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**PHENOMENOLOGY
AND THEOLOGY**

For the time Being: Heidegger's Final Words in *Vorläufiges I-IV*

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Abstract

This article discusses the final volume of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*. It does so by contextualizing its main themes, that is, by relating it to other writings of Heidegger of roughly the same period. Three such themes can be discovered in Heidegger's "final" writing: a discussion of the nature of phenomenology, the abandonment of the ontological difference and the relation between the thought of being and the discipline of theology. The essay concludes with a comparison of Heidegger's thinking of *Ereignis* to how theology configured the relation between God and the human being, so arguing that Heidegger seemed more indebted to the tradition of theology that he at times could acknowledge.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, phenomenology, ontological difference, theology, black notebooks

Preliminary Remarks

THE FINAL VOLUME OF THE Black Notebooks, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, obviously does not contain Heidegger's last words. We have plenty of texts that are of a later date. Yet the volume conveys a sense of closure: all of Heidegger has now been published and one can now spend a life-time reading Heidegger. Our method in this essay, discussing this last volume, will therefore consist in a sort of contextualization of this fragmentary, sketchy closure of the *Gesamtausgabe* in order to sense, so to say, what was on Heidegger's mind in these last years. Between 1963 and 1976, the year of his death, several of his works did appear. One might think, just prior to these notebooks, of *Time and Being* (1962), *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (1964) and the four seminars held in Le Thor and Zähringen between 1968 and 1970. Other texts, later ones even, will be helpful too to gain an understanding of these final notes of the thinker.

This last notebook rehearses quite some themes that prevail in these books authored by Heidegger. Yet our focus will lie on some of the threads that appear throughout this last notebook in order to so gain sight of Heidegger's thinking in the last phase of this life. We will gather three themes: his thought of the end of metaphysics and his attempt to press beyond the ontological difference, his return, so to say, to a version of phenomenology and his relation to theology, which, although less present in the volume, returns in Heidegger's preoccupations at the time through various instances, as for instance the publication of *Phenomenology and Theology* (1969 in French, 1970 in German)—first given as a lecture already in 1928 however—, the letter of 1964 to the conference at Drew University with some “pointers for a theological conversation” as well as his letters to Bultmann, dating all the way to 1975.

Heidegger's *Vorläufiges* are difficult to read. Their fragmentary nature can be very demanding. Quite some volumes in the *Gesamtausgabe* however display this fragmentary nature. It is difficult to see of what use these sentences sometimes were for Heidegger's writings. Were they scribbles he hoped to insert in a publication later, as one can in effect from time to time notice? Are they momentary insights he would rather keep out his published work? Were they meant as mere pointers, their fragmentary nature just enough for the thinker to be reminded how to spell them out in writing? It is hard to say.

It is not clear whether these final notebooks will bring anything groundbreaking to Heideggerian scholarship. Some, like Richard Capobianco, have already argued in this direction: “It would not be surprising that even in a few short years the *Black Notebooks* will be largely set aside in favor of returning to Heidegger's major writings and lecture courses. Even so [...] these notebooks [...] will be of some value in shedding more light on his central philosophical themes and on the development of his thinking”.¹

Capobianco's book, however, was published before this final volume saw the light of day and we have yet to see whether such an assessment is valid for the notebook in question. We want here, in this essay, apart from putting Heidegger's development in perspective to let these preliminaries, these provisional, provisory remarks, speak for themselves first of all and enter into conversation with them. With this, we already touch the first of themes we discuss below: Heidegger's renewed interest in phenomenology. It is an attempt, he even writes, to “save phenomenology”.² This return is obliquely present in his writings of the time and concerns, one might say, the movement of the phenomenological gaze or, as Heidegger says, “the

¹ Richard Capobianco, *Heidegger's Being. The Shimmering Unfolding* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2022), 35.

