeneutics of appropriation rather than a robust engagement.

Contrariwise, Wiredu also argues that one cannot fully grasp the importance of a moral anthropology unless they accept its metaphysical implications: if personhood is acquired through engagement with others, and thus one discovers who they are through these engagements, then it also follows that one discovers the world itself – in both a concrete and metaphorical sense – through these engagements. Hence, Wiredu emphasises that the Akans’ moral anthropology follows an “empirical metaphysic,” which follows an empirically social epistemology.⁶ If one’s personhood is always-already becoming through engagements with the world, then one’s sense of the world – what it is and what it could be – is likewise always-already becoming. This is why Wiredu calls for a conceptual decolonisation – with an emphasis

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- 3 Kwasi Wiredu, “Reflections on Cultural Diversity,” *Diogenes* 205 (2005), 118–121.
 - 4 Edwin Etieyibo, “African Philosophy in The Eyes of the West,” *Phronimon*, 17.1 (2016), 87. Note that Etieyibo’s critique is against Metz’s reading of Ubuntu, which relates to the issues mentioned throughout this Introduction.
 - 5 Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2015), Chapter 2, “Dialogue at a Distance,” 39–56.
 - 6 Wiredu, “Empiricism: The Empirical Character of an African Philosophy,” in Helen Lauer, Nana Aba Appiah Amfo, Jemima Asabea Anderson (eds.), *Identity Meets Nationality: Voices from the Humanities* (Ligon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2011), 22.

on *conceptual*, or the notion of what a concept psychically is – since merely rejecting anything colonial requires a rational negotiation of what makes it colonial, whether it is beneficial to the community despite its colonial genealogy, and whether it has already been embedded into the given community's ethical-empirical self-understanding.⁷

This is also why he has an aversion to the West's reading of the Akan as overtly spiritual or superstitious, and why this shoehorning of Akan philosophy into a Western paradigm is so problematic. For instance, the notions of spirituality and materiality are foreign concepts to the Akan: "Yet not only is the notion of the spiritual unintelligible within [Akan thought and culture] ... it also is objectively a very problematic one."⁸ He then carries on to show that it is problematic because it skews the relationship the Akan have to God, to their ancestors, and to their community. Thus, Western spirituality, like many other concepts in Western discourses, is "not a universal feature of human thinking," and, consequently, concepts such as spirituality are neither philosophically innocent and cannot be presumptuously employed. What this means for us is that, if one is to explore African philosophies and religions, then they must be extremely careful – hermeneutically suspicious – with how they employ Western terminologies, which are beholden to specific intellectual assumptions.⁹

In what follows I will keep this in mind as we investigate the political nature of Wiredu's empirical metaphysics. What I will emphasise throughout is how his moral anthropology *builds to* a metaphysics – it is crafted "from the bottom to the top" rather than hoisting an anthology into a metaphysical framework – and thus is always-already moral (and hence, always-already political). I will do so by first showing how Wiredu's critique of faith is really a critique of anti-rationality. This critique of anti-

7 Kwasi Wiredu, "An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy and Orality." *Research in African Literatures* 40.1 (Spring 2009), 9. See also Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1996), 137, 142–143.

8 Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 55. Note: hereafter this title will be abbreviated as *CUP*.

9 *CUP*, 55.

rationality is important to him since it solidifies that the Akans' metaphysics is not spiritual nor divine in any way; it is a purely rational framework of understanding.

Once this is made clear, I will then describe Wiredu's reading of the Akans' empirical metaphysics, highlighting how its basis on concrete encounters with other people and the world itself eschews a transcendent/immanent (or supernatural/natural) paradigm. Of greater significance is that, for Wiredu, an Akanian empirical metaphysics is entirely spatial: it is based upon both experience and the capability of forming ideas from these experiences. This displays how Wiredu's metaphysics eschews any abstraction or speculative rationality; everything is spatialised, even metaphor, and even then cannot be merely described as purely immanent. Finally, we will unpack the way in which this moral, spatialised empirical metaphysics entails an always-already becoming of a political-moral nature and what that means to both a person and their community.

Wiredu's Rationality Over and Against "Faith"

Wiredu has consistently been critical of the concept of faith and, by extension, the Western distinctions of supernatural/natural and the religious/secular. From my reading, I think that why Wiredu is so critical of the concept of faith is that he is frustrated by the ways in which the West renders African thought as overly emotional, spiritual/superstitious, and therefore not sufficiently rational. This concern runs similarly to Tsenay Serequeberhan's complete dismissal of *Africanté* and *Negritude*. Furthermore, Wiredu's critique carves a space where African rationality can be understood through its own distinctions.

Wiredu's critique holds vast decolonial implications, but it also emphasises a key philosophical point: the Akan (and other African traditions) simply do not have these distinctions, and the West problematically imposes these categories upon African culture, distorting these cultures in the process. For example, Wiredu argues that it was Christian missionaries who bastardised the Akan language (and thus Akan cultural and thought) to both delegitimise the Akans' intellectual heritage and to convert

them.¹⁰ In missionary circles, this bastardisation was justified through the notion of *preparatio evangelica*, or the belief that God had predisposed Africans to Christianity due to their overtly spiritual nature.¹¹

One can see this in his early, highly influential article, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought.”¹² Here, Wiredu emphasises how African Traditional Thought – often construed as primitive religion – is contrasted with Western science and reasoning. “Nevertheless,” he argues sarcastically, “since [African] traditional thought is inferior to modern science-oriented thought in some obvious and important respects, some Western liberals have apparently had to think hard to protect themselves against conceiving of Africans as intellectually inferior.”¹³ He continues by lamenting how African traditions are delimited to “spectacles of otherwise enlightened Africans” and how the West tends to see these acts as “superstitious” and not recognising “the content of a belief,” seeing it rather as a “mode of entertainment.”¹⁴

Where the West views African witchcraft as superstitious, in short, what they surmise is an irrational spectacle for their own amusement, bereft of serious reflection. However, Wiredu is keen to point out the hypocrisy in all this: there are people in London who proudly purport to be witches; superstition runs rampant throughout Western society; Westerners too pray for rain or for a good harvest. The list goes on and on, and yet how is any of this at all different from Africa?¹⁵ And finally, in contrast to the superstitious, there are plenty of Africans who employ rationality throughout their daily lives, and this cannot be relegated to an accessory to their consciousness. Rather, it is germane to their

10 CUP, 52.

11 James Kombo, “The Trinity in Africa,” *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 3.2 (2009), 128. Note that Kombo gathers this from his reading of John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 39; John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 44.

12 Kwasi Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought,” *Transition*, 75/76 (1997): 320–327.

13 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 321.

14 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 321.

15 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 322.

own sense of being. Consequently, Wiredu argues that “the truth, then, is that rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West, nor is superstition a peculiarity of the African peoples.”¹⁶

What this article advances, and what Wiredu will expand upon throughout his work, is that superstition, religion, or “faith,” construed in whichever sense, can only be cross-culturally compared with corresponding counterparts, and one cannot delimit African culture to the realm of the spiritual as so many Christian missionaries (amongst others, but he specifically singles them out) are wont to do.¹⁷ In short, he is clearing away, by his own means, the colonial view of Africa being too superstitious to be rationally serious and, in its place, Wiredu posits that Africa’s rationality is not inferior to the West’s in spite of its different orientation and operation.¹⁸

This is why he begins with a moral anthropology which expands to an empirical metaphysics rather than the other way round, which is typically how Western philosophies present their larger claims. He finds no need to generate or explain African philosophy on the West’s terms: he only needs to do so from his own Akan perspective. In fact, presenting his Akan philosophy in a Western fashion would strip from it all nuance and intellectual force. Therefore, dispensing with the concept of faith – removing it from philosophical consideration – allows him to place African rationality as the focal point of West’s dialogue with African thought. Africa’s intellectual beliefs become the centre of consideration rather than being ancillary to Africa’s religious beliefs and practice, which the West does not understand but nonetheless fixates upon.

This being the case, Wiredu’s definition of faith holds some peculiar details and needs to be read in full. Note how, although he allows space for a self-reflective practise of faith, his definition emphasises an unthinking adherence to dogmatism:

16 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 322.

17 *CUP*, 48–52.

18 Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 326.

The word 'faith' can be used in various senses. ... [in the way I employ it, I mean that] *what is believed by faith is, by virtue of that fact, inaccessible to rational evaluation. Accordingly, there can be no discussion with non-believers.* There is another complication. Religious dogmatists (of the anti-rational variety) are apt to maintain the dependence of morality on religion. The notion of what is morally right now comes to mean what is willed by the God in whom the particular believer believes. *The combination of anti-rational faith with this divine-command view of morality can lead to imperiously held views, not only about how abysmally wrong-headed non-conformers are, but also about how ungodly and unregenerate they are.* ... Given [that they believe their morality is God-given] they will hold their beliefs very strongly; indeed, with uncompromising inflexibility. ... Clearly, so long as such beliefs hold sway among their proprietors, there can be no chance of a dialogue. *The reason is that dialogue presupposes the fallibility of all its participants.* Consequently, if such beliefs should happen to function even as undertones of political dispute, the difficulties of conflict resolution are multiplied a thousand-fold. The only ray of hope that one espies in this matter is owing to the fact that in some dogmatic religions ... there are some devotees who do not entertain their beliefs in an anti-rational manner. *They appear outnumbered*, but, since time is infinite, such believers might, perhaps, come some day to outnumber their more faith-based partners in piety by the power of rational education.¹⁹ (Emphasis mine)

Wiredu often references this notion of faith within his works, but not quite as openly as quoted above.²⁰ On the one hand, it is

19 Kwasi Wiredu, "Reflections on Cultural Diversity," *Diogenes* 205.1 (2005), 126.

20 See: Kwasi Wiredu, "Truth and Dialogue," in Christian Kanzian and Edmund Runggaldier, S.J. (eds.), *Cultures, Conflict, Analysis, Dialogue* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2007), 127; Kwasi Wiredu, "Identity as an Intellectual Problem," in Jose Cabezon and Sheila Greeve Davaney (eds.), *Identity and Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), p. 212; Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1980), 28, 169n.22.

quite problematic that Wiredu establishes his own definition of faith without serious consideration or investigation into the way in which the concept of faith operates in various theologies and philosophies of religion.²¹ This makes him liable to creating a strawman against faith, particularly so when emphasising its so-called unquestioning nature. In a sense, his critique of the unthinking, stereotypical rendering of African Traditional Thought could likewise be held against him and his definition of faith. Furthermore, I also know that numerous theologians – from Jurgen Moltmann in the 1970s up to Elizabeth Johnson in the 2020s – likewise critique the fundamentalist faith Wiredu highlights, and they do so to emphasise the “pro-rational,” open faith he espouses at the end of the above quote.

On the other hand, granting Wiredu some reprieve, I find that what Wiredu really is critiquing is an unquestioning anti-rationality and its resultant dogmatic ideolog(ies). In his moral anthropology, which is not revealed by or indebted to a god, Wiredu argues that ethical personhood is inherently rational. “Faith” becomes a means for him to critique an irrational – or blindly applied – morality that enters society under the guise of religious dogma and/or ideology. Contrarily, though his morality is impartial, it is sympathetic and therefore is fundamentally rational: it holds to a moral standard of conduct, yet one’s actions are weighed and judged – hence reasonably considered – against that standard.²²

Throughout his work, Wiredu makes substantial critiques against unthinking dogmas and irrationality. Importantly, while he will often attribute it to religion, secular institutions and frameworks are not immune either. Their problematics arise through a susceptibility to ideologies divorced from reason. So crafted, they employ an unthinking, instrumental reasoning which relies on a set of unquestionable values for their moral-social positions and acts: “A man pushing a doctrinaire line does

21 Motsamai Molefe offers the strongest critique I have seen against this. See Motsamai Molefe, “A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality.” *Acta Academia*, 48.1 (2016): 91–110.

22 Kwasi Wiredu, “Society and Democracy in Africa.” *New Political Science*, 21.1 (1999), 35–36.

not in the standard case say, 'I know that the policy I am pursuing is not reasonable but I don't care.' What usually happens is that his sensitivity to observation and reasoning is dulled by emotion; his perception is distorted and consequently he honestly regards his line as the best."²³

What this critique of faith and/or dogmatism means for us is that Wiredu is intent on showing the empirical nature of morality and thus the rational theory of mind which crafts an Akan empirical metaphysics. As Fimono Julia Awajiusuk puts it, for Wiredu, "African morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare. African traditional ethics is thus based on natural light of reason with conscience playing a central role."²⁴ Remember that personhood is something one acquires through social esteem; it is communally awarded and not a mere given. Thus, even being "someone" requires rational – not ritual – consensus. If this is so, if the basis of even being a person is socially rational and derived from empirical encounter, then so is our entire understanding of the world.

Thus, for Wiredu, we arrive at a bottom-up metaphysics: we require communication and a foundational "golden rule" (however construed) to survive; in our survival we develop a shared language through which we develop a shared culture – a society – and within that shared culture we develop personal esteem through others whilst reflexively giving that to others as well; from this shared culture and its moral encounter with the outer, concrete world, we develop a sense about this world and the way in which it works together (whether in harmony or discord); this sense becomes a metaphysics in the way that it helps further organise our moral-social encounters and our own sense of personhood as we interact with others and the world at large.

In the next section, I will set this out in detail. For now, though, notice how intent Wiredu is on the rational nature of this metaphysics: as we shall see, he is not arguing that there is no God

23 Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture*, 177. Emphasis is mine.

24 Fimono Julia Awajiusuk, "Reflections on African Ethics: A Case For Cultural Relativism." *Ciências da Religião: história e sociedade*, 12.1 (2014), 41.

(for indeed the Akan believe in a God), but that we cannot rely upon an unthinking ideology for moral or personal comfort. Not only is our view of the world at stake, but so is our own personhood. This amplifies the consequences of an empirical metaphysics.

Wiredu's Empirical Metaphysics

At this juncture, it is important to remember that what follows will be Wiredu's reading of Akan metaphysics, not a definitive account of Akan thought itself.²⁵ That being said, Wiredu sees the Akan as "a highly metaphysical people in that they are very curious about concepts such as God, human personality, destiny, free will, causation. But they are preeminently empirical in their intellectual orientation."²⁶ The primary difference from Western cultures lies within this relation to experience (i.e., empirically) and its implications of what could be called God and how God "operates," if you will, within the universe. As Wiredu explains:

In radical contrast, the Akan Supreme Being is a kind of cosmic architect, a fashioner of the world order, who occupies the apex of the same hierarchy of being which accommodates, in its intermediate ranges, the ancestors and living mortals, and, in its lower reaches, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Thus the universe of being is ontologically homogenous. In other words, everything that exists exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking. In the Akan language to exist is *wo ho*, which, in literal translation, means 'to be at some place.' There is no equivalent, in Akan, of the existential 'to be' or 'is' of English, and there is no way of pretending in that medium to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space. This locative connotation of the Akan concept of existence is irreducible except metaphorically. Thus you might speak

25 For his primary critics, amongst other examples, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, (eds.), *Personhood and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Vol. I* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992). Wiredu addresses these critiques in the final chapter of *CUP*.

26 *CUP*, 87.

of there existing an explanation of something...without incurring any obligation of special specification, because an explanation is not an object in any but a metaphorical sense, and to a metaphorical object corresponds only a metaphorical kind of space. The same applies to so-called abstract entities. In the Akan conceptual framework, then, existence is spatial. Now, since whatever transcendence means in this context, it implies existence beyond space, it follows that talk of any transcendent being is not just false but unintelligible from an Akan point of view.²⁷

Note how, while there is an implied hierarchy of being, each entity exists in the same fashion as every other being. The hierarchy is crafted through esteem, or status, rather than anything ontologically pre-ordained: God exists in just the same sense as an ant, and in the same realm of space as an ant, where each occupies a specific place and time. Though God or an ant may hold different social statuses, their ontological and spatial status remains the same.

Moreover, as part of being in this same sense of space and time, both God and the ant are subject to the same rules: the Akan adhere to an “inherent law-likeness of reality. And the crucial consideration is that God’s relationship with the rest of the universe, that is, the world, is also conceived to be inherently law-like. ... Divine law-likeness *only* ensures that there will be no arbitrary interferences in the course of the world-process.”²⁸ Wiredu explains that this is why the Akan do not appeal to God for intervention, since God is not supernatural to the law-likeness of the world; the supernatural/natural dichotomy “has no place in the Akan system of thought.”²⁹

This has moral implications for the argument, namely, that even metaphorical (note: not abstract!) notions accord to concrete experiences. This entails, for Wiredu, the “concrete” nature from which these notions are derived maintaining their “concreteness,” or physicality. What this means, for

27 CUP, 49–50.

28 CUP, 50.

29 CUP, 51. Emphasis is mine.

Wiredu, is that Akan metaphysics is entirely spatial: it does not separate contemplation about the world (say, a transcendental categorisation of the principles of knowledge) from the physical nature of the world itself. Every concept reflected upon in the Akan worldview thus corresponds to the concrete experiences within the world; one cannot abstract the world to reflect upon the world. Even metaphors exist in a form of metaphorical space.

What holds this empirical metaphysics together, then, are two key concepts: First, that metaphysics cannot be done alone through an inward introspection. Metaphysical contemplation must be done through reflecting upon shared (i.e., relational) experiences, whereby these reflections are socially negotiated to arrive at a consensus about the world. Second, in order for these experiences to happen, they must happen in a given space for them to be concrete. Accordingly, one's reflection upon those experiences cannot divorce said experiences from their spatialised nature. Doing so would negate their concrete actuality and move them into an abstract realm accessible only to the individual. This negation destroys the social-empirical nature of the concept/experience in question.³⁰

Returning to this notion of "law-likeness," Wiredu states elsewhere that "in sum, a human being is a rule-following animal, and language is nothing but an arrangement of rules."³¹ Accordingly, when thinking about the world and/or cosmology, Wiredu argues that the Akan hold that everything has its explanation: "*biribiara wo nenkyerease* – a kind of principle of sufficient reason."³² This explanation is found in the order of the world, but a lingering concern is whence this explanation comes?

30 This negation, or divorce between the social reflection and empirical experience, is the great contrast between Akan metaphysics and Western metaphysics. As mentioned above, this contrast is often omitted when translating African thought into Western paradigms. This is why many perceive Africans to be overtly spiritual people when their worldviews are, in fact, incongruent to the supernatural/natural paradigm altogether. Moreover, addressing Akan metaphysics as a purely immanent metaphysics is likewise a problem since it denudes Akan metaphysics' social – and thus morally political – nature.

31 CUP, 24.

32 CUP, p. 50.

I argue that Wiredu sees the origins of this explanation as emerging out of the universal, vital forces he locates within basic human survival.

Going back to Wiredu's cultural universals – communication and the “golden rule” – we find Wiredu describing how communication builds a language through referents between things/events which become words out of which – and through relational interaction with others – a vocabulary, syntax, and grammar arises. Furthermore, morality – especially the notion of treating others the way one would wish to be treated if they were in the others' situation – arises through relational interaction which therefore establishes ethical/moral standards: a sympathetic impartiality. Wiredu's general theory of language, part and parcel with his general theory of morality, are built through experiences and interchanges between persons.

These interchanges create a network or society, whereby explanations for the unknown are negotiated in the same way in which one struggles to describe – or a community struggles to judge or understand – an event or experience. As these vital forces evolve within a community, they frame an explanation of both that community's purpose and the meaning of (and order to) the world. This is what makes his empirical metaphysics, to my mind, always-already political: it is socially vital to the sustenance of the community itself and thus it is always-already being socially negotiated as the community encounters the world, and persons within their community encounter each other. Both events build a sense or explanation or meaning of the world order, i.e., a metaphysics.

What makes this exceptional to a Western metaphysics – whether religious or secular – is not an appeal to God or to any transcendent *a priori* or abstract idealism, but the fact that speculative reasoning is never a consideration. In technical language, speculative reasoning, in the Kantian/Hegelian sense at least, is the philosophical notion of thinking about thought itself (i.e., infinite reason), and this would literally be “none sense” due to the pure fact that it never practically relates to the here-and-now of the person or community participating in the reflection

upon the issue at hand.³³ If a thought cannot be construed in or corresponded to a experiential sensation, then it holds no sense whatsoever to think it.

Moreover, speculative reasoning's solitary introspective tilt, where one could rationalise the world by oneself through inwardly reasoning about thinking itself, would be 'none sense' due to its ignorance of the fact that all about which we think comes through engagements – through sensory experiences – with the people and the world in which we inhabit. We cannot survive in the world alone, *pace* Wiredu, therefore we cannot think of the world alone. We must always remember that we live in communion with others – whether harmoniously or discordantly – and that communion always-already imparts our notions about the space in which we live.

Finally, just as an empirical metaphysic refuses abstraction, and therefore cannot be stereotyped as overtly supernatural or transcendent, it likewise cannot be confused as overly immanent. Nor can it be understood as a remixed Lockean *Weltanschauung*. Remember that empirical, for Wiredu, is not merely an existential ideal, but entails the capacity for critically reflecting upon experience. Empirical, here, means not just the experience itself but the *capability to contemplate experience itself*. Importantly, this capability reflexively allows one to think or reflect upon previous, present, and future experiences in their becoming a person within community. Wiredu distinctly points out:

In other words, we are not born with a mind that is a tabula rasa, as the seventeenth-century British empiricist philosopher John Locke suggested. *Rather we are born with only the potential for one.* The acquisition, through suckling, nursing, and nurturing by parents or persons in loco parentis, of the gestured rudiments of language is the first hint of a baby's pretension to mind. *Even this much is already heavily laden with culture, that is, with a certain particular*

33 For more on speculative reasoning, see: Justin Sands, "The Concept of *Aufhebung* in the Thought of Merold Westphal: Appropriation and Recontextualization." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (June 2015), 3n.13.

*way of becoming sensitive to “the other” and subsequently cognizant of the self.*³⁴

Sure, the Akan are curious about God, nature, and events unknown, but their curiosity flows not just through their own experience. It flows also through the practical, pragmatic functioning they experience within and through the world; the capacity for mind is met with their reception of the culture which nurtures them. Furthering this, the laws through which they experience the world also dictate the way in which the Akan understand that world and, consequently, the way in which they morally engage that world. Again, it is a bottom-up metaphysics: from the potentiality of forming fundamental, vital exchanges to culture and moral norms, to exploring the questions of both the mundane and cosmos, Wiredu's Akan metaphysics is one in which its practitioners need to go out into the world to find their sense of both themselves and their world.

Finding one's sense of the world and, in tandem, finding one's personhood or character entails a sense of becoming. Again, one *becomes* a person through their engagements with their community, and a community *becomes* itself through interpersonal interactions and external encounters with the world in which they find themselves.

From the above, we now understand the way in which an empirical metaphysics develops from the rationality an individual employs to not only find understanding or meaning from worldly events, but also understanding and meaning of their own moral character. This rationality thus guides one on their path to becoming a person, but, through its metaphysical nature, there appear to be larger concerns involved beyond one's personhood. This is what our final section will explore.

34 Wiredu, “Identity as an Intellectual Problem,” 214. Emphasis is mine.

The Relational Implications of a Moral Anthropology and its Empirical Metaphysics

What we have detailed thus far is how Wiredu's moral anthropology is not just communal in the sense of personhood and community, but also communal in the sense that its metaphysics is socialised in nature. For the former, one only becomes a person through social esteem; for the latter, a thing only becomes worthy of contemplation in relation to other things in and through the space which we all co-inhabit. This final section will touch upon what I find to be the lynchpin that connects Wiredu's thinking: a relational, or consensual, logic that is necessarily political.

Wiredu argues that humanity is a rule following species.³⁵ From its language formation, to its development of the "Golden Rule," through the formation of specific customs and laws, humanity seeks an order to the world not only to survive but, as we have seen in his metaphysics, to find meaning in that survival. It makes sense, then, that his reading of the Akans' empirical metaphysics establishes a set of rules for contemplation and even has its own principle of sufficient reason ("*biribiara wo nenkyerease*"). What I find interesting is that these rules – from who is a person to what is God – are both co-developed and co-effective: one can only form a language with others; through culture, one can only bestow personhood (let alone acquire it) through others; finally, through a shared logic, one can only find meaning in the world through a shared inference of signs and symbols with others. Each aspect cannot be done in silo; nothing can be understood or fundamentally comprehensible without community.

Moreover, nothing develops or changes without encounter. This is why spatiality is so fundamental to Wiredu's empirical metaphysic: if a fundamental order is to be applied to the world, it can only be applied insofar as there is a *shared experience of the world*. Empirical experience is required for two reasons: First, something must happen in order for it to be shared. Second, in order for something to be meaningful it must be understood in relation to other things/events.

35 CUP, 25–26.

Concerning the first requirement, since there is no divine revelation or anything beyond the world itself, then something must have happened for it to be shared. The happening of the event takes place within the world – i.e., in our time and space – which means that the event can be comprehended by others since they have baseline referents. Even if it is a brand-new experience, for example someone witnessing a new technology that at first appears to be magic, it can be logically broken down by the community in accordance with what they already believe to make it appear possible within time and space. In so doing, a co-development occurs: their notion of how the world works – what is possible and impossible – changes in tandem with their comprehension of the new experience in question. This co-development has a knock-on effect in that it may re-orient their notions of other concepts, objects, and even laws or order.

Concerning the second requirement – even presuming the first one is false – in order for anything to generate meaning it must do so in relation to other experiences. Even in the realm of metaphor or concept, if one is to convey their thoughts they must employ a shared language – or, more importantly, a shared sensibility – so that it is understood by others. There must be referents for others to grasp, and those references are derived from shared experiences. It is only thus that someone can share their beliefs with others. One can experience something alone, to be sure, but its meaningfulness expands when that experience is taught to others whilst others share their own experience in turn. In conversation or, more technically, through social negotiations, a community comes to understand the world in which they live and the meaning of life within that world. If something “otherworldly” happens, then it changes as these social negotiations carry on throughout generations. It does not matter what experience a person has; if they share it and it is received by the community, then the community judges it with their remembrance of past experience to arrive at an understanding of the situation and event at hand.

This second requirement adds moral weight to Wiredu’s empirical metaphysics in that *understanding the world and its order is a communal effort*. This requires what I have called social

negotiations, but what Wiredu refers to as consensus building.³⁶ Wiredu argues that societies work best when they accept a consensus-based approach to social negotiations. This entails, while not everyone will be in absolute agreement, the ability to come to terms with each other on some key ideas/concepts that not only provide social cohesion but also further the moral prerogatives of the community. There is variance of opinion, but an agreement on fundamental or essential ideas that are related to the time and space in which those ideas disclose themselves.

Concerning Wiredu's empirical metaphysics, what his notions of consensus inform us of is that beliefs not only require a symbolic/linguistic community of referents to be expressed, but also a social community of persons where they can be shared and understood. Far too often, rationality – especially within Western Philosophy – is adversarial in nature, whereby “the best idea wins.” Yet, who picks the “best idea,” and is it always the correct one? Far too often, adversarial rationality has silenced the voices of the marginalised in pursuit of a *self-assured* sense of progress; a progress that often becomes an unthinking – or at least unquestionable – ideology. Thus, rationality fails both its function as a mode of thought but also its impetus as a moral component of social cohesion and progress. I cannot help but think that one of the reasons why Wiredu is so critical of faith as an unthinking concept is the result of this historic denial of a Christian majority who saw themselves as just in their subjugation via colonialism.

A detour is in order to make this concept's metaphysical implications clearer and to connect them to Wiredu's wider philosophy. Scope and space prohibit us from delving too deeply into Wiredu's critique of democracy and his advocacy of a consensual democracy, but his rationale for a consensual democracy can be helpful in detailing how these social negotiations work. For Wiredu, Western democracy is combative in nature.³⁷ He finds that Western democracies function on an adversarial model whereby each candidate or party is pitted

³⁶ CUP, 8–9, 106, 120, 143–144, and especially 163–164, 184–186.

³⁷ Kwasi Wiredu, “Democracy by Consensus: Some Conceptual Considerations.” *Philosophical Papers* 30.3 (November 2001), 230–231.

against the other and, by extension, the entire citizenry's notion of what is morally right for their society is placed into competition. This "winner takes all" form of governance is innately confrontational and, at times, can even inhibit the moral-social growth of a community by its sheer competitive design.³⁸

Consider, for instance, how voting for a third-party candidate in the United States of America's presidential election is often a wasted vote since your candidate has no chance of winning. Compounding the matter, it could even be seen as helping the party least representative of your views since you have effectively taken away a vote from the party "who could win" and best represent your views. In contrast to this framework, Wiredu advocates a democracy by consensus where communities come together to arrive at an agreement or compromise.³⁹ Again, agreement is not total, but in conversation with other points of view, people arrive at the best path forward through what they agree upon and not against what they disagree with. The point of consensus is not to dissolve dissent, thereby creating a univocal vision of governance, but to remove the belligerence one sees in adversarial democracies when the winning party often dominates and silences the losing party, thereby marginalising them and creating more and more resentment.⁴⁰

Conversely, a moral anthropology which develops a metaphysics in pursuit of understanding its own moral progress finds its purpose in contrast to this adversarial rationality and its social order. Derived from the core needs of human survival, to how humans become persons, and how societies form cultures, it circles back to question the "hows" along this journey: how did we become persons? How did we become a society? Now that we know new things about the world – which has changed the way in which we think the world works (i.e., the "laws" of the universe) – how does that change the meaning of not just our own lives, but the meaning of our community?

38 Wiredu, "Democracy by Consensus," 228–229, *CUP*, 178–179.

39 Wiredu, "Democracy by Consensus," 237–238.

40 *CUP*, 175, 179.

Importantly, these questions, asked through Wiredu's framework, never really end but keep evolving. Good persons become better persons, good communities become better ones, and good encounters with the environment or other cultures become better encounters. Likewise, when they become worse – and there is that flip side to the coin – one can rationally trace back where everything went wrong. It can because nothing is unquestionable, nothing is held by “faith” in Wiredu's sense of the term (however problematic it may be).

One could say, in sum, that Wiredu is at once denouncing Western rationality and its concepts of faith, whilst proclaiming another way to display how we are not alone in our reasoning. We are not alone in our expressions about the universe (religious or otherwise), nor alone in our contemplation. We have others to contemplate with and against, and the whole enterprise of thinking itself is a communal one. Idealistic it very much is, but it is a good distance away from the idealism which subjugated his continent and its people. From bottom-up, his moral anthropology declares a metaphysics that is moral before it situates itself amongst the stars, amongst the cosmos and the meaning of cohabitating this planet. This morality, though, is socially negotiated, therefore it nakedly recognises that it too can be co-opted for ill-gotten means. The question becomes, then, what society should we negotiate?

Conclusion

In lieu of an answer to this question, perhaps it is not our place to dictate or imagine an ideal society in a solitary chapter. I hardly think Wiredu would even appreciate such a task given that it would disinvite future generations from the discussion. What we have done in this chapter is to explore the metaphysical implications of a moral anthropology and how they may present threads to weave a decolonial communion between worldviews. We did not have the scope and space to explore in depth his notions of an ethic and ethics, but for those who know it they should be able to see how they do fold into his larger project of a communal, consensus-

based ethic for African communities and beyond. Furthermore, his debates about these ideals have been well covered in other areas.⁴¹

However, what this chapter sought to do was to connect his notion of personhood through community to his larger metaphysics, and what it unpacked is the empirical and spatial nature of this metaphysics. It is not a static metaphysics, nor is it one grounded upon god or some other self-legitimising entity, as seen in Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological construction of metaphysics. It sought to show the socialised and moralised nature of a metaphysics which eschews any unthinking ideologues such as a god to present itself as viable.

However, there is a danger here. Humans are more than capable of transforming anything into an unthinking ideology. Even Jesus himself, who taught non-violence and the fulfilment of the religious laws of his time, has been used as an impetus for war. Wiredu's metaphysics is not immune to this, if the consensus of a people – however rationally divorced from adversarial thought or faith they are – can still agree upon war, even genocide. We should be mindful of this, without dismissing Wiredu's metaphysics out of hand.

Why? Because Wiredu's metaphysics, if meaningful to those who adhere to it, openly states that it is in the hands of the people – and incumbent upon the people – to find order and harmony in the world according to the rules and order of the world. This is why his belief that the Golden Rule is fundamental to uniting humanity, speaks volumes. The concern becomes, then, how does a community negotiate this rule for peace and not violence?

41 For an overview, see: Barry Hallen, *Reading Wiredu* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Kindle Edition, 2020), Ch. 5 "On Sympathetic Impartiality," 70–80; See also: Kwame Gyekye, "Person and Community in Akan Thought," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), 101–122; Motsamai Molefe, "A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu's Humanism and Impartiality," *Acta Academia*, 48.1 (2016), 91–110; Motsamai Molefe, "An African Perspective on the Partiality and Impartiality Debate: Insights from Kwasi Wiredu's Moral Philosophy," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 36.4 (2017), 470–482.

This chapter sought to show the political nature of not just Wiredu's metaphysics, but the concept thereof. It did so by unpacking what Wiredu means by shared knowledge and how an epistemology is a socially construed concept, which is liable to ideology or instrumental reason if handled improperly. A bottom-up metaphysics is beholden to the morality it exhibits, and although Wiredu's concept of personhood through community holds this morality, it is up to both the person and the community to express that morality as they see it unfold, in the here and now, in the spatiality of existence itself, and not in the clouds or skies which move at the will of a select few.

Chapter 11

The Subaltern Agenda of Martin Versfeld: The Ontological Argument from Below

Ryan Haecker 

Introduction: Subaltern Voices

The other is more than the abject pole of the one. For to think the other requires that we should think, not only of the one or the other, but also and essentially that which is shared between both. Neither the one nor the other can fully explain how the one can stand in a relation to that which is not itself, nor, alternatively, how this other can stand in a reciprocal relation to that which is itself alone. Rather, every difference of the one to an other gestures beyond such relations to a third term, which embraces, not only the one or the other, but, rather and beyond both, the concrete universal that produces both particulars. The universal paradigms initially appear to descend in a cascading division of one universal into many particulars, and many particulars into one among many singular entities.¹ Yet, as had already been observed by Plato, a sheer vertical descent of the ideas could not be dialectically sustained: for if the elevation of this third term to a higher universal must arise from a particular relation of one to the other, and this relation is more than what can be analysed from the one, then we must also acknowledge the essential role of the other that erupts from below.²

In the history of logic, this other from below has been named the “subaltern.” The subaltern can be formally defined as a specific mode of negation, in which some particular negates

1 Plato, *Phaedo*, 100a–d; *Republic*, 503b, 505a, 511b–c.

2 Plato, *Parmenides*, 130a–134e.

some other (alter-) particular (sub-ordinate) under the superior universal that is the same as itself. It is the inverse corollary of the grammar of paradigms: for as soon as such a universal and perfect exemplar of all predicates is elevated above many subordinate and particular instances, the difference of the same from the other, and of the universal from the particular, can be translated to express the negation of the particular that stands opposed to an other particular under this self-same universal. Hence, in Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, and later in Boethius' *Square of Opposition*, the subaltern expresses this negation of the subcontraries "Some S are P" and "Some S are not P."³ Since, from Parmenides to Hegel, the unity of being has been absolutely presupposed to stand above the division of the multiple, the particular, and the different, this subaltern negation has – with rare exceptions – tended to be relegated to an abject pole of conceptual opposition in and against the concrete universal.