² Martin Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, GA 102 (Frankfurt a. Main: Klostermann, 2022), 351.

primordial sense of phenomenology”.³ This movement, this “path”, is in these publications however only addressed briefly: it “leads away to come before...and it lets that before which it is led show itself”.⁴ We propose to do the same with these notebooks—to read them as they are and let them show to where they lead us. In this way, their fragmentary nature might just as well serve the purpose to inspire their readers, to let the mind wander and walk away with the ideas that the notebook, here and there, might offer.

The *Black Notebooks* have received plenty of attention. One may doubt whether this was always due to philosophical reasons. Some interpreters might confront the *Vorläufiges I-IV* with a non-benevolent reading as well—after all, there is a mention of his Nazi period, and two references to fascism and antifascism. We will not discuss these passages here, for a perhaps provocative but nonetheless philosophical reason: the Heidegger of the thirties, with all the decisionism and the very naïve belief that one or the other political system might address the question of being and so relaunch Western civilization is probably the least interesting period of Heidegger’s work. It is where he intuited something like the *Kehre* but did not seem to have realized what exactly this *Kehre* was. This happened only later, and the notebook under discussion will make clear why. We will not mention these passages nor the lesser benevolent reading of the notebook that circulates on the Internet, for the simple reason that what is happening today to Heidegger in general but to his thinking in particular seems an immunization on all counts, whereas the only sensible conclusion, with regard to Heidegger’s path, seems to be that no one, not even the smartest, not even the wisest, is *immune* for fascism and its metaphysics, especially in a discipline that has had elitist tendencies from the very beginning, from Plato’s philosopher-king to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*.⁵

Heidegger’s *Vorläufiges*, their preliminary character, is a bit awkward considering it is the last tome of the collected writings. The diffidence speaking from this title—and for which the editors of the volume call attention since it markedly differs from the somewhat ironical and cynical tones of the earlier *Schware Hefte*—echoes *The End of Philosophy* where the decisionist stance of the earlier years had already changed into a preparatory thinking, which is now a preparation for God knows what. It anticipates an “other beginning” that by no means could be established by one or the other regime or thinker. “Thinking [...] remains unassuming, because its task is only of a preparatory, not a founding character. It is content with

³ Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, trans. A. Mitchell and F. Raffoul (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2012), 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵ I did address this period, and these notebooks, in my essay on *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks. Beyond Antisemitism*, edited by P. Trawny, in *Phenomenological Reviews* 4 (2018). See: <https://reviews.ophen.org/2018/01/14/heideggers-black-notebooks-responses-anti-semitism/>.

awakening a readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain".⁶

Heidegger obviously did not know this notebook would be the final volume, back in 1963. There are indications, however, that many of the entries date later than 1969. The mention of "Le Thor 1969"⁷ indicates at the least that some of the entries may have been written at the beginning of 1970. The editor of the Black Notebooks, Peter Trawny, reports this fact, and also conveyed that Heidegger did not write these different entries chronologically but came back to some of them, adding this deleting that, and so on.⁸ It was the philosopher's workshop so to speak. It is for this reason, too, that a contextualization of this notebook seems at issue.

The Return of Phenomenology?

Many commentators agree that Heidegger seems to have abandoned phenomenology altogether from the thirties onward.⁹ At least one will not find compelling descriptions of particular phenomena in the "later Heidegger", as he once did with boredom or anxiety. Now, late in life, Heidegger writes that he wants to save phenomenology. From what exactly? From its "transcendental" character. One of the last lines of the notebook reads: "the first compelling experience of thinking: to remark the relation between presencing and unconcealment [which] remains foreign to dialectics and sealed for phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology that is".¹⁰

Heidegger's early critique of transcendental thinking is well-known: Dasein was to be distinguished from the ego or the absolute consciousness of which, mostly Husserl's phenomenology, spoke. Dasein was to be inserted and immersed into the world in which it is involved in the things of the world. In a text from 1968, however, Heidegger still identified his question of being, or about the being of beings, as phenomenological.¹¹ His critique of transcendental thinking now however plays on an entirely different level. The thinker of the event of being now questions transcendentalism as a heir to metaphysical thinking. Its quest for "conditions of possibility" prolongs the latter's attempt at grounding and looking for an ultimate foundation. Transcendentalism repeats this attempt by looking for a priori structures, so laying out what is prior to what, like the metaphysical ground

⁶ Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (London: Routledge, 2002), 436.