In Post-Colonial Theory, the word "subaltern" has come to be used as a grammatical marker of a class of people who stand in a relation of particular alterity to the universalising power of colonial nations and imperial capitalism.⁴ Following the "Linguistic Turn" of Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Derrida against totalising reason, grammar has again been acknowledged to carry a wealth of conceptual significance.⁵ The reflection, in Hegel, of negativity as an essential moment of conceptual

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- 3 Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 6–7; *Prior Analytics*, I.2, 25a.1–25; Boethius: *On Aristotle on Interpretation* 4–6, ed. Richard Sorabji, trans. Andrew Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 263.14–269.16., 21–24.
 - 4 See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998); Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2001); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).
 - 5 See Richard Rorty, ed. *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Michael Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

production⁶, like the galvanisation, in Marx, of the labour of the working-class as a pivot of class-struggle⁷, has, in Antonio Gramsci, been reconstituted as the social basis for the institution of a counter-hegemony of anti-imperial resistance.⁸ In Jacques Derrida's reflections on Hegel and Marx, this unsublatable excess has been rendered from the margins as a quasi-transcendental marker of revolutionary potential.⁹ From these currents, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has influentially cast the subaltern as the pivotal site of resistance against the cultural hegemony of imperial domination.¹⁰

More than perhaps any other nation, South Africa has been both condemned and celebrated as the geographic pivot of the subaltern. Founded at Cape Town as a coastal port along the southerly trade route from Western and Northern Europe to the East Indies, it has since been settled by Portuguese, Dutch, and

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- 6 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, & H.S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1991), §§112–114, 175–179; *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 351–353.
 - 7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Volume 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey, & Co, 1887), see esp. Part III, Ch. VII, 156–178.
 - 8 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 506–507, 765–766.
 - 9 Jacques Derrida, “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 69–108; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 38–41, 47, 64; *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 48–9, 61–3, 75; Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 146–81.
 - 10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313; Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Rosalind C. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

English settlers, before the anti-colonialist political convulsions of the twentieth century. At the southern tip of the most southerly part of the Eurasian world-island, it looks back from the utmost South upon the global North. Yet, as a result of this most particular reflection upon the universal hegemony of power that ranges across the world, it can also serve as a unique mirror to reflect upon the many submerged pathways of philosophical modernity – from a new land, and for new ideas.

Like a prophet crying from the subaltern, Martin Versfeld speaks of how God can be known from the depths of the real, and with the songs of holy souls. With striking parallels to Martin Heidegger, Versfeld offers new romantic answers to the twin modern challenges of scepticism and idealism. Since then, he warns, “Descartes has perched like a ghoul upon the corpse of metaphysics, which is also the corpse of Western civilization.”¹¹ He chooses instead to speak from the standpoint of experience, but for the purpose, not of remaining within the ambit of the subject, but rather, of discovering a more originary escape to begin again from a higher principle. In speaking from the subject, and searching for the object, his works take flight from the subaltern to restore the universal.

Along with Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, his works can initially be situated within the tradition of Neo-Thomism originating from the Italian Neoscholastic reaction against French Cartesian epistemology in general, and German Idealism in particular.¹² Versfeld’s writings are, however, notably distinguished by a strikingly generous openness to wrestling with the current questions of philosophy. He wrote: “We come nowhere being near right, since we have the answers.”¹³ For

11 Martin Versfeld, *The Perennial Order* (New York, NY: St Paul Publications, 1954), 19.

12 Joseph Kleutgen S.J., *Die Theologie der Vorzeit* (3 Vols., Münster, 1853–60, 5 Vols. 1867–74); *Die Philosophie der Vorzeit* (2 vols., Münster, 1860–3; Innsbruck, 1878); *Pre-Modern Philosophy Defended*, trans. William H. Marshner (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2019). See Romanus Cessario, O.P., *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

13 Martin Versfeld, *St. Augustine’s Confessions and City of God* (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990), 18.

“to be a Christian cannot possibly mean to conform to a type or to coincide with the paradigm case. And if you are asked by anybody with such an idea in the back of his mind, whether you are a Christian, it is intensely embarrassing. You may say no, not because you are Judas, but because you are trying not to be.”¹⁴ It is struggling with these more embarrassing questions, rather than with an assemblage of ready-made answers, that holds the promise to discover that which saves.

More than a thinker of simply one nation, Versfeld holds together two apparently conflicting trajectories of thought: on the one hand, he recovers from before the Cartesian shift to Modern scepticism, the “perennialist” tradition from Lao-Tzu to Thomas Aquinas; and on the other hand, he recommends a post-Heideggerian openness to its critical subversion. With the former trajectory, he is cosmopolitan, while with the latter, he is a perennial critic of postmodern nihilism. Against, however, any simplistic characterisation as a “medievalist,” Versfeld acknowledges that “we can’t go back in history,” except as “we are always going back to the past for spiritual nourishment,” and can, perhaps, most of all discover the sources of that nourishment in Plato, and the “great days of Athens.”¹⁵ His classical philosophical inclinations – increasingly of a Catholic tenor – came to be expressed in one voice with his political opposition to “Christian Nationalism” from Christo-fascism to South African apartheid. And his engagement with the political Left would later manifest in a more felicitous celebration of the secular as the “miraculous” self-abnegation of Christian dominion.¹⁶

This recollection of the “Perennial Order” calls for a critical interrogation of the causes of forgetting the particular. As the negation of the “all,” the particular is a way of judging “some” of what there is. It is an essential moment in the inner division and analysis of the syllogism in scientific knowledge. Yet it has

14 Martin Versfeld, *Our Selves* (Cape Town, Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974/2010), 111.

15 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” in *Sum: Selected Works / 'n Keur uit sy werke* (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1991), 20.

16 Martin Versfeld, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher’s Cook-Book* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983), 89.

tended to be forgotten in totalising philosophies of transcendent domination or of immanent emancipation, except that in each such a subordinate movement of the other from below continues to be preserved in the truth of the particular. This is as evident in logic as in metaphysics, where, expressly in the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, the “supreme being” is elevated above all particular beings as the greatest that can be thought. From Anselm to Hegel, the Ontological Argument – from the absolute idea of God in the self-surpassing of its contingency – tends to suppress the truth of the more substantial and real particular, except virtually as it must be surpassed by the recycling of its content that is already contained in the inescapable circuit of its logical operations.

This contested legacy of the “subaltern” now calls for a critical theological investigation. Although the word had been recoined by Gramsci, Derrida, and Spivak in protest to a totalisation of logic that refuses its emancipatory potential, the formal character of the subaltern can be more precisely interrogated by exploring the role of the particular other of judgement. In this essay, I will argue: first, Versfeld collects its truth from a circle of particulars; second, he suspends direct knowledge of the highest idea of God to authorise a subaltern ascent from the particular; and yet third, if all arguments for God can be analysed into the Ontological Argument, then Versfeld’s subaltern ascent can be recalled to pivot under the particular to preserve the incarnational and iconic truth of existence. His style can thus be explored as a “subaltern logic,” in which the essence of the syllogism is less the middle term, and more the subordinate alterity of judgement that calls upon a particular understanding of the real that cannot be so easily captured under the dominion of scientific certainty. With a prophetic voice that cries from below of the highest idea, Versfeld can still be read to have preserved the enduring ground of the particular, the subaltern, and the national perspective of South Africa. As Versfeld had written his dissertation on the Italian Hegelian Benedetto Croce, of “whose thought,” he claims, he “remember[s] nothing at all,” we can, though shorter, stand upon the shoulders of giants to

see from below further beyond these suspended alternatives of modern thought.¹⁷

The Perennial Order

Of all his works, *The Perennial Order* represents the crowning synthesis of Martin Versfeld's thought. The ambition of this book is nothing less than to recover from among the debris of modern philosophy the scattered pieces of a Christian *speculum mentis*, a mirror of the mind, so as to allow readers to ascend in spiralling reflection from the simplest elements to the highest idea of Christian theology.¹⁸ The first section investigates the simplest "Object of Philosophy," as the "primary datum" from which to discover the highest idea of the "supreme and necessary" being.¹⁹ The object of philosophy is "that which is," of being, in its "truth."²⁰ The "fundamental sanity of Greek metaphysics lies," he writes, "in its conviction that it is a body of truth revealing the nature of that which is."²¹

Christian theology is upheld as the sovereign "Queen of the Sciences." Yet "neither Plato nor Aristotle" had, Versfeld argues, "succeeded in stating the problem of philosophy in its purity."²² This "ultimate problem" is, as Leibniz stated, "not the problem of why things should be so disposed as they are, but why there should be any thing at all," in short, the question of existence.²³ In privileging existence over essence, modern philosophy has largely tended to hold "reality [to be] prior to logic," in a meta-logical reserve that stands prior to logical analysis.²⁴ This trajectory has culminated in the logic of Hegel, for whom, he contends, "rationalism is a pretension of divinity."²⁵ Such a philosophy of "essence," that will "have to do with essences," results,

17 Versfeld, "Descartes and Me: Truth and Things," 13.

18 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 53–54, 247.

19 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9–38, esp. 10, 23.

20 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

21 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

22 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

23 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

24 Martin Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," in M. Versfeld and R. Meyer, *On Metaphysics* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1966), 10.

25 Martin Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 8.

he indicates, from an assimilation of the conscious subject of philosophical inquiry into the suggestive aspect of the object, in which the subject “is itself included in the independent reality which is the object of thought.”²⁶ Following Schelling’s critique of Hegel,²⁷ he elevates the act of being (*actus essendi*) beyond the conceptual ground of essence. Since, for Versfeld, existence cannot be simply reduced to essence, there can, it seems, be no complete system of the knowledge of “being from nothing” that begins without presuppositions.²⁸ The beginning of what can be thought must rather be found in the receipt of existence, and the line of philosophical speculation that takes flight in search of this higher ground.²⁹

By contrast, the Cartesian “Cogito” is the singular reflection upon the subject, which, in its simple reflexivity upon thought, thinks nothing but itself, and ultimately nothing at all. Where, for Descartes, the clear and distinct ideas provide a transparent certainty of the object in and for the subject, for Saint Augustine, the expression “*factus eram ipse mihi magna question*” (I became a great puzzle to myself), acknowledges the objective depths that await to be discovered in the interior chambers of the soul.³⁰ Already here, “we are,” Versfeld writes, “an anonymous epistemological subject, interchangeable with any other,” and “on our way to the eternal substance of Spinoza, and the impersonal spirit of Hegel,” from which “Kierkegaard was to revolt.”³¹ Echoing Kierkegaard, the “incompleteness” of an objective science rests upon the subject’s interrogation of the being that is its own being for itself, or “self-knowledge.” Versfeld writes: “The incompleteness of the sciences rests upon

26 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

27 See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, “The Difference between Negative and Positive Philosophy,” in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 141–154. See Stephen Houlgate, “Schelling’s Critique of Hegel’s ‘Science of Logic’.” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (September 1999), 99–128; John Laughland, *Schelling Versus Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

28 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 10.

29 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

30 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 15.

31 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 15.

the incompleteness of our self-knowledge.”³² Yet, in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger’s critique of Husserl, it is “something which snowballs” from one time to the next in time and in history,” as it is “essentially a historical discipline,” such that, in reflecting on its roots, and searching for its eternal source, it stands open to receive this present moment as a gift of existence.³³

In a *Ressourcement* leap over the critical aporiae of modern philosophy, Versfeld calls for a Neo-Thomistic supersession of the anti-realist trajectory of post-Cartesian idealism. He protests that the Cartesian belief in the “natural light” of reason has led to a loss of “the radical historical conditioning of social reality,” and, consequently, led us to “end up in a relativism which makes one a hopeless sceptic.”³⁴ A question once asked of the entire world must be answered for oneself by creating that world anew. This scepticism had been capriciously withheld from destroying the ground of the subject. For “he had doubted whether the things of sense exist, and left himself with an ideal world between which and existence *ut exercita* that was a gap.”³⁵

“The source,” Versfeld writes, “of modern rationalism is the cogito.”³⁶ From this “abscission” of Descartes’ *Cogito* there arose “the primacy given to theory of knowledge in modern philosophical systems,” and the evacuation of the historicity of existence. Following this evacuation, Versfeld recounts: “I came to comprehend [with the realism of Saint Thomas] what metaphysics really was, and to comprehend how and for what motives Descartes and Kant had destroyed metaphysics.”³⁷ For, in assimilating the ground of existence to the transcendental determinacy of essence, there remains no depth of hidden meaning that awaits to be discovered.” “I turned,” he writes, “from a philosophy of clear and distinct ideas to one of existential acts for which nature and man once more became a mystery” of “man’s radical questionability.”³⁸ The soul is, in this strange way,

32 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

33 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

34 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

35 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

36 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

37 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

38 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

as hidden and mysterious as our bodies, as each are gifts of God who is manifest in creation.

A torrent of anti-metaphysical currents has since cascaded from this initial irruption of unrestricted scepticism.³⁹ This reversal of “fundamental realism” has been held in the suspension of the object, and paradoxically to the re-objectivisation of the subject, in an absolutised correlation of thought and being.⁴⁰ “The pantheism of Spinoza is,” he narrates, “the point to which Cartesianism must logically lead,” and , in this absolute correlation, there is “the identification of God with nature.”⁴¹ Yet From this counterfeit identification of “God with nature,” we “arrive, by way of the rationalist evolutionism in Hegel, at the materialist evolution of Marx,” as ultimately in modern atheism that threatens to destroy its absolute and abiding ground of truth.⁴²

With an invocation of hyperbolic dynamism, the “world of finite things [remains] in a state of constant interaction.” For, in contrast to static essence, it consists of things that are “acted upon,”⁴³ the “mirror of others,”⁴⁴ and “revealed in experience.”⁴⁵ As in Heraclitus, he writes: “Movement implies not merely the falling short of being of anything of any cross-section of its history but of a lack of actuality in its history taken as a whole.”⁴⁶ The originary question of philosophy, of “why there is something rather than nothing,” is thus initially transposed to the question of “the origin and change or movement,” that is, of the absolute contingency of movement.⁴⁷ Since, however, time “involves the inadequacy of things to themselves,”⁴⁸ he answers that “motion cannot be the object of philosophy.”⁴⁹ The “final object of philosophy” cannot be held to “terminate in the empirical

39 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

40 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

41 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

42 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

43 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 13.

44 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 14.

45 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 15.

46 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

47 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

48 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

49 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 18.

world,” but rather it must “take it according to its own standard,” the standard of its truth, or “leave it alone.”⁵⁰

With this critique of Neo-Kantian and Positivistic philosophies of finitude, Versfeld turns from the “reflexive activity” of the *Cogito Ergo Sum* to the singular ground of the *Esse Aliquid* to revive the “corpse of Western metaphysics.”⁵¹ To exist is to be in a singular way. For if common being is a transcendental, and universal predicate, existence is the being of “some thing” (*esse aliquid*), such that what makes something a “thing” (*res*) is that it is constituted from the singular ground of universal predication. He argues, against all varieties of Cartesian and Kantian epistemological reductions, that, if “there must be the experience” of thought, “it is impossible to think away the act of existence.”⁵² Existence is, he contends, no mere illusion, but, on the contrary, the indubitable ground from which any such illusion can appear: “We may dream that we dreamt, but at some point dreaming implies a waking world.”⁵³ In a way reminiscent of Gilson, he promotes the Neo-Thomistic metaphysical primacy of the act of being (*actus essendi*) over any conception of common being (*ens commune*). For the “awareness of existence” is, as he writes, the “primary datum of experience.”⁵⁴

With this higher criticism, he raises the question, not only of the reality of the illusion, but also of this very sceptical movement of doubt. Versfeld denies that this question of being *qua* being in metaphysics can be reduced to a generic concept (*ens communes*) of a univocal designation of beings (*univocatio entis*).⁵⁵ Rather, being is the subject that questions the object that is more absolutely unquestioned. As the object is also a subject, “it is,” he writes, “not we who are to judge metaphysics, is not we who question being but being which questions us.”⁵⁶ The being of the world, as of God, raises, in us, the question of being, as of one’s own being. There can, accordingly, be no “outside”

50 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 19.

51 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 19.

52 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

53 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

54 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

55 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

56 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

of metaphysics, as every approach to the question of being, as of God, is also an approach from inside the act of questioning one's own being. Being is not an object, but rather, as for Gilson, a reflection upon the act of being, which arises from within the indispensable standpoint of the subject.⁵⁷ Hence, there can be no objectified metaphysics, or "ontology," which is not, more essentially, also a questioning in one's own being as it stands absolutely before the creative source of being.⁵⁸

This maieutic questioning of being is an acknowledgement of openness to the other, of the difference of being, and of the particular negation of the universal, or of the subordinate alterity, or the subaltern, in which a particular alternative is held against to speak from below of what is above. To interrogate existence is thus to ascend from the subaltern to the universal of truth. It is "the love which constitutes our interest in the object known," and the love that calls the subject to know, as it is known in and by the object.⁵⁹ The call of metaphysics is this "love of truth rather than its possession," of love rather than mastery, for it is "desire to possess itself which spurs it on," as it "exists as a question about itself," "knows that it is not the answer to its question," and, from within this question, "seeks its own being qua ens," even as it is "aware that its adequation can never exhaust its own essence" – as "it always points beyond itself" as given to and from its source.⁶⁰ The particularity of existence thus points beyond all particular things to the hidden yet revelatory and creative source of being.

Any answer to this question would be false, except as it refers to a transcendent source. In "call[ing] in God only to confirm us in our own self-idolatry," Descartes has, Versfeld alleges, "set metaphysics back half a millennium."⁶¹ For in claiming to know, not only that he is, but what he is, Descartes claims "an identity of essence and existence, which St. Thomas had attributed only to God, for only God could be unquestioning

57 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 7.

58 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 9.

59 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 12.

60 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 17.

61 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 17.

self-intelligence.” He claims, in short, a knowledge of essence that would be the necessary ground from which to produce all that exists, and all that can be known of being. This absolute identity of essence and existence is held to have achieved its culmination in German Idealism. For in constructing a “spurious metaphysical pantheism of pure reason,” “Kant, and especially Hegel, represent the ultimates in this direction” of dissolving the ground of reality into “human ghosts which are their correlates” of “the world safe for abstractions.”⁶² “Hegel is the greatest of all the anti-metaphysicals.”⁶³ And yet, this is not the end of the story. For, as he also argues, “all entities, even books by anti-metaphysicals, are metaphysical.”⁶⁴

Beyond any transcendental reduction, the “starting point of philosophy” is, Versfeld writes, those “things which exist,” and yet “for whose existence a sufficient reason must be found” for them to exist.⁶⁵ Yet knowledge of its “sufficient reason” cannot be satisfactorily given in experience. For as any finite thing “both is and is not,”⁶⁶ in a “plurality” that “stand[s] in need of other things,”⁶⁷ its sufficient reason is, he suggests, not found evidently in the immediate expression of its sheer external act of existence. Rather, it reflects from this inner ground of its essence to the outer consequence that it should necessarily exist. And, in asking this higher question, it reflects from the chains of causation to the singular and sufficient ground, from which anything can exist at all.

The unknowability of God as *actus purus* is correlated, for Versfeld, with the unknowability of the soul, such that, our questioning of being is also a questioning of ourselves. “When,” he writes, “Augustine says that the essences of things remain unknown to us, he applies this to ourselves and to our own knowledge.”⁶⁸ As this questioning of our own being must precede any further determination of contingent acts of existence, “its

62 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

63 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

64 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

65 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 11.

66 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 12.

67 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 13.

68 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

essence remains unknown to us,” as “all our knowledge is human knowledge,” and, as such, “is rooted in a being who is an enigma to himself.”⁶⁹ As metaphysics is the “activity of asking questions about its own truth,” this questioning constitutes “the basis of the dianoetic sciences,” which “leads to a view of science as” “opening horizons.”⁷⁰ Since, therefore, “all science is based on self-knowledge,” and yet knowledge of the self is as mysterious as knowledge of God,” “truth is,” for Versfeld, “immanent,” even as it stands “always as a background,” “which can never be fully comprehended.” Although “nothing is more present to the mind itself” than the presence of being as shown in truth, “this presence is an imperfect presence,” which is “rooted in aspiration after a good,” the gift of the good, and the calling to discover within itself that source.⁷¹

Versfeld then calls for us to “bring the notion of metascience into closer connection with history.”⁷² As there can be no production of existence or being from nothing, there can also be no absolutely presuppositionless and autonomously productive science, or special science, whether of metaphysics or a logic, which can “render itself intelligible.”⁷³ Rather, the intelligibility of any “special science,” including that of logic, “is derivative from the intelligibility of the historical and social process,” of our social and political relations, and, as such, of our questioning “what we make of it will depend, in part, at any rate, upon our philosophy or theology of history.”⁷⁴ In contrast, however, to Giambattista Vico,⁷⁵ Versfeld argues that “[history] is nevertheless not the ultimate science, because history itself always impels us towards the meta-historical,” which is the questioning of the historical

69 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

70 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 17.

71 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

72 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 14.

73 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 16.

74 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 16.

75 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948), Section VI, Ch. I, Epitomes of Poetic History, 257–9. See A. Robert Camponigri, *Time and Idea: The Theory of History in Giambattista Vico* (Chicago, IL: Regnery, 1953); Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976).

that “rise within the bosom of history itself,” and “lead the history,” through “a concern with historiography,” to ask the absolute questions of the “philosophy and theology of history,” such that, when “we look within ourselves,” we should find that “metaphysics seeks truth about truth.”⁷⁶

Lacking such a historical ground, Cartesian idealism also lacks a rich ground of social relations. Versfeld writes: “Cartesian thought is anti-metaphysical because it is anti-historical.”⁷⁷ He proposes, instead, a reversal of this Cartesian priority, in favour of a zetetic return to Augustine. “In Descartes, we go from doubt to certainty, in Augustine from scepticism to questioning.”⁷⁸ The historicity of consciousness results from this continuous reflexivity. For “there is,” he writes, “an evolution of self-consciousness, a never-ending confrontation of thought by itself,” as it “assimilates something in each confrontation with itself, which will become an intellectum to the intellectus,” like a “growing intelligence with its finger on the pulse of its own growth.”⁷⁹ Against the “Manualist” Thomists⁸⁰, Versfeld argues that it is precisely that “actus is becoming” that “must always keep the question open,” “both for itself and for the special sciences,” as it is “founded in human being itself.”⁸¹ From this human centred foundation, the canon of truth should, he argues, be humanly reconsidered.

In an expression that is pregnant with political significance, Versfeld compares the mechanical automation of metaphysics to “the broken-down machine of the Empire.”⁸² He associates this sovereign making of the concepts with the ontological production of the world in the history of European colonialism, and the surrender of oneself to a recognition of its disintegration. “One has

76 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 17.

77 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

78 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

79 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

80 See, for example, Joseph Pohle, *Dogmatic Theology* I–XII, trans. Arthur Preuss (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1916–18); and Cardinal Mercier, *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, Volume(s) I–II, trans. T.L. Parker and S.A. Parker (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.: St. Louis: B. Herder, 1916).

81 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

82 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

to destroy metaphysics to make the world safe for imperialism.”⁸³ For the visible empire of the world is but the manifestation of the invisible hegemony in the realm of ideas, in which God has been cast as an idolatrous instrument of reason. “Metaphysics is,” he argues, “not a conceptual framework or a spectral dance of concepts, which we manipulate, but the objective unfolding of being in time, submissive to its own entity,” in a surrender to coming to know.⁸⁴ Against this “empire” of ideas, Versfeld affirms that “science” is “human science,” essentially human, for “its limits are the limits of human self-consciousness.”⁸⁵ The highest question of the whole of being is thus always a question of one’s own being, from within the interior sources of the self-conscious subject, and for the purposes of discovering being drawn back into a more substantial relation to the object.⁸⁶

Under these conditions of accelerating cybernetic production, Versfeld protests that “the sacramental mind is absent,” and “the liturgy [is] dismissed as parrot-repetition or idolatry.”⁸⁷ For “the havoc wrought by the Reformed doctrine of the Fall, and the destruction of analogical thinking” has resulted in the demolition of all relations, in a false naturalisation of the order of grace, as of divine power.⁸⁸ Hence, “indifference to God” has had the “inevitable consequence” of “disrespect for the human intellect,” which has been framed under an “instrumental view of the mind,” such that the operations of the intellect have been framed in a “positivistic social climate” which threatens to “trivialise grace by asking it to do that for which our natural faculties are sufficient.”⁸⁹ Yet, even in the midst of a world driven mad by power, we can, nevertheless, continue to search within ourselves for the springs of a more original and incorruptible knowledge. As Versfeld promises: “We shall have all sciences when we know ourselves even as we are known.”⁹⁰ The

83 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

84 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

85 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 11.

86 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 12.

87 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa.” *Blackfriars* 28, No. 328 (July 1947): 306.

88 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa,” 306.

89 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa,” 308.

90 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

“foundation of all ontology” is, accordingly, only “saved from idealism,” as from imperialism, “by the insight” of the human, as “an element in a life which makes itself only by finding itself” in a higher questioning of its own being.⁹¹

To Call upon God from Below

In the midst of these questions, Versfeld seeks to collect the truth of the highest idea from among a constellation of many particular things. His ascent, however, to this higher ground always inclines towards collapse, as, in every forward advance, it hurtles from one finite instance to the next, in a finite arc of ascending motion that can only ever stretch to without reaching the infinite. Hence, Versfeld argues that “the ontological argument makes the enormous claim that man can conceive the divine essence,” whether, for Descartes, in a transcendental argument for knowledge of the simple Augustinian divine essence, or for Spinoza, in an immanent dialectic of the absolute substance that is shown through all the modes of various extension. In each case, “the real has become rational,” because God has become, it seems to him, an idol of reason. Yet, “Cartesian philosophy,” Versfeld comments, “does something worse than deny God, it makes use of him.”⁹² For, in collapsing God into an absolute concept, God would be cast as an instrument of the computational universe. This shift to the subject, he argues, “had blindly borrowed a Christian God without the metaphysical apparatus which would enable them to distinguish act from action,” collapsed act into action or potency, and the ground of being into the totalising nihilistic flux of so many false and passing sensations.⁹³

From this abyss, we can turn backwards and search upwards for the highest idea. As, Versfeld writes, “our own reason reveals itself as not being itself its own sufficient reason,” “human reason ceases to be itself when it cannot go beyond itself,” except as it takes leave from the idealist enclosure reason apart from the real.⁹⁴ And it reflects from the ungrounded contingency to the

91 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

92 Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

93 Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 20.

94 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 21.

principle necessity of “a being which contains all the reasons for its being in itself,” in which “existence must belong to its very essence,” that is, to the simple identity of essence and existence.⁹⁵ As the ground whose existence is essential, God “is its own sufficient reason,” a “sufficient reason,” and the “idea of a cause” that “is also the cause of itself,” that is, the absolute principle of all causes.⁹⁶ Although the empirical world has a “mode of being” “whose essence is not to exist,” we can discover among the effects within the world “an object more satisfying to the intellect than that which changes.”⁹⁷

Against those who would pretend to “pass directly” from this idea to God, Versfeld contends we can only come to such an idea from a reflection upon the particularity of existence as true.⁹⁸ For since, “my thought imposes no necessity on things,” an argument that leaps directly from the finite to the infinite can,” he argues, “be justly criticised for “excessive rationalism.”⁹⁹ Following St. Thomas Aquinas’ critique of Anselm of Canterbury, this idea is “necessary only in our mind.”¹⁰⁰ As such, it does not “possess a real and de facto existence.”¹⁰¹ Against Descartes’ suggestion of an innate idea of God, he argues, instead, that a sufficient reason must be *per se notum*, in which “the predicate is the same as the subject,” “not known by us per se,” but rather better known from the effects.¹⁰² Since, as for Malebranche, “God illumines” our intellect “without allowing Himself to be seen,” “the idea of being is not the idea of anything created, but is the idea of God himself.”¹⁰³

Knowledge of God must be reciprocally sustained by divine illumination, through which the mind reflects as in a mirror the divine light of every thought. Yet this divine illumination would

95 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 22.

96 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

97 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23–4.

98 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

99 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 24–5.

100 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 25.

101 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 25.

102 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 26. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, PP1.Q2.A1.

103 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 27.

“destroy the natural as opposed to the divine causality.”¹⁰⁴ For as the divine Light is the ocular manifestation in glory of the divine Word or *Logos*, and the natural reason of finite logic is assumed in to proceed luminously from its source, the subaltern particularity of finite existence must be utterly evacuated by such a more immediate knowledge of God. By contrast, Saint Thomas Aquinas has, for Versfeld, presented the standpoint of the subaltern particular as an essential moment in proofs of the existence of God. As a “finite creature,” “man is caught up or involved in the order of material things,” among particular things, and the “hierarchical order,” in which all such things come to be known.¹⁰⁵ As an “embodied mind”¹⁰⁶, “human knowledge must stand with the material things,” with sensible species, and with the subaltern particular.¹⁰⁷

After rejecting *a priori* arguments from above, Versfeld rather affirms a series of *a posteriori* arguments for God from below – from the particularity of sensation, and from the subaltern path of the particular. In line with the *Angelic Doctor*, Versfeld rejects *a priori* proofs of God, such as the Ontological Argument, and restricts proofs of God to *a posteriori* arguments, such as the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments. He writes: “There can, in fact, only be a proof *a posteriori* of the existence of a [supreme] Being.”¹⁰⁸ Since, however, “our intellect cannot proceed from sensible things to a vision of the divine essence,” we can, to the contrary, only “know that there is a God as the first cause of all things.”¹⁰⁹ This “transcendent caused relationship” is thus linked in a relationship of “analogical knowledge,” the natural from which the “supernatural irrupts,” as from this “life of grace” we can “dimly discern” the “excess of light.”¹¹⁰ His pivot from the universal to the particular is thus reciprocally sustained by a parallel reflection from the particular to the universal, which prepares a subaltern road of *a posteriori* arguments from below for

104 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 32.

105 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 33.

106 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 34.

107 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 35.

108 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 35.

109 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 37.

110 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 37–38.

the existence of God beyond every order of sensation. As a voice crying from the South, Versfeld's struggles to emancipate this particularity of existence from the universal determination in an absolute idea.

Of the classical arguments for the existence of God, the Ontological Argument is first and absolute, as it alone conceives of the highest idea of which nothing greater can be thought. All of the arguments for the existence of God can be analysed in and from the ground of this highest idea. As Immanuel Kant has argued, the Teleological Argument and the Cosmological arguments can be analysed in an argument against an infinite regress of causes from effects to the first and final causes, culminating in a first and final cause or principle of creation; and since the first and final cause of all effects stands absolutely beyond any diminution of greatness among the effects, the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for God can also be analysed into the absolute Idea of God. In each of these latter and lesser arguments, thought reflects from the effects of motion to either its first beginning or its final end: either from the posited ground, or from the inferential conclusion, such that the mind arrives, on this ascending road of reflection, to the highest idea of the divine Intellect, which virtually contains all relative, partial, and lesser concepts, as it contemplates every argument in absolute knowing.

At this pivotal juncture, Versfeld's critique of the Ontological Argument can be recalled to recommend a subaltern way to search for knowledge of God that leaps from the particular ground of existence. For if, as Gaunilo of Marmoutiers' objection of the "Lost Island" suggests, the Ontological Argument virtually presupposes its own conclusion, the foremost challenge of this argument must be to demonstrate how such a circle of argument can be productive of novel consequences. As a finite series of arguments, it appears to presuppose its conclusions among its premises. Yet, as an infinite dialectical circuit, it can recycle its first posit in and for the production of novel consequences. Since, as in Descartes and Malebranche, thought should either infinitely reflect from images to ideas, or be circuitously sustained from above by divine illumination, yet either share in divine or start from human thought, the Ontological Argument would appear

to lead to either the excesses of “Ontologism,” holding God to be known from being, or “Rationalism,” that God can be known without the aid of supernatural revelation. Against these false alternatives, Versfeld attempts to, more radically, sustain the Catholic sense of the particular by speaking from below of the truth of existence.

The signature of Versfeld’s style has, in this way, been to speak from below with the submerged voice of Neo-Thomistic and Existentialist concern for the subaltern particular. The subaltern is, in Versfeld, not just an irruptive potential of post-colonial resentment, but rather, and more richly, a metaphysical exploration of the chthonic texture of that which exists. As existence recalls its origin, God can, accordingly, only be known from below, from an *a posteriori* analysis of the effects of motion to the originary cause of creation, that is, from the humble standpoint of the subaltern experience of existence. This subaltern style upholds the unanalysable fact of existence, as the “basic datum” of scientific knowledge. And it can discover in this fact the immediate trace of the oldest revelation. In reflecting from the particular to the universal, Versfeld more radically affirms its truth in existence, and existence as true. In contrast to post-Cartesian reductions of the real, Versfeld assumes this zetetic questioning of our ways of knowing into the revelatory ground of existence.

Existence is the key to theology. For, as Versfeld contends, the idea of God can only be approached from below, as knowledge of its existence opens from the most general science of the increasingly specialised and existential sciences, all of which, at last, culminates in a leap of faith from the circle of its particular irruptions to and from the idea upon which it pivots to proceed. Setting aside suspicions of “ontotheology,” he affirms “the essence of the Christian God is being,” for “God is being, supreme and necessary,” as “His existence lies entirely within Himself, and therefore the reason for all contingent existence lies within Him.”¹¹¹ Since, finally, this movement ascends beyond all lesser, incoherent, and diminished ideas of God, to the greatest idea

111 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

of which nothing greater can be thought, this conflict of the Ontological Argument can at last be collected into the highest idea. The subaltern approach, from the particular to the universal, is thus, not a suspension of, but more ultimately, a way from below to knowledge of God that opens from among the subordinate other.

At the summit of this subaltern ascent, we can acknowledge, in Versfeld, an iconic gesture to the revelatory facticity of existence as the nova of truth. In contrast to post-Cartesian suspensions of the world, from the concept, he calls any and all views of the world to answer to the most originary question of its contingent and creative source. In the inspiration of Maritain, Gilson and the Existential Thomists, the question of existence thus comes before that of being and nothing. And, in decisive contrast to Heidegger and Sartre, the truth of existence, for Versfeld, is not simply a choice of one's own being before the abyssal finality of the nothing, but rather, as in the less explored paths of late Schelling and the Russian Sophiologists, the call to reflect from the revelatory traces of effects in motion to the creator of every act of existence.¹¹² This subaltern ascent is thus eternally sustained by the generation of the particular, the creation of the world, and the begetting of its creative voice. From beginning to end, the truth of the particular is absolutely the procession of God from God, in whom the highest idea has opened to give entirely of itself in each living spark of experience.