⁷ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges*, 267.

⁸ See the afterword, in *Ibid.*, 434.

⁹ For an original take, see Fredrik Westerlund, *Heidegger and the Problem of Phenomena* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 361.

¹¹ See Heidegger, "Über das Zeitverständnis in der Phänomenologie und im Denken des Seinsfrage," in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, GA 14 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2007), 147.

of being comes before, even caused, the chain of beings. Heidegger does not shy away from criticizing *Being and Time* in this regard. One of the remarkable features of Heidegger is indeed that he time and again returns to the thinking of this particular book. It is, however, quite rare that he openly criticizes this work which in *Vorläufiges* happens quite some times, along with critiques of his other works.

Vorläufiges repeatedly turns to the supposed transcendental nature of *Being and Time*. In a sense, in and through mapping the existentials of Dasein, it lays out the conditions for Dasein to be able to own up to its proper existence within being, that is, within the world against the “horizon” of its finitude. Heidegger, of course, would not be Heidegger if the critique is not in some way anticipated. At issue, then, in *Being and Time* already, is a “transformation” of transcendental thinking and its transcendental nature does not have to with Dasein so much as with being which, as the *transcendens schlethin*, remains as the condition par excellence through which there first are beings, ekstasis and so on.¹² It is, however, quite surprising to read — next to its attempted cleverness — the following: “It would be more appropriate to call the Heidegger from “*Sein und Zeit*”, insofar he still is suspended by metaphysics, attempts “*Ontology*”, and does not yet clearly see in what he moves, the later one,”¹³ that is to say: not the first, most *anfänglich* and important one.

If anything Heidegger, up to the seventies, was perhaps performing a phenomenology of poetry or phenomenological reading of poetry. A confrontation, however, with the discipline of phenomenology was absent. In the *Four Seminars*, then, there was the infamous mention of a “phenomenology of the unapparent”, along with some sort of “exercise” that accompanied this phenomenology, wresting the unapparent out of concealment into the open.¹⁴ It is this path that *Vorläufiges* lays bare. Heidegger here quite frequently returns to the nature of phenomenological questioning. He laments that what is lacking today is “phenomenological discipline” (which is something else than the discipline of phenomenology), one that is not biased by one or the other philosophical position and lets itself be determined by the claim of the *Sache*, the matter of thinking.¹⁵ For this, Heidegger turns, quite surprisingly, to Goethe’s notion of *reine Bemerken*, the pure remarking of what happens, the noticing of what might go unnoticed. Here too echoes can be found in the *Four Seminars*, where Heidegger quotes Goethe too: these *reine Bemerkungen* are rarer than one expects, Goethe says, all too often our sight is mixed indeed with opinions and interpretations.¹⁶ From this viewpoint, Heidegger will

¹² Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 141. For the “transformation”, see e.g. 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, 80 and 89. The idea is mentioned in *Vorläufiges* a couple of times, see e.g. 350.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 89.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, 97. The quote is present in *Vorläufiges* too, see 283.

launch a forceful critique of the discipline of hermeneutics, which always runs the risk of a totalitarianism of sorts stating that in the end interpretations are all there is.

This manner of noticing cannot be learned—it is more like a talent one has or one doesn't have. One does not learn phenomenology by "reading books".¹⁷ Yet at the same time Heidegger complains that in our age of information "no one learns to read" anymore.¹⁸ In a similar manner, his critique of metaphysics' closure does not mean one no longer has to confront the metaphysical tradition. On the contrary, any thinking at the end of philosophy "finds itself moved to review the whole history of philosophy".¹⁹ Reading, it seems, is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition to acquire phenomenological discipline and to learn phenomenological seeing.