112 See Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Library of Russian Philosophy, Lindisfarne Books, 1993); Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii, Berdiaev* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); Marcus Plested, *Wisdom in Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Chapter 12

The Hidden Face of Christ: Chesterton and the Concealment of (Divine) Mirth

Duncan Reyburn 

Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a fire that breaks out backstage in a theatre.¹ A clown charges out onto the stage to warn the audience of the danger but, because he is already dressed up for his show, the audience members mistake his warning for comedy. They laugh and clap and ultimately fail to respond to the real threat he is trying to save them from. Kierkegaard speculates that the world is likely to end “amid general applause” like this because so many people believe that what they are witnessing is only “a joke.” Considering this more deeply, in this story, Kierkegaard sets up a distinction – along soteriological lines – between what appears and what may be concealed by appearance. It seems to me that Kierkegaard means this distinction between the apparent and the hidden to be the fundamental issue at play. His clown is perhaps a symbol of Christ, the light that shines without the darkness comprehending it.² Another reading of his parable would suggest that Kierkegaard has granted a deeper ontological importance to seriousness and a lesser significance to hilarity. After all, the crowd misses the truth precisely because

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E Moore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 404; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (New Jersey: Princeton, 1978), 3. The parable in question is based on real events; see Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmisse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 774.

2 John 1.5.

they are amused. They are, to reference Neil Postman, amused to death.³

However, such a conclusion can be assumed to be right only if we believe that Kierkegaard has ontologised the sin that he is referencing through his metaphor of the backstage fire. In fact, his selection of the clown as the hilarious messenger is entirely congruent with the idea that hilarity can be found beyond the immediate danger. If there were no fire, after all, the clowning could continue as planned. To miss this implication would be to fail to attend properly to the distinction, albeit a porous one, between appearance and reality. What is hidden is sometimes, as in this case, hidden in plain sight. The clown may be taken as a symbol, therefore, of a deeper joy that we would miss if we were to get too caught up in the wrong meanings. The immediate and thoroughly fleeting desire to laugh is, in a way, both revealing and concealing of a desire for an even deeper, more permanent sense of divine delight.

A similar idea is found in the work of G. K. Chesterton. “[A]pppearances,” Chesterton notes, have rather a lot to do with “disappearances.”⁴ It is this gap – and something of the bridging of this gap – between appearances and disappearances that I want to address here. In this chapter, I explore what it means that Chesterton is always on the lookout for joy, for this is surely something that even the most casual reading of his work brings to light. In this, I argue that his preoccupation with joy is in fact bound up in what Marshall McLuhan suggests is his tireless preoccupation with formal causality.⁵ I argue, therefore, that there is a link between a particular metaphysical concern and a certain attitude of mind, or perhaps a certain posture towards being. Chestertonian hilarity, in other words, offers a kind of perceptual key to the joy that transcends both comedy and tragedy. As Chesterton suggests, “far from it being irrelevant” to resort to

3 Cf. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 1985).

4 G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993 [1925]), 265.

5 Marshall McLuhan, “Formal Causality in Chesterton,” in Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (Houston: NeoPoeisis, 2011), 73.

joviality on matters of faith and metaphysics, it is actually “a test of one’s seriousness.”⁶ As this implies, there is ultimately, for him, no dichotomy between hilarity and seriousness, insofar as they reveal reality rightly.

At the very end of his book *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chesterton makes a claim regarding the “pathos” of Christ, which was “natural,” and “almost casual.” But he contends that one dimension of Christ’s pathos remained strikingly hidden, namely, his “mirth.”⁷ The word *mirth*, a synonym for *amusement*, is the last word of that book – a book that is allocated a pivotal place in Chesterton scholarship. The word is jotted down not as a flippant observation but as an exclamation mark on that spiritual autobiography. However, because Chesterton offers no justification for attributing mirth to Christ, the question remains open as to whether there is more than a merely subjective reason for his claim. To clarify the above-mentioned aim here, I want to account for this very claim on a philosophical and theological basis. I want to articulate how there is in Chesterton’s writings, especially exemplified in his metaphysical thriller *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1907), an incarnational metaphysical vision at work that reconciles the more explicit dimensions of Christ’s *pathos* with a concealed divine mirth. In a sense, Chesterton presents Christ as being a lot like Kierkegaard’s clown. He is not laughing for the moment, of course, while things are going awry, but this does not mean that he does not plan to laugh later. Indeed, as I hope to show, Chesterton’s consistent search for insight into the formal cause is thus not merely an abstract concern but is instead something with profound existential and emotional resonances. By implication, his metaphysics is not unphenomenological but profoundly rooted in a desire to let reality show itself as itself, as well as to let perceptible reality show more than itself.

The Man Who Was Thursday opens with a dialogue, or rather an argument, between two poets in the suburb of Saffron Park.

6 G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 27: Illustrated London News 1905–1907* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 206.

7 G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 365–366.

The setting is significant. For one thing, it is a real place and not a mere fictional conceit. Chesterton takes the time to articulate it as a place in which being subverts imagining even as it encourages imagination. One young man there, for instance, “with the long, auburn hair and the impudent face—that young man was not really a poet; but surely he was a poem.” And an “old gentleman with the wild, white beard and the wild, white hat—that venerable humbug was not really a philosopher; but at least he was the cause of philosophy in others.” Chesterton mocks the scientist who shows up in the suburb, too: “That scientific gentleman with the bald, egg-like head and the bare, bird-like neck had no real right to the airs of science that he assumed. He had not discovered anything new in biology; but what biological creature could he have discovered more singular than himself?”⁸

What is important, therefore, is not so much the *ideas* that people in this setting have but *who they are in the flesh*. This is vital for understanding Chesterton’s work as a whole. In his book *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910), he writes, “Each human soul has in a sense to enact for itself the gigantic humility of the Incarnation. Every man must descend into the flesh to meet mankind.”⁹ Chesterton is clear to mention that this atmosphere of incarnation in Saffron Park feels like a “comedy.”¹⁰ In this place in which reality constantly throws into question the way that people conceptualise it, we find the birthplace of laughter. Although the novel itself is very funny, Chesterton has given it a surprising subtitle; it is *A Nightmare*. I say more about this below.

In this setting, as I mentioned, two poets are arguing. The poets in question are Gabriel Syme and Lucian Gregory. We soon learn that Gabriel Syme symbolises order and Lucian Gregory symbolises chaos, although the line between order and chaos is not so clear.¹¹ In other words, Syme stands for the principle of the

8 G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999 [1907]), 35.

9 G. K. Chesterton. *Collected Works, Volume IV: What’s Wrong with the World, The Superstition of Divorce, Eugenics and Other Evils, and others* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 93–94.

10 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 35.

11 Michael D. Hurley, *G. K. Chesterton* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2012), 29.

one, while Gregory stands for the principle of the many. These principles are at odds with each other. The principle of the many, in particular, seems to relish dwelling amidst the equivocalities of being. It is no mistake that the two characters here have names that echo the names of angels, although the connection between *Lucian* Gregory and *Lucifer* is slightly less obvious.¹² He is an anarchist who quite literally wants to blow things up with bombs. Chesterton takes *anarchy* as a synonym for *nihilism*; it means a manyness without any awareness of unity. It implies the “[hatred] of life itself.”¹³

The main point of contention between the poets revolves around the nature of poetry. To put it misleadingly simply, Gregory sees art and anarchy as coextensive.¹⁴ For him, to make poetry exciting, the poet must aim to constantly pervert norms. The anarchist claims that an artist “disregards all governments” and “abolishes all conventions”; he insists that “[t]he poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the [London] Underground Railway.” Against this, Syme, who reflects the Chestertonian view that free verse in poetry enslaves it, regards poetry – meaning structured poetry – as being about ordering. Syme believes that the London Underground really is “the most poetical thing in the world.” This upsets Gregory greatly. He tells Syme that he is talking nonsense. After all, he explains, “Why do all the clerks and navvies in the railway trains look ... so very sad and tired?”¹⁵ The anarchist speculates that the people on a train are despondent because they know that the train will end up precisely where they expect it to end up. Where is the thrill and adventure in that?

Syme, who is a better poet (and a better psychologist and metaphysician) than Gregory, refuses to take this appearance

12 In the end, the hint of this connection is made explicit as Gregory is revealed later to be a devil incarnate.

13 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 82.0

14 Chesterton attacks Gregory’s position on poetry directly in an article written for *The Speaker*, published on 29 March 1902. That article, “A Sermon on Cheapness” is reprinted in G. K. Chesterton, *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks and Other Essays*, ed. Dorothy Collins (London: Wheaton, 1975), 1–4.

15 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 39.

at face value. He reads the Underground poetically, and not as a univocal expression. If people can remain so blasé on the Underground, he implies, it is because they have overlooked and forgotten what disappears from view. They have become habituated to custom and so have forgotten how remarkable the customary is. More particularly, they have lost contact with the consciousness out of which the needful order has been granted. On the surface, everything can seem placid and banal and lacking in spirit – and therefore also lacking in meaning. But this surface is not the whole story. “The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark,” Syme purposes. “[T]he gross, obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when a man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when a man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull; because in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria [Station], and lo! it is Victoria.”¹⁶

Chesterton claims that behind every appearance of order is an occluded battle against disorder; and, moreover, that all signs of disorder occlude, but can also potentially reveal, a deeper order. Syme remarks “that every time a train comes in” he feels “that it has broken past batteries of besiegers, and that man has won a battle against chaos.”¹⁷ Already in this, we sense something of how Chesterton is gesturing to mirth beyond the serious, even if we have not yet grasped the meaning of this. If trains and train schedules seem boring it is not because they are boring. Behind them is the delight of being able to grant order to the world. Chesterton perceives this, and so does Syme, because of a sense that things do not merely exist to be consumed; or perhaps that things are not merely there to be subsumed into the predetermined. When we allow them to be themselves, things resist us. In their contingency, they alert us to their otherness. Perception is not equal, therefore, to mastery. It is humbler than that.

16 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 39.

17 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 41.

“There are no uninteresting things,” Chesterton writes in *Heretics* (1905), “only uninterested people.”¹⁸ Given what has been said above, we might take this to mean that things cannot be taken as equal to what our metaphysical boredom might impose on them. If we take the trouble to care, we would fairly easily notice that behind the given is a loving act of creation. To be clear, this is not to simplistically side with order against chaos, just as one would not necessarily side with the univocal against the equivocal, or with humour against all seriousness. The dichotomy is not ultimately as clear as it would seem. Equivocacies remain in being itself. The point is that the tension between order and chaos is mediated; and it is in this grace called mediation that we find the hidden work of mirth.¹⁹ In fact, as I unpack in greater detail below, it is in a particular posture towards this mediation, a mindfulness of the between as suggested by the work of William Desmond, that not only do we discover mirth but also discover a sense of the formal cause.

Chesterton has a problem with a particular mindset that insists on making the world small—that is, on reducing being to one’s conception of being. He takes issue, in other words, with reframing reality as something that ought to conform to any desire to eradicate mediation. The poet Syme in *The Man Who Was Thursday* goes against this tendency to univocalise or equivocalise—both postures involve a denial of mediation—and so gives himself over to the lingering, sometimes hesitant otherness of the call of the real. “God made man so that he was capable of coming into contact with reality,” writes Chesterton in his biography of *St. Thomas Aquinas*, “and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder.”²⁰ Sadly, as Chesterton points out, “[i]n most important matters, man has always been free to

18 Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 54.

19 I write on the grace of mediation in the conclusion of my book on Chesterton. See Duncan Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are: G. K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene: Cascade, 2016). I also articulate something of what this mediatory mirth looks like in Duncan Reyburn, “A Kindly Scandal: A Mimetic Theory of Humor.” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 28 (2021): 201–236.

20 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas & St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 170.

ruin himself.”²¹ He will ruin his chances of participating in the real. Still, in the archetypal tension between order and chaos, God, Light from Light, announces light – and there is light.²² There is, in other words, to use Syme’s metaphor, the London Underground.

In considering the book of Job that acts as inspiration for *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton mentions especially how God announces his entrance by declaring that, behind the obvious difficulties of life, there is delight: “When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”²³ Perhaps even suffering hides a mirthful face. The revealed order conceals a mystery, and that mystery suggests transcendental joy. Chesterton invites his reader to look again, to resist taking the familiar as equal to the settling of a matter. How does he do this? Importantly, he refuses to let his rhetorical constructions linger as merely rhetorical. In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, for example, he is not trying to position himself within a contingent distinction between the orderly and the chaotic. Instead, he wants to aim for an incarnate experience of ontological stability and oneness beyond contingency. It is possible that Lucian Gregory’s disastrous nihilism stems, in part, from an unconscious desire to uncover what is going on beneath the surface. Nevertheless, he keeps getting stuck on the surface. He places all things at odds with all other things, failing to discover the unity beneath. Against this, Chesterton asks us to leave the representational world and enter the drama of being itself. He asks us, in other words, to escape the modern nominalist frame that would have us separate naming from being and to welcome us into a world in which naming reveals and intensifies being. Indeed, this is part of the function of one of the chief conceits of the novel: every man is given the name of a day of the week, not to conceal who he is but to reveal who he is. Each man is, arguably, the manifestation of some aspect of the liturgical calendar. For example, Thursday is *Maundy Thursday* and Sunday is the *Sabbath*. Sunday is also, very importantly, the formal cause. There is more on this shortly.

21 Chesterton. *Collected Works*, Volume IV, 142.

22 Genesis 1:1–3.

23 See Job 38:6–11; G. K. Chesterton. *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 91–102.

In the end, insofar as the plot of *The Man Who Was Thursday* goes, the bold claims of these two poets cannot be settled except by experience. The poet must become the poem. He must recover the sense that he has always been a poem before being a poet. Ironically, perhaps, even the villain in the story agrees with the need to transpose thought into action. Gregory invites Syme to attend a meeting of anarchists to see for himself what sort of chaos they are plotting. Before the other members arrive and before the meeting commences, Gregory explains that he at one time made a habit of disguising himself in various ways. Again, Chesterton draws attention to *appearance* to suggest *disappearance* or concealment. However, it is clear that he means concealment to be a mode of revealing. After all, no one ever believed Gregory's disguises and so he ended up simply dressing like an anarchist. Again, no one believed him. Somehow showing the obvious truth became the best way to conceal the truth. No one would expect someone who looks like an anarchist to be an anarchist. If it walks like an anarchist and swims like an anarchist and quacks like an anarchist, it must be a perfectly sensible intellectual with no insidious motives at all.

Still, another way of interpreting this is as a way of showing that Gregory, standing for the principle of the many (against the one), is the symbol of modern dualism. His very being is forced into a terrible battle between univocity and equivocity that he cannot resolve on his own. And, in any case, he may in the end not be the anarchist he thinks he is. He has mistaken his self-understanding for genuine understanding. There is therefore a paradox here. On the one hand, Gregory is precisely what he seems to be. He is on the side of misrule and disintegration. On the other hand, however, his true identity is not in this. He was made for so much more, if only he would deny his false self and take up the cross of his true self. He would be better off giving up his persona for the sake of presence.

Still, Syme ends up at that meeting of anarchists, each of whom, as I have said, is named after a day of the week. Hilariously, Syme convinces the anarchist council to elect him, and not Gregory, as the replacement for the former Thursday, who recently died. He does so by sounding far more dangerous

than Gregory does – by being, in speech, more anarchic than the anarchist. Chesterton toys with a similar idea elsewhere, with particular reference to Christianity. It is the Christian, with his passions well anchored, who is able to be at once more pessimistic than Schopenhauer and more optimistic than Walt Whitman.²⁴ This anchoring of the passions, he suggests, is bound up in his willingness to tolerate paradox: a desire to have red and white at full force rather than to endure the sublation of red and white that results in an insipid pink. By implication, Syme is able to hold within himself a higher anarchy than what Gregory tolerates, even as Syme is able to be more respectful of authority. In fact, as the mysteries of the story are brought to light, all of the members of the anarchist's society are revealed to have retained a sense of the paradoxical: they are all anarchists who want order; they are all rebels whose rebellion is thoroughly doctrinal.

Still, ahead of this revelation, and certainly despite Gregory's protesting, Syme becomes the new Thursday. As this scene among the anarchists reveals, Chesterton renders the line between chaos and order, and thus between appearance and disappearance, ever more confusing and mysterious. The novel shows, through the experience of the protagonist Syme, a constant determination to unmask what appears and thus to reveal what is hidden – but without destroying all mystery. Identities are constantly mistaken, then corrected, as one by one each of the members of the collective of anarchists is revealed to be a policeman just like Syme. There's a perfect metaphor for revealing order *beneath* any appearance of chaos. And it is by no means coincidental that the order beneath the appearance is often funny. In *All Things Considered*, Chesterton suggests the following: "If you isolate a thing, you may get the pure essence of gravity. But if you take a large thing (such as the Solar System) it must be comic, at least in parts. The germs are serious, because they kill you. But the stars are funny, because they give birth to life, and life gives birth to fun."²⁵ This is to say, a perception of wholeness – the grounding pattern of being – opens away for hilarity. The

²⁴ Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 189.
²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1908), 152.

reverse may also prove to be true, where hilarity opens a way to better perceive the grounding of being in God. Just such a disclosure of wholeness confronts Syme, and so also the reader, with another paradox: unmasking does not put an end to the mystery. Revelation often *deepens* the mystery. At one significant moment in his story, Syme cries out, “Listen to me ... Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—.”²⁶

This declaration begins to suggest why this story is given the subtitle, *A Nightmare*. Symbolically speaking, the antidote to a nightmare is not a dream (something pleasant) but the act of waking up (something that is potentially more unpleasant than the nightmare). And yet, the idea that we cannot see the hidden face of things suggests how difficult this waking up is. There is anguish in the experience. Syme is insistent on the Job-like suffering he experiences in endeavouring to see the hidden face of things.²⁷ Of course, this has tremendous theological significance. It echoes the scene in which Moses asks to see God’s glory in the book of Exodus. God responds that he will “make” his “goodness pass before [Moses]” but since no one can see his face and live, he will show Moses only his back.²⁸ There is something of this echoed in what Chesterton writes in his book on the artist G. F. Watts, who was fond of painting the backs of people:

The back is the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: it is impossible to speak about it. It is the part of man that he knows nothing of; like an outlying province forgotten by an emperor. It is a common saying that anything may happen behind our backs: transcendently considered the thing has an eerie truth about it. Eden may be behind our backs, or Fairyland. But this mystery of the human back has again its other side in the strange

26 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 247.

27 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 263.

28 Exodus 33:18–20.

impression produced on those behind: to walk behind anyone along a lane is a thing that, properly speaking, touches the oldest nerve of awe.²⁹

As Chesterton more than hints here, knowing the back of things is to not know them. But that we *only* see the back of things has three important implications. Firstly, it means that we necessarily feel, in our encounters with the real, that there is always more there than we are conscious of. Perception itself, when we allow it to be itself, cannot take things at face value. This is unpacked, for example, in the work of Bernard Lonergan, who discusses how the most innocent of childlike questions, the question *Why?*, reveals an entirely natural, intuitive sense that we cannot apprehend anything without a sense of its contingency and its hidden causes. We assume formal causality, as that cause that implies and grounds the other causes, even though we tend to do so unconsciously.³⁰ Secondly, it means that the natural resistance that things offer to us in our perceiving them is in fact important to our perceiving them rightly. A complete conflation of subject and object, a dissolving of all differences, does not bring clarity. If anything, it represents death – the annihilation of both subjectivity and objectivity.

Then, thirdly, it means that we must speculate about the nature of the face of things. And yet, as suggested by the first implication, this speculation cannot merely exist at the level of what we are conscious of and what we might be able to articulate. We know this, especially from Chesterton's frequent articulations around his strong sense of contingency.³¹ This is not merely a conceptual category but is something felt in one's very depths. In this felt sense of the contingent, what appears is decidedly not self-caused. Its meaning is sustained by what transcends it. It is given but that only means that there is *that* which gives it or *one* who gives it. Perception itself, if allowed to be itself, refuses to

29 G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts* (London: Duckworth, 1904), 136–139.

30 Eric McLuhan, "On Formal Cause," in *Media and Formal Cause*, 91.

31 See Miguel Romero & Duncan Reyburn, "Towards an expansive objective and a restricted experience in Everyday Aesthetics: A Chestertonian metaxological approach." *Revista KEPES* 24.8 (2021), 197–231.

take things at face value – it refuses to linger with abstractions and must, like Gabriel Syme, step into the drama of meaning. Perception is not its own ground.

Still, we tend to fall rather often into the trap of training perception to accept limits that are not inherently present within perception, while at the same time refusing the limits that are there. Perhaps better stated, we have a habit of causing perception to fall into disuse and misuse. This is just as bad, if not worse, than the problem of regarding perception as self-grounding and self-sustaining. If Lucian Gregory sees only the value of chaos, it is because he is not attending to the real. His very being is granted, but he takes this for granted. This is a reminder of Chesterton's awareness of how we lose contact with reality. I quote here at length from Chesterton's *The Defendant*:

Religion has had to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star upon which we dwelt. For the mind and eyes of the average man this world is as lost as Eden and as sunken as Atlantis. There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves.³² The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not[only] towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility. This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall. It is a strange thing that men ... have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.³³

32 In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton claims, “the most dangerous environment of all is the commodious environment”; Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 323.

33 G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: JM Dent, 1907[1901]), 12–13.

Note here how Chesterton connects the fall with an over-reliance on univocal conceptual configurations, which banish a sense of formal causality in favor of the other causes, especially efficient causality. We fail to perceive what is right in front of our eyes, and so require something that will allow us to reconnect with it. Our abstractions are often a defense against the real. Paul Rowan explains how crucial the above passage is for understanding Chesterton's perpetual concern with how "human beings have forgotten who they are."³⁴ The trouble is not just in the forgetting of the world but in the forgetting of our very selves. We far too easily lose a felt sense of our embeddedness within the drama of meaning. What does the forgetting of self, differing as it does from self-forgetting or humility, look like? For Chesterton, in sticking with the biblical envisioning of pride as going before a fall while also noting how this distorts even our capacity for humility,³⁵ the result is over-seriousness. The prideful do not laugh easily and are in fact monstrous in their seriousness.³⁶ Here, however, I want to suggest that the opposite is also possible. Pride can be manifest in a refusal to take anything seriously, in an essentialising of irony as a posture towards being. Both over-seriousness and excessive irony point to a loss of humility.

In *Orthodoxy*, transcending both over-seriousness and excessive flippancy, Chesterton suggests that "[m]an is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial." He is very critical of over-seriousness in particular, as I have suggested, but this has implications for trivialising everything too. Taking joy out of the picture causes people to be unhealthily complacent in their self-satisfaction. Over-seriousness produces stale perceptions, and this is not something Chesterton can tolerate. He writes:

The swiftest things are the softest things. A bird is active, because a bird is soft. A stone is helpless, because a stone

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- 34 Paul Rowan, *The Scrappy Evangelist* (Charlotte: ACS Books, 2017), 48.
 35 Proverbs 16:18; Augustine, *City of God* 14. 13; *De Genesi ad litteram* 11. 14. 18.
 36 G. K. Chesterton, "'The Personality of Mr. Gladstone.'" *The Speaker* (10 October 1903).

is hard. The stone must by its own nature go downwards, because hardness is weakness. The bird can of its nature go upwards, because fragility is force ... Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. ... Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. One 'settles down' into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to ... self-forgetfulness ... Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be ... much more sensible ... to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good *Times* leading article than a good joke in *Punch*. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy; hard to be light.³⁷

Again, Chesterton's concern is with *connection* to reality. It becomes apparent that Chesterton on the whole connects severity or solemnity, as a particular form of attention that eradicates the possibility of humor as antithetical to such a connection. The obverse is also true. Flippant joking may conceal a deep failure to attend properly to joy. Transcending these is an ontological attunement to formal causality; that is, to the whole picture of the world presented to us. This connection is highlighted by McLuhan when he discusses Chesterton's constant attention to formal causality. It is by now not controversial to point out that, in general, modernity and its aftermath have tended to exaggerate, even to the point of grotesqueness, all attention on efficient causality at the expense of the other causes. This has encouraged a tendency to conceive of things as equal to their appearances within a chain of cause and effect. In other words, even something as complex as understanding may be grounded in a monocausal process or structure, rather than in a larger sense of the patterns of the real. Given this bias in attention, the entire field of meaning too easily gets reduced to the most immediate appearance of things. Univocity and equivocity, as supposedly unmediated, are accepted without question. This, at least, is what is suggested by the character of Lucian Gregory. This coincides with a tendency to reduce meaning to having a seemingly uncontestable

37 Chesterton, *The Collected Works*, Volume 1, 325–326.

character, implying that there is a stress on directness against the difference.³⁸ Put briefly, this mode of attention sacrifices a sense of form, and with it a sense of joy that can anchor both humor and seriousness. It is only in attuning ourselves to the formal cause, to analogy beyond univocal sameness and equivocal difference, that we stand a chance of knowing when to laugh and when to cry.

And seriousness, on its own, is no guarantee of this analogical awareness. In fact, on its own, it almost certainly ensures disconnection. Chesterton suggests that it is “the test of one’s seriousness” to “use silly metaphors on serious questions.” In fact, a “responsible religion” can be defended “grotesquely.” “It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.”³⁹ He is not encouraging irreverence here. In fact, he sees *humour* and *humanity* and *humility*, which in English are linked etymologically, as connected with an essential vulnerability to being. He means that by loosening up our over-seriousness, we may discover a deeper joy, and a deeper reason for our seriousness. In fact, in locating the depths, it is not only hilarity that is guaranteed but also sorrow. “If you have a good heart,” he writes, “you will always have some lightness of heart; you will always have the power of enjoying special human feasts, and positive human good news. But the heart which is there to be lightened will also be there to be hurt.”⁴⁰ If Christ could show his sorrows without being overcome by them, this is precisely a signal of his capacity for joviality. The same vulnerability to being supports both mourning and levity. Mirth, then, is not the *opposite* of seriousness but its *obverse*. “The more one suffers,” Kierkegaard writes, “the more ... one has a sense for the comic.”⁴¹

As the above suggests, Chesterton is not merely encouraging a correct view of things in the sense of providing a checklist of doctrines. He is not offering us yet another univocal set of instructions. He is not arguing for a mere reconceptualisation of the real – as if the problem is in our thinking primarily and not in

38 William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

39 G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (9 June 1906).

40 G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (11 January 1908).

41 Kierkegaard, *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, 30.

us. Rather, he is encouraging us to embrace what is – *as lived*. This is the central key to understanding his view that Christ's hidden face is mirthful. This is not to explain Christ but to embrace the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation more fully. Chesterton writes the following on what it means to be human, and already here we find a hint of how the mirthful points to the more than mirthful:

Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself.⁴²

42 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 36.

Chapter 13

How Morality Comes to Be: On the Germ of Being and Normativity in the Action of Signs

Arlyn Culwick 

Introduction

When confronted with an argument for some theory of morality in which an “is” turns into an “ought,” a contemporary reader of philosophy is likely to recall immediately David Hume’s prohibition of such moves. Hume observes that

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it’s necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the

distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.¹

In other words, there is what one might call a *modal difference* between normative or prescriptive statements, and descriptive or positive statements, and Hume does not observe a manner in which the writer may make a such a modal leap. However, I believe that a modal conversion of a particular kind *does* take place between being and normativity, does so *pervasively* in the universe, and is immediately observable. In this chapter, I defend the nature and empirical observability of this modal conversion in even physical interactions between nonmental objects.

The presentation to follow is of a modal conversion in the *action of signs*. When the action of signs is pursued as an avenue of inquiry in its own right, rather than under the rubric of “semiotics” or any one of many other perspectives, it implies a perspective all of its own.² I contend, in this chapter, that *normativity is a reality within and constitutive of the natures and interactions of physical entities*, and to experience this, one must understand these entities through the lens of sign action. Moreover, the model by which is manifest this elementary normativity within being is a basis to explore further how value and morality emerges within the sociocultural world of human beings.

Synopsis of Doctrinal Sources

The biography of the ideas in this chapter is not widely known in mainstream professional philosophical circles, and so it will be profitable to summarise it briefly. In order to locate a naturally emerging normativity in what I will call a “kenotic” aspect of sign action or *semiosis*, I rely on my own prior extension

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1739), §1, 469–470.

2 The philosophically doctrinal implications of the perspective implied in the action of signs is explored in Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). In this chapter, I focus on its physical and empirical implications.

and modification³ of the work of John Deely on so-called “physiosemiosis,”⁴ which is the thesis that sign action is not confined to merely cultural, mental, or biological activity, but is operative also in any physical system, rendering sign action a *pervasive* activity in the universe. This claim is itself an ambitious extension of the founding biosemiotic work of Jakob von Uexküll⁵ and Thomas Sebeok,⁶ which extends significantly beyond semiology or “semiotics” in the linguistic, anthropocentric sense of the term popularised by Saussure and others of the twentieth century Continental tradition. To sketch the landscape further, this theoretical backdrop draws upon the semiotic work of Charles Peirce in the late 19th century, in particular his concept of an “interpretant.”⁷ More significantly though, the recent discovery by John Deely and Ralph Austin Powell,⁸ in the years between approximately 1977 and 1985, of the revolutionary potential in John Poinset’s treatise on signs (1632) has provided the field with a systematic theory of signs of extreme terminological precision. Poinset, also known traditionally as John of St. Thomas, is claimed to be multiply revolutionary: he provides grounds to transcend

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- 3 Principally in Arlyn, Culwick, “‘Machine Code for the Universe:’ How the Action of Signs Pervades Everything’. https://academia.edu/39709311/_Machine_code_for_the_universe_-_how_the_action_of_signs_pervades_everything_; Culwick, ‘A Fissure in the Foundation’. *Reality*, 2024. <https://realityjournal.org>.
 - 4 John Deely, ‘The Grand Vision’. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring, 1994): 371–400
 - 5 Jacob von Uexküll, “A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men,” in *Instinctive Behaviour: The Development of a Modern Concept*, trans. by Claire B. Schiller and Claire B. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, Inc, 1934), 5–60 (14).
 - 6 Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 663 adverts to Sebeok’s work in this area going as far back as 1968 in Thomas A. Sebeok, “Goals and Limitations of the Study of Animal Communication,” in *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 59–69.
 - 7 Charles S. Peirce, “‘Lowell Lectures on the Logic of Science; or Induction and Hypothesis’, Lecture VII,” in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, Volume 1: 1857–1866* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982), 4644–65.
 - 8 John Poinset, *Tractatus de Signis*. Edited by John Deely and Ralph Austin Powell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1632). Biographical notes on the origin of the discovery are found in Deely, “The Semiotic of John Poinset: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” *Semiotica* (1988), 79–80.

the idealism–realism dilemma⁹ and to permanently repudiate nominalism.¹⁰ He advances an experientially-driven¹¹ realism in a tradition generally thought to consist of mere medieval Aristotelianism, all the while avoiding invoking the perennial stumbling block of the failed modern era, the so-called “problem of the external world.”¹² What is of interest to me in Poinsoot, who I shall rely on principally, is more technical and rather narrow in scope, namely his terminology and his realisation that Boethius’s¹³ two exhaustive categories of relation, transcendental and ontological relation, have greater scope than the Aristotelian categories of being, extending over both being and nonbeing (that is, mind-dependent being) and providing sign action with truly universal scope.¹⁴ These resources are adequate for the task of elucidating (a) how the action of signs generates normativity, and (b) the root of the normative principle, in the heart of sign action, which I term “kenosis.”

Philosophical Method of Exposition

If I am to make a claim to the *truth* of this chapter’s claims, then the manner in which it is ordered to truth is of principal importance. To make manifest a modal conversion in the real relating between things, I shall rely principally upon an *image*,

9 Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 443.

10 See, for example, Ralph Austin Powell’s development upon Poinsoot’s concept of “ontological relation” that not only are some relations real, but real relations are directly experienced and thus knowable without need for further inference, e.g. Powell, *Freely Chosen Reality* (Washington D.C: University Press of America, 1983), 81.

11 “Doctrinally, Poinsoot’s work achieves a new, entirely experiential point of departure for the enterprise of philosophy, and reconciles in so doing the seemingly opposed orders of nature and “culture” (Deely, “Poinsoot, John,” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, by Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986); <https://www.ontology.co/semiotics-ontology.htm>.

12 Deely, “The Quasi-Error of the External World,” *Semiotics* 10, no. 1 (2001), 31n.12.

13 Boethius. “In Categorias Aristotelis Libri Quattuor,” in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* 64, *Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: 1844), 195–294.

14 Deely, “The Semiotic of John Poinsoot: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” 77, 80.

upon which the theory rests, and this image relies upon the reader's everyday understanding of the following:

- objects affecting other objects,
- objects being distinct from other objects,
- objects having or acquiring some significance.

Thus, the image stands or falls on the appropriateness of applying the reader's everyday understanding to the subjects of relations and signs. I am unaware of other dependencies.

I claim that the image to follow is admissible as an interpretive, framing or context-giving element of this chapter's argument, because I believe that deferring explanatory power to the above dependencies puts the image "above reproach." Relying upon common experience enables this chapter to make no special claim to knowledge, as its claims are verifiable by any reader. Moreover, any potential bias in my understanding may be spotted and distinguished from a reader's own immediate experiences of objects. Furthermore, it empowers a community of readers to signal their (non-) acceptance of the chapter, and so to reach rough consensus regarding its claims, and in so doing to construct an empirical proof of this chapter's truth.¹⁵ Concerning the mode in which the image operates, it demonstrates *mechanically or concretely*, as far as a thought experiment can simulate concreteness and physical mechanism. It is thus an *analogue* model¹⁶ serving to ground and animate the abstractions from

15 This understanding of how scientific proofs operate originates in the work of Karl Popper, and, pertaining to how such proofs can obtain actual knowledge, is advanced in Powell, *Freely Chosen Reality*. In Culwick, "How to Render Freedom Empirically Verifiable: Ralph Austin Powell's Radically Scientific Thomism." *Academia.Edu*, 2020; https://www.academia.edu/38466994/How_To_Render_Freedom_Empirically_Verifiable_Ralph_Austin_Powells_Radically_Scientific_Thomism, I have attempted to recover Powell's method of empirical proof from historical oblivion, and argued that his method makes testable many philosophical questions that traditionally have unfortunately remained speculative exercises of reason.

16 Sun-Joo Shin, *The Iconic Logic of Peirce's Graphs* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002) is exemplary on the difference between analogue and digital models. In brief, an analogue model is first grasped as a whole and can then be read analytically into component parts, while a digital model is first grasped in its parts, which can then be

which the exposition is crafted. As for the *function* of the image, it is to manifest immediately (that is, without further inference) how relations function, including what marks the difference between the following:

- relating and nonrelating
- relating in one respect and not in another respect
- being something *versus* being nothing in particular
- coming into relation as a reduction from potentiality to actuality

The image's immediate manifestation of the above furnishes the reader's model of relating with a grounding for the concepts and terminology to be set forth.