Heidegger likens the practice of *Bemerken*, remarking, to *spüren*, a "sniffing around" as it were, to find a phenomenon.²⁰ One needs to have the taste for this discipline, or not—at best this phenomenology is an acquired taste. One might just as well stick to a phenomenon simple and plain and remain stuck in the "*Bestellbarkeit*" that spreads over the world through the *Gestell*, where all of us have become administrators that count everyone and everything.

What is needed, this late Heidegger says, is that phenomenology needs to be determined from out of *Ereignis*.²¹ It needs to heed the event of world and being. It remains for us to see just how such *Bestimmung* comes about. Elsewhere Heidegger adopts Goethe's *Urphänomen* when speaking of *Lichtung*, unconcealment (which, although part of it, is to be distinguished from *Ereignis*. Speaking of what appears in the *Lichtung*, one more lesson for phenomenology is to be learned. "Goethe notes: "Look for nothing behind phenomena: they themselves are what is to be learned".²² It is as if Heidegger anticipated the bidding for the utter *epekeina tes ousias* that Levinas would launch and Marion today continues: "With regard to presencing, there is no *epekeina*".²³

As much as we need to encounter the phenomenon without prior established conditions, we need to speak of it without interpreting it afterwards. We need to, as *Being and Time* indicated, receive the phenomenon as it shows itself from itself. There is neither something behind nor before its appearance—its presencing is all there is to it. Heidegger's critique of

¹⁷ Heidegger, "Über das Zeitsverständnis", 149.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 354.

¹⁹ Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy", 436.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 301.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²² Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy," 442.

²³ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 319. On this question, also Heidegger, *Vigiliae und Notturmo. Schwarze Hefte 1952/1953-1957*, GA 100 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2020), 74. For Marion, see *God Without Being. Hors-Texte* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), for Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2002).

Husserlian phenomenology is in this later era quite fierce: its quest for a “principle of all principles” is but one more attempt at a certifying foundation and its conditioned and constituted appearances but one more attempt to domesticate the beings and the things appearing.²⁴

A genuine phenomenology for Heidegger, one readied before the event of *Ereignis*, knows neither of conditions nor of borders: “*Phenomenological thinking* can never, not even to a certain measure, be learned. Because it desires that its relation to the matter and the determination of this matter as the matter of thinking [...] is constantly tried anew, that the thinker him- or herself incessantly renews his or her relation to the matter and is so tried by [this] relation to his or her thinking”.²⁵ All this concerns “the transformation of phenomenology into the *Inständigkeit des Ent-sagens*” — standing within (the event) and re-nouncing or unsay what is present and what can be spoken about.²⁶ With the latter, we have reached the vocabulary of the “later Heidegger”.

Heidegger quite early on connected “showing” — the phenomenon shows itself — to “speaking”: *Zeigen* is ultimately a *Sagen*. Apart from the similarity between the words, there is something to be said about this connection. I can of course notice this particular phenomenon over here (and solipsistically perform all kind of reductions on this phenomenon) but without communicating this phenomenon to others, this phenomenon never really “is” properly. It takes two for meaning and sense to arise — something that Levinas really took to heart. Once, however, a phenomenon “is” between us, it can be said in multiple ways, correct and incorrect ones. All these ways can and must be said and can be unsaid as well — one might be reminded of Levinas’ notion of *dédire*. Similarly, a phenomenon can appear in and through words alone. We should not underestimate Heidegger’s turn to poetry in this regard. The poet speaks and is so able to show us what we otherwise would not have seen. The connection between showing and saying is therefore double: what is seen, needs to be said; what is said can lead to a new way of seeing.

In *Vorläufiges* too Heidegger insists on this connection, which leads all the way up to the event of being and *Ereignis*. Here Heidegger appropriated the stages in the ways of truth that he announced since *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* in the thirties: truth has not always been truth but has a history — it is relatively late in history that truth comes to be determined as correspondence for instance. An older word for truth remains: *aletheia*, unconcealment. The word, and what it conveys, will be paradigmatic for the later Heidegger. Truth is accompanied now by a “*Hervorbringen*”, a

²⁴ See Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy,” 439-40. *Vorläufiges I-IV* contains quite some vicious remarks about Husserl, and his idea of the “*Lebenswelt*” especially, see e.g. 45 and 71 to mention a few.