Finally, concerning the completeness of the method of attaining truth, a chapter of this length will not permit an empirical proof, nor a fully specified set of falsifiable claims. But what there *is* scope to provide for is (to use a term introduced later in this chapter) a material¹⁷ fundament of such a proof, such that this chapter contains, latent within it, such a proof, which can be made manifest to the reader upon consulting the relevant material.¹⁸

synthetically assembled in order to grasp the whole and to perceive the context in which each part operates. For example, an analogue clock is read by understanding the position of its hands against a circular backdrop in which they rotate; it is necessary to grasp that they rotate full-circle around a centre, and then (analytically) to use the hands' positions to divide the circle, and so to tell how much time has elapsed or remains of a given day, hour or minute. In contrast, a digital clock is read by understanding numerical values on a screen; it is necessary to know how high a given number (e.g., that representing minutes) goes before it simultaneously increments another number (e.g., that representing hours) in order to tell the time. As such, the parts are given first, from which one *synthesises* the whole via imaginative effort. Analogue models, such as images and concrete examples, are especially useful in abstract exercises such as philosophical reasoning where many "parts" (e.g., terms and concepts) are given and where the imagined organic whole in which their figure is usually difficult to grasp.

17 See note 25 for details of this term.

18 See note 15. For a concrete application of the method to a hitherto speculative question, see Culwick, "An Empirically Testable Causal Mechanism for Divine Action in The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics, Andrew Pinsent characterises this interaction

The model: what relations are like and how they work

Universes

Our point of departure to discuss the emergence of being and normativity in the universe is to imagine a collection of objects, none of which can have any kind of relation to another. To construct this image, do not attempt, in one breath, to visualise a collection of objects that can have no relation to each other. Rather, by a process of abstraction, begin to consider such a scenario, and as soon as you notice any respect in which the objects might be related, rule it out. Are they related in space? No. Do they both have shape? They could not. Do they both have a surface? No. And so forth.

Now, in what respect could these objects comprise a system? *In no respect, since there is no means by which the objects can be related.* There would be nothing over and above their existence by which they could comprise a system. And bare existence is self-evidently not a form of relatedness, since it is not being-towards, but simply being absolutely. Thus, the objects do not suffice to establish a system.

Universes Necessarily Are Systems

Now, universes necessarily are systems, however scantily related their components might be, or else there would be nothing to make a universe an entity in its own right, over and above its components. If one were to argue the contrary, the only basis by which a universe could be anything would be by force of describing it in language or in thought. As such, however, it would be a mere nominalism. Without a mind-independent basis intrinsic to the

in terms of mutually empathic relations that serve to \"infuse\" virtues and other attributes into a person. Such interaction requires that causal relations exist between a necessary being and the contingent universe. This paper addresses a central problem of special divine action: that the empirically identifiable causes of physical events are modally ill-suited for (and epistemically distinct from\" Stellenbosch Theological Journal 6, no. 4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a10>.

universe in question, there would be no way in which a universe could be anything in its own right.

From the perspective of being a universe and not just a relationless “heap” there is no difference between there being no objects at all and each object being nothing to any other object: in either case the outcome is identical: since a universe requires some way of relating – some “principle of unity” – there would be no way to be a universe.

It would not help, either, to recur to the merely linguistic and mental fact that by thinking of things as being a “heap” they are thereby related in thought. After all, either thought stands outside of the real, in which case it does not bear upon the scenario, or it is real in its own right, in which case it constitutes yet another respect in which the objects are related, which must therefore be abstracted out from the thought experiment.

Therefore, a universe does not arise if objects can have no relation to each other. In this respect, *relation is fundamental to a universe in the sense of it being the principle or form of universehood.*

Objects Necessarily Are Systems Too

Let us now turn our focus onto the objects themselves in the thought experiment. For anything to be an object, it would have to be a system of interactions in its own right. If you are in any doubt about this, it appears to be the case for the actual universe. As a case in point, the following regress occurs in the physical sciences:

1. A theory – say, gas laws – explains (and predicts the behaviour of) an object or system of objects in terms of relations between aspects, components, or attributes it has (in the case of gas laws, molecules).
2. Since relations necessarily have terms, the objects or systems embodying these terms are then empirically investigated, resulting in a theory that describes their internal relations. For example, molecules are in fact atoms (or rather ions) interacting.
3. These new relations’ terms (e.g., the atoms) are investigated, resulting, of course, in a further theory that describes the

behaviour and constitution of the object in question in terms of further relations between new terms, *ad infinitum*.

4. Thus, gases are relations between molecules, which are relations between atoms, which are relations between electrons, protons, and/or neutrons, which are relations between quarks, leptons, and bosons.

The latter three are called “fundamental” particles not because they are known to be indivisible “building blocks” of reality, but merely because it is not established that they have parts in relation like everything else in the universe. It is possible that at smaller scales there are no further parts or “particles” (that is, entities identifiable by energy level, spin, etc.), but this is not to say that there would necessarily be *nothing*. There would be something – perhaps simply a vague fuzz of relations between relations, with no term having intrinsic specification of any kind. Such a scenario is theorised under the name “quantum foam” to be interspersed by particles (and their complimentary antiparticles) momentarily popping into existence and then annihilating themselves, giving spacetime a granular texture that otherwise would be “smooth,” that is to say, having nothing to cause enough disturbance to quantise out a particle. This scenario suggests thoroughgoing fundamental relationality that, at this tiny scale, lacks the continuity to sustain a mechanism to produce “stuff” reliably.

Thus, the picture suggested by the progress of physics is of a world both primarily and pervasively relational, with each term (or object) turning out to be simply another set of relations. It would be relations “all the way down,” to a point where no mechanism is present to cause discrete entities to exist. Beyond this point, the very principle of the universe (as defined) would break down, as it would imply that there would be relations and no “stuff,” which is plainly impossible since relations necessarily must have terms, or else there would be nothing to relate. This point, logically implied by our image, would be a limit case for the possibility of objects, and the lower bound of the universe itself.

This suffices to show that any object in a universe must consist of relations between parts. Since our image requires that there be no relations, it must now require that there be objects

that lack relation. But from this it follows that there could be no objects at all, since being an object requires having parts in relation. Therefore, my thought experiment can feature neither objects nor a universe. In other words, the scenario must contain “nothing” at all.

Relative Nothing and Absolute Nothing

It must be clarified, though, that although I denote a very high grade of nothingness by the term “nothing,” I do not mean nothing *absolutely*. After all, it is perfectly conceivable that something exists beyond the human capacity to imagine its being, involving in itself neither relation nor matter, nor a universe.

However, such an entity would not have parts; it would not have attributes; it would not be an object; it would not be a relation. There could be no content of *any* kind by which one might think of such an entity, other than the bare property of existence. Nonetheless, there are no grounds to rule out the existence of such an entity. Therefore, the above scenario only reveals that there can be “nothing” in terms of the capacity for human thought to imagine how things can be, rather than nothing absolutely. As such, “relative nothing” is the most basic content to the term “nothing” that can be employed concerning the universe, since it cannot be ascertained whether absolute nothingness obtains, and so “relative nothing” is an acceptable grade of nothingness for tackling the question of how being and normativity come to be.¹⁹

Relating in All or Some Respects

To put it simply, in a universe, a thing is only something if it is something to something else. But things are not related in every way. Thus far, the contrast between being something and being relatively nothing implies being part of, or not part of, the universe. But it is also possible for a thing to relate to another in one respect, but not in another respect. And “nothing” can be shown to play a local (non-universe-wide) role here.

19 The subject of “relative nothing” is dealt with in considerably greater detail in Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation.”

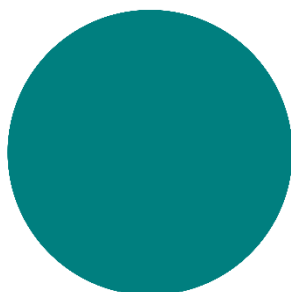
Modify our image to comprise a universe consisting of only two things, where one thing is something to the other thing in one respect but is nothing to it in some second respect. If the thing is an object in the actual universe (as per Section "Objects are necessarily systems too"), then the "second respect" is either imaginary or it is a relation intrinsic to the being of the thing. In the latter case, then it is merely "locally" nothing, that is, nothing to the other thing; but it is something to at least one other part of the first thing, and so it is part of the universe.

In the former case, or if the things are individuals (that is, they have no parts), it follows that the second respect *is not part of the universe*. This obtains directly from the fact that universes consist essentially in their principle(s) of unity. There is nothing to relate to the second respect, and so it is not in the universe, thus imaginary.

Identity and Distinctness

This state of affairs may be unfamiliar ground to the reader, and so it could be fruitful to attend to a limit case: identity. I distinguish identity from relatedness by testing whether there is at least one respect in which things are unrelated, such that if things are related in *every* respect, then there can be no respect in which they are distinct or independent, and so they are one thing.

It appears to me, on the basis of our image, that this is its principle of distinctness: a thing's distinctness from another thing originates in there being at least one respect in which they are *not* related. For our two objects are not related in the above "second respect," and so they do not determine each other in this respect. And if they do not determine each other in a given respect, then they are distinct from each other in this respect.



these two objects are related to each other in every respect

Figure 1: Identity modelled in relational terms. Source: Author

Attributes and Relations

When something *does* respect something else (according to some attribute(s), of course), the relation has within it certain roles, to which we now turn. For example, a relation of parenthood requires one person to possess the attribute of being a parent and another to possess the attribute of being a child. In Poinset's terminology, the relation is "founded" upon the attribute of being a parent and "terminates" at the attribute of being a child. And because no relation is actualised in a universe unless "something is something to something else," this (logically) third entity "to which" something is significant is termed by the scholastics a "knowing power." In the nineteenth century, Charles Sanders Peirce proposed a generalisation of the concept to include mind-independent things and termed this the "interpretant" of the relation.²⁰

We learn further from John Poinset²¹ that, in the inner workings of any relation, there are in fact two complementary facets in the connections between interpretant and fundament, and between fundament and terminus. It is the same two facets

20 Peirce, "Lowell Lectures on the Logic of Science; or Induction and Hypothesis," 464–465.

21 Poinset, *Tractatus de Signis*.

that are observable, whether between one or another extreme of a relation.

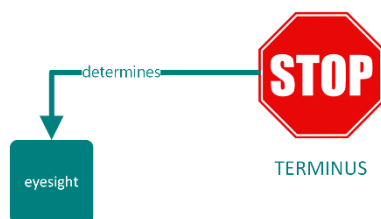


Figure 2: A relation of determining. Source: Author

The first facet is known as *determining*²² and is the effect of a relation's fundament upon its interpretant, and its terminus upon its fundament.²³ For example, a stop sign cannot terminate the thought that it is rectangular, since it is octagonal. What a terminus does is *delimit the scope of possible ways it may be related to*. In this way, a terminus determines its fundament by having a certain nature, which cannot be what it is not, and so cannot support a fundament that is unable to relate to its attributes.

22 *Tractatus de Signis*, 166–192 (Book 1, Question 4).

23 This chapter must necessarily be brief on the inner workings of relations, but the idea that a terminus “determines” a fundament in the same way that a fundament determines an interpretant is confirmed in Poinsot, *Tractatus de Signis*, 194/31–37, 195/3–9, 195/18–29, 202/46–203/14.:

[The] sign [-vehicle] strictly keeps to the order of “objective causality” or of the formal causality of knowledge, not of efficient or productive causality. When a sign [-vehicle] produces an effect it is never by virtue of being a sign [-vehicle]. The sign [-vehicle] is not even the efficient cause of the knowledge of the thing signified; it **makes it known only by standing in lieu of the object [i.e. significate] within the cognitive faculty to which it brings the presence of the object**, thus functioning **in the same line of causality as the object itself** (formal causality). (Maritain’s translation, in Jacques Maritain, *Language: An Enquiry into Its Meaning and Function*, 52.

Maritain here describes a sign-vehicle determining a knowing power in the same rationale as a significate determines a sign-vehicle in the definitional context of determination.

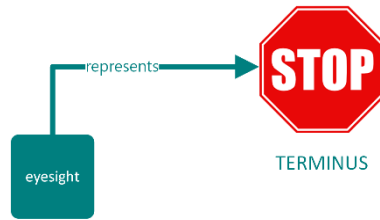


Figure 3: A relation of representing. Source: Author

The second facet is known as *representing*.²⁴ It is the effect of an interpretant upon a fundament, and of a fundament upon a terminus, and runs in the opposite causal direction to determining. For example, when you see a stop sign, your perceiving it represents the octagonally-shaped stop sign – and thus you are guided to recognise that it is a stop sign. And in turn, the stop sign represents the command to stop. In this way, fundaments represent their termini by having attributes that are represented – by some interpretant – to represent the terminus.²⁵

In every actual relation, determining and representing occur together in a two-way causality, which I term *founding*.²⁶ To put determining and representing together in an example, the stop sign's physical attributes determine a driver to represent it as a stop sign, which is a recognition not only of its being as an object, but also that it further represents a command to stop. This determined recognition thus *founds* a relation to the rules of the road, such that the stop sign *signifies* to the driver the command to stop.²⁷

²⁴ Poinsett, *Tractatus de Signis*, 26 (Book 1, Question 3).

²⁵ On this point, I must again be brief on the inner workings of relations, but fundaments, prior to being in relation, are not fundaments formally and actually, because only the attribute(s) founding their being in relation exist. This is traditionally known as the “material” aspect of a fundament. As such, it is the material fundament that determines an interpretant, and the formal and material fundament that represents a terminus. Detailed discussion of this area is in Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation.”

²⁶ Introduced in Culwick, “‘Machine Code for the Universe:’ How the Action of Signs Pervades Everything,” 17. Detailed technical discussion in Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation.”

²⁷ The term “sign” is used somewhat interchangeably with “relation” in this chapter, due to their differences not being essential to my

Freedom and Change

When something is undetermined in some respect by at least one thing but determined in that respect by at least one other thing, then I term the latent possibility of change engendered by the undetermined respect *freedom*. That is, this form of freedom consists in the indeterminacy of one thing relative to another in some respect(s). Where there is indeterminacy, there is not only distinctness between things (as manifested in Section "Identity and Distinctness"), but also freedom to move and change independently of other things. Indeterminacy, as described, creates considerable scope for change to occur, since each respect in which a thing is not determined is a degree of freedom of the overall system.

Change, within this conception is, naturally, some alteration in relating. For example, a respect in which an object is undetermined could become determined if a new relation were to arise; a relation can cease to be if some attribute (itself constituted by relations) ceases to be. The more respects in which things do not determine each other, the higher the grades of freedom they have from each other. For example, an asteroid moving in space does not determine the direction or velocity of another asteroid (excluding, for the sake of argument, their tiny gravitational attraction), which is why it is acceptable to say that they can collide by "accident";²⁸ their motions are largely determined freely of each other (until they collide, of course). Moreover, other of the asteroids' attributes are entirely undetermined by each other's, like, say, their colour and the type of rock they are made of. Thus, even in a fully (so-called) deterministic Newtonian

thesis. However, there are differences. Briefly, a sign is something that signifies something other than itself to some third thing, while a relation is any sort of "being-towards," and can have any kind of (imaginary) configuration. *But any relation that actually exists is a sign.* Not all signs are real relations, but all real relations are signs. For some signs are virtual or potential, and these are not a real relating in the here-and-now. Detailed discussion in Culwick, "A Fissure in the Foundation."

28 I believe I owe this example to Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, though I am unable to find the paragraph in which I recall his making this example.

system, bodies are not determined in every respect but have freedom from each other.

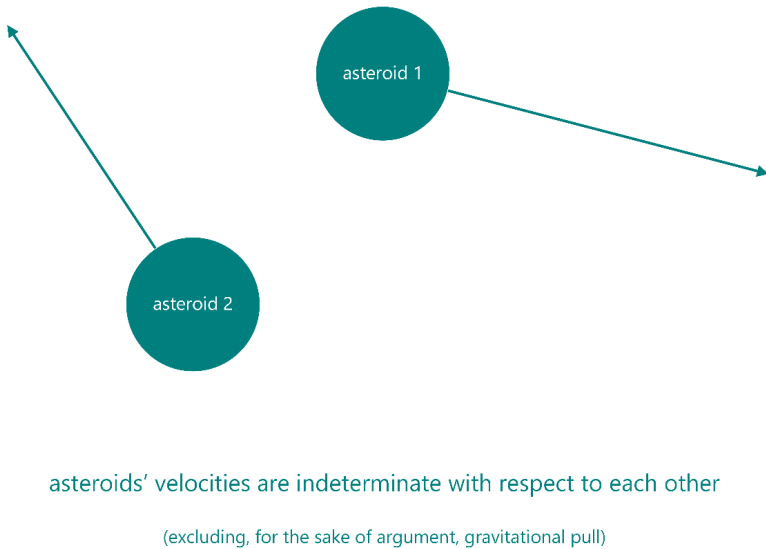


Figure 4: Indeterminate (free) motion in a deterministic Newtonian system. Source: Author

Change and Relation

Change, as accounted for thus far, has only been allocated “space” to occur within undetermined respects; but it is one thing to make space for something, and another thing for it to actually occur. What is it, then, that causes an “alteration in relating,” as I have described it? To manifest this in our image, it is necessary to pay closer attention to what takes place when something relates to something else. In the case of the asteroids, whose velocities are indeterminate with respect to one another, if they were to happen to collide, then these velocities would become determined by their relating during the collision. For example, the momentum (relative velocity multiplied by mass) of one asteroid would cause a proportional change in the other’s momentum. This is a positive sense of “change” supplied by the relation.

That relation is the driver of change can be shown in the details of the collision. There are numerous attributes that directly determine the second asteroid's final velocity, and it is their presence or absence, and their particular magnitudes, that determine the particular change – for example, whether the second asteroid is struck a glancing blow or is hit head-on, the amount of energy its material reflects back at the first asteroid in rebounding off it, the maximum energy it can absorb before deforming, the specific angle of impact, the specific angle of the surfaces that make impact, and in what order, and so forth. Now if these properties were to be modified, then the change that would take place would differ. As such, the specific change that takes place is determined by the intrinsic natures of the things in relation, but – as shown above – not by just any attribute, but by the attributes actually relating in the here-and-now, which come to correlate and determine some particular new set of attributes.

The Modes: Potentiality, Actuality, and Virtuality

The interplay between things' indeterminacy with respect to one another, and their changing, in which things or attributes become determinately actual, renders identifiable certain (meta-) attributes concerning their status as regards possibility and actuality. That is, our image manifests *modes*.

There appear to be three modes. "Actual relating" I term *actual*, and it includes all here-and-now relating (of the kind manifested in Section "Attributes and Relations" and "Change and Relation"). "Locally relative nothing" I term *potential*, and it comprises the latent physical potentiality for change in a universe (as manifest in Sections "Relating in All or Some Respects" and "Freedom and Change"). "Universally relative nothing" (as per Section "Relative Nothing and Absolute Nothing") I exclude from the modal scheme since such attributes are not part of the universe.²⁹

29 "Universally undetermined" attributes, though imaginary, have an important function: they limit the modal scheme and thus answer the question, "why not more than three modes?" They do so by defining, in effect, a limit beyond which possibility is no longer real in a universe. For when some thing's attribute is not only "locally

The third mode in my conceptual scheme is *virtuality*, and this mode is in fact the most common mode of relating. Now the definition of “virtual” is to not be some thing, yet to have the actual efficacy of that thing,³⁰ and it is exceedingly common for something nonexistent to be signified (e.g., a unicorn, a work of fiction, a dead person, aether, or the Ptolemaic motions of the universe) and, in so doing, to have an actual effect on some interpretant (e.g., a listener). In such a situation, the terminus is nonexistent and so cannot determine the fundament; as such, there is no real relation, only a relation “subjective” to the interpretant. Yet something is still actually interpreted as a fundament, prior to which the fundament has determined the interpretant, and thus does it have the usual effect of a fundament upon the interpretant. Systems in each mode are *real*, but not in the same way. The case is self-evident for actual relations. Potential relations are *not* relations; they are real possibilities, that is, they are potentially relations in the same physical sense implied by the potential energy of a rock perched atop a hill (as per Sections “Relating in All or Some Respects” and “Freedom and Change”). Virtual relations, too, are not relations, and neither are they latent physical possibilities. They are, instead, some possible scenario as represented by some interpretant, which could perhaps be actual in the right circumstances (e.g., aether if electromagnetism in fact propagates through a medium, or Ptolemy’s theory if the earth were the centre of the universe).³¹

relative nothing” (that is, it is nothing to some particular thing), but it is also “universally relative nothing” (that is, it is nothing to anything in the universe), then the attribute is neither something to something else, nor (as per Section “Objects Necessarily Are Systems Too”) something intrinsic to the thing. And there is no other manner in which it can be anything. Therefore, they are imaginary and not a way in which things (or attributes) have being in a universe.

30 Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: IntelLex Corp, 1994 [1958]), 6.372. See also <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/term/virtual>.

31 To return again to the matter of defining the limits of the modal scheme, it is instructive to compare “universally relative nothing” to virtual relations, for both are “imaginary” in the sense that nothing in the universe possesses attribute(s) to terminate a relation, and yet I have claimed that virtuality is real. The difference, I believe, turns on some interpretant being actually

The modes correspond also to the presence or absence of one or another extreme of a relation, for a virtual relation has a

affected in some minimal way, such as “subjectively.” For if something is nothing to anything else in the universe, then of course nothing is affected, not even subjectively. In contrast, virtuality is modelled as follows.

Imagine a universe consisting of only two things, where one thing is something to the other thing in one respect but is nothing to it in some second respect. Moreover, imagine that the second respect is not an intrinsic attribute of the second thing. It is thus *not part of the universe*.

Imagine now that this respect is an extrinsic attribute, denominated by some interpretant. In such a case, it would be “subjective” to the interpretant.

And now imagine that no interpretant exists, but that, *if* one were to be present, the extrinsic attribute would accrue to the second thing relative to the interpretant. Take, for example, the attribute “knowable”:

1. Water is *knowable* under the concept H_2O in the event that something or someone comes along with both the concept and a means of identifying water as H_2O .
2. To possess the attribute “knowable if someone were to come along (etc.)” is:
 - 2.1 an attribute extrinsic to the being of a thing, since it is a relation, and
 - 2.2 not the same as being actually known, but merely for something else to be able in principle to detect or experience it.
3. Historically, nothing was known to be H_2O until the relatively recent past, and yet, all along, the molecule possessed the mind-independent nature requisite for it to be known in this way, and so it was *knowable*. In such a case,
 - 3.1 inferring from Section “Relating in All or Some Respects”, the attribute was not in the universe.
 - 3.2 But all along, it was mind-independently an attribute of water.

This perplexing situation is not easy to resolve. A sceptical reader would likely object to 3.2. on the grounds that, in order to be knowable, it is necessarily to imply a relation to a knower, and if a knower is absent in the actual here-and-now, the attribute could not arise. To this I respond (*contra* Poinset, *Tractatus de Signis*, 138) that to be knowable has a mind-independent *material* aspect and a mind-dependent *formal* and actual aspect. That is, the intrinsic nature of the thing possesses the attributes that found being knowable, but it does *not* actually possess the attribute “knowable” in the absence of an interpretant. (I have explored this area in great detail in Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation”.) Therefore, knowability is mind-independently present only as a material fundament, but not as an actual and formal fundament. Modally, this places “knowable” outside the real, in the “imaginary” and “universally relative nothing” class. But if an interpretant were present, then it would actualise a relation; and in the event that no terminus exists, the relation would be virtual.

nonexistent terminus and a potential relation has no interpretant. An actual relation has an interpretant, fundament, and terminus.³²

Modal Filtering

When change occurs, systems undergo *modal filtering*. For coming into relation is a movement from virtuality or potentiality to actuality, in which an infinite or indefinite number of potential attributes are sacrificed for a determinate actuality. For example, prior to coming into some new relation, an asteroid has an infinite number of “universally” undetermined attributes, which are not (yet) real in any mode. It could accrue the attribute *...rebound off...* if it were to make impact with another asteroid; it could accrue the attribute *...is mined by...* if it is composed of enough rare earth elements to justify the risk and expense; it could acquire some unknown new attribute under the crushing gravity of a black hole; and so forth.

No less limited in principle, but limited by interpretants’ ability to seek out significance, are the imaginary attributes of the nonexistent termini of virtual signs, which nonetheless really affect interpretants. More limited, but still indefinite in number, are the “locally” undetermined attributes of a thing (that is, attributes not being determined by some other particular thing). For these accrue actually to a thing as a result of ongoing relations constituting its being intrinsically and extrinsically, which have filtered the infinite number of imaginary and virtual attributes to produce the set of real and undetermined attributes “free” to found, terminate or interpret some new relation. (For example, the asteroid has spatial extension, a certain mass, and so forth.) This set comprises the thing’s latent physical potential. Most limited in number are a thing’s actual attributes in actual relation in the here-and-now.

Below, I graph the modes. Circled letters are attributes, rectangles are subjects, and arrows signify what a given interpretant takes a subject to signify. Interpretants (not shown) function to bring attributes from the blue circle or the

32 The subject of the parts of a relation is explored in considerable detail in Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation.”

orange-brown circle into the green circle. Unreal (universally undetermined) attributes are not shown, because they are not in relation to anything and so are not a mode.

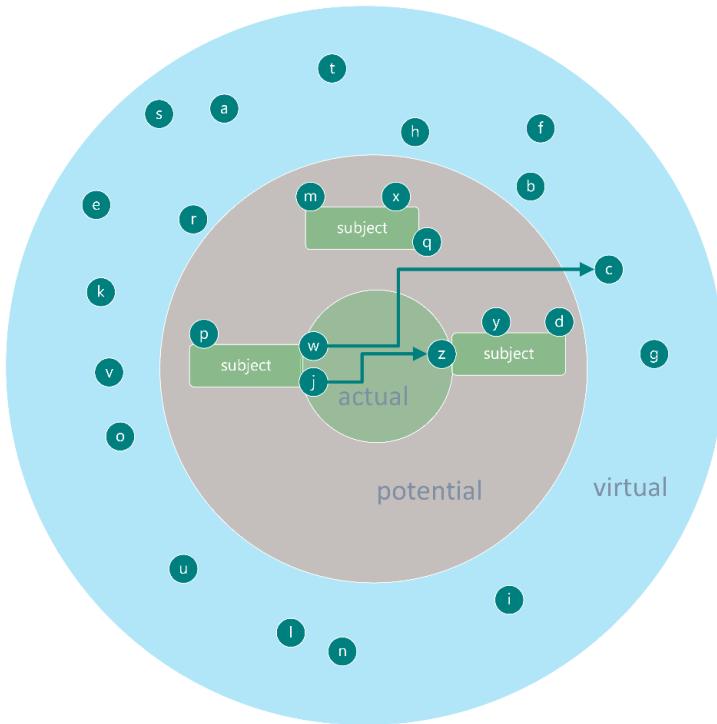


Figure 5: Modalities of attributes, and the filtering effect of relations. Source: Author

Moreover, movement from potentiality to actuality is observable in terms of either of the two “facets” introduced in Section "Attributes and Relations", “determining” and “respecting.” Modal filtering can thus be further characterised in their terms. It is these characteristics from which normativity can be rendered observable in immediate experience as a “kenotic” principle.

The Emergence of Normativity

In order to draw out more clearly the sense in which normativity is involved in modal filtering, an example in a more familiar human

setting will be given. The human and familiar setting is that of love. Now love necessarily involves two aspects: an aspect of self-sacrifice on the part of the lover, and an aspect of hospitality or receptivity on the part of the beloved. For example, let's say I take time out of a busy morning to wash the dishes for my wife. The act involves a sacrifice of my time and effort, and it involves my wife's benefitting from it. In order for the act to be loving, it is necessary for me to have done the act in love, but also for my wife to actually be loved – that is, for her good to be attained – by the act. This entails a relation between an active and a passive term: the former loves, and the latter possesses the capacity to be loved in the manner that the former loves.

It might be objected that the passive term is not necessary. For example, would it not be love even if my wife took offense due to her feeling that I had, say, washed the dishes as if to imply that they had been neglected by her? In response, I assert that my act certainly was loving, but that her good was not in fact attained. Therefore, a *relation* of loving did not arise, for the act had no real terminus.

One might further object that even if, in some convenient and technical sense, a "relation" of love might be said not to arise, it is still true that I actually and really love my wife by washing the dishes, for to love is to want the good of the other, not necessarily to succeed in achieving their good. To this I respond that to love without happening to achieve their good is indeed love, since it represents the act of washing dishes as being for my wife's good in precisely the same way that to speak of unicorns is to signify really and actually, namely without terminating at anything actual. That is, I would actually love, but a real *relation* of love would not arise.

Moreover, if my love was not insubstantial, then when I notice when it is misdirected, I would tend to try to work towards more consistently acting for my wife's good. That is, loving her motivates me not to have my love languish in mere virtuality, but to actualise it. The same is apparent in unrequited love, where the lover naturally strives to turn virtuality into actuality – that is, to reduce a wide range of possibilities as to who the lover and the beloved may end up loving down to a single determinate actuality:

their loving each other. Thus does modal filtering operate in this instance.

To bring out more clearly the nature of the passive role in love as a filter, a further example shall be given. Imagine that you are drafted into the military for a war. The military thus *designates* you a soldier. If you were to accept the designation, you would exercise hospitality: you are welcoming a relation which strips your being of indefinitely many other potential designations (lawyer, priest, model train hobbyist, etc.). The respect in which this is a stripping away of potentialities would be made even more clear if you had a commitment to a different potentiality – and especially if you did not believe in the war. Nonetheless, your being designated is not a “sacrifice” in the same sense as the active role, since strictly speaking you are not actively sacrificing anything. Rather, you are being passively designated a soldier, by virtue of purely abstract attributes of your person which determine the relation, like possessing legal status, age and citizenship. No action on your part is required to possess these attributes, and thus no action on your part is required to be designated a soldier.

To clear up a potential source of confusion, when it comes to answering the call and taking up arms, action on your part is of course required, but this is consequent upon the designation, not part of it. This is clear from the fact that you would not be answering a call if you were not designated a soldier; but once designated, you are then free to play an active role by taking up arms or by objecting. Contrastingly, in situations where you voluntarily become a soldier without being conscripted, then you would be the active party, not the passive party, and your role in the relation would therefore not be one of hospitality, but of self-sacrifice.

At this, one might object that it is not clear how determining is necessarily like hospitality, for a tyrannical ruler may represent you as a slave and treat you brutally. Under such conditions, you would not typically be exercising hospitality, you would probably be exercising the greatest reluctance! I respond that the respect in which a tyrant might commit you to slavery does not bear upon your wishes, but upon your perceived usefulness. Unfortunately

for you, your broader personhood is not the object “represented”; rather, attributes like being able to do certain work, and being coercible, are what *determine* the relation, and it is these that exercise “hospitality” by actually determining, that is, being *amenable* to being represented as worthy of enslavement. As a general guide to employing this model, it is the real relations – those actually in play – in which one may identify what is functioning to determine and to represent.

As such, whether actively being self-sacrificial, or passively being hospitable, a stripping away of possible ways of being occurs. To be caught up in a relation of love – or of conscription or any other relation – is to exchange a rich array of possibilities for a limited, determinate actuality. Without remainder, these are instances of the complementary relational facets of determining and representing, and when they are both present, of founding.

There is a term adequate for signifying either the “self-sacrifice” of representing and the “hospitality” of determining: *kenosis*. “Kenosis” originates in the Greek κενόω, which means “to empty out,” and within the Christian tradition, St Paul’s use of ἐκένωσεν (“ekénōsen”) which, in English, is translated “Jesus made himself nothing” (NIV) or “he emptied himself” (NKJV)³³ is traditionally interpreted to signify God’s self-sacrificial love, either in being reduced to human incarnation in the person of Jesus, or in his giving his life for ours. Now within this historical usage of “kenosis,” both “hospitality” and “self-sacrifice” are manifest, for God “determines” the being of Jesus as the Word,³⁴ who is thus “the exact *representation* of [the Father’s] being,³⁵ and who self-sacrificially gives his life for the world. “Kenosis” thus adequately encompasses the meaning of either “determining” or “representing,” and it does so in historical *usage*, that is, without imposing a dependency upon the Christian tradition’s truth-claims.

33 Phil 2:7

34 John 1:1–3 and 14: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. [...] The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

35 Hebrews 1:3 (*New American Standard Bible*), italics added.

Kenosis: How “ought” Comes from “is”

How, then, is modal filtering normative? Most generally, it is normative because for any interpretant, there is something “at stake” – something significant – to it. Even in a collision between asteroids, there emerges *value* of a minimal sort, namely, in the respect that one asteroid is *something* to the other one. And if no interpretant is present (i.e., in a given potential relation), a given system is pregnant with the potential to be reduced to some significant actuality (as with quantum foam). And if no terminus is present (i.e., in a virtual relation), signification may proceed regardless, for interpretants may found virtual signs. It is as if there being something at stake surpasses in importance even the reality or unreality of the relation. The universe appears ordered to significance *first*, and the rest are details.

As for the more principal matter, namely the observable physical process by which normativity emerges, it appears on the basis of our image that “self-sacrifice” and “hospitality” are plainly instances of the facets “representing” and “determining.” After all, to be conscripted is plainly to be the terminus in a relation of conscription, in which your imminent role as a soldier is signified, and so some of your attributes (e.g., suitable age or citizenship) serve to *determine* the relation. Likewise, my washing the dishes founds a relation signifying love for my wife, and so the sacrificial act of washing *represents* the respect in which my wife is beloved. And if her good is in fact attained, then that *determines* the fundament of the relation, terminating and thus actualising the relation. As such, on the basis of our image, *all being can be seen immediately to manifest kenosis*, in a manner analogous to acts of “self-sacrifice” and “hospitality,” specifically in the complementary facets of representing and determining. Moreover, *kenosis is pervasive*. For there is no instance in which relating occurs that does not involve determining or representing, and the principle of being a universe is relation. And *there is no normative activity which is not kenotic*. For to be in relation is to

be something to some interpretant, which is to have at least a minimal sort of value to the interpretant.³⁶

That said, value of this elementary sort does not have universal scope. That is, something is not significant to everything in the universe. It is, rather, relative strictly to the interpreting entity. At this elementary level – at the very earliest and faintest whisp of normativity – no grand moral principles or public ethics emerge. Nonetheless, our image manifests that it is due to kenosis – the receptivity to and stripping away of a great richness of possible ways of being – that value emerges in a universe. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to put forward a positive theory as to how kenotic relating develops into the multitude of norms, moral systems, legal systems, and economic relations, but provided these activities take place in the universe, they are without exception sign action, constituted dynamically by kenosis.

36 To clarify, the presence of an interpretant does not imply *teleology*, nor that the theory of value advanced here requires teleology. In Culwick, “A Fissure in the Foundation,” I explore the causal mode of determining, and confirm Poinot’s thesis that it is extrinsic formal specification, not final.

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