²⁵ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

bringing forward, to the fore as it were. In a text from 1960, Heidegger explains it well: *Hervorbringen* concerns a bringing “from” (*her*) concealment “on/to” (*vor*) display in the open.²⁷ What was hidden, is in truth, put on display, brought onto a platform. This is paralleled in the first definition of phenomenology the notebook in question offers: “phenomenon—the self-showing of concealment as beckoning [*Winken*].”²⁸ The phenomenological gaze gazes into what conceals itself and is so able to wrest the phenomenon out of concealment into unconcealment.

It remains for us now to follow the different steps of this movement from concealment to unconcealment. It is through what is in the open, unconcealed, that we can speak of the showing and manifesting of presencing, the “*Zeige des Anwesens*”.²⁹ If in *Being and Time* already, one could surmise an overlap between the word and the world—beings are what is spoken of—then the later Heidegger sought to reveal how the naming of beings calls these beings into being.³⁰ This “call” and this “claim” is now an interplay between several actors, it is by no means a dialogue between Dasein and being. Rather, it concerns an encounter between things—Heidegger’s later word for “phenomenon,”—the contexts in which they arise, the speech of the human being needed for this thing to be brought to light and the “prior” bringing to light itself. Heidegger will admit, in *Vorläufiges* that for this encounter the names being and beings (nor their ontological difference) no longer suffice.

This naming is not an act of the subject. It is not we who do something with words. Rather, it is to “allow the name (the word) to be said, *sich den Namen [...] sagen lassen*”.³¹ Such an event of the word, then, belongs to all what is said through precisely *die Zeige*. We “owe” (*Sichverdanken*) the event of word to the showing of the being or the thing, which, in turn, needs the word to be called into being. “*Poiesis*,” is to be thought precisely as a “*Hervorbringen*”, so again a “bringing forward,” “in which the bringing concerns something handed to it [*Zugereichtes*], something already arrived”.³² Here Heidegger once more differentiates this thought from

²⁷ Heidegger, “Sprache und Heimat”, in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910-1976*, GA 13 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 1983), 171.

²⁸ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰ Few studies have stressed this almost magical realist force of naming in Heidegger, yet it is a constant in his thinking from the thirties onward. See for instance, in 1939, Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Sprache* (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 1999), 56, 72 and 117 and of course, in 1957-1958, in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), 193-4, the meditation on “nicht: Es gibt das Wort, sondern: Es, das Wort, gibt...”. Even in the *Schwarze Hefte*, this particular understanding of the word and the thing transpires, see Heidegger, *Anmerkungen VI-IX. Schwarze Hefte 1948/49-1951*, GA 98 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2018), 162, “every thing brings its own word with it”.

³¹ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 258, also for what follows.

³² *Ibid.*, 259.

the ego and the subject which know no dative, for nothing is ever handed to it, it always only concerns a *for-itself*, a for-me and “*Zu-sich*”.³³ The word (and the thing) step forward, they come toward us. One more feature of this *reine Bemerken* should not go unnoticed and will bring Heidegger a step further underway to *Ereignis*: “Presenting itself holds itself back, and lets what is present precedence and constant priority. In forgetting [of presenting, JS] there is no fault, it rather concerns an allowing [*Zulassen*]”, of presenting to let appear what is present.³⁴ Being admits that beings take center stage, and so winds up begin forgotten.

All of this might sound rather abstract. Let us give two examples, one rather lofty, one rather mundane. It is probably Jean-Yves Lacoste who has developed Heidegger’s account of language the most, by discussing the poet’s ability to make phenomena and things “overappear”, bringing an extra and an excess that the objectivity of the object cannot contain. Lacoste calls attention to Gerard M. Hopkins’ poem *Hurrahing in Haroest*. Hopkins writes that “these things, these things were here and but the beholder wanting [and], to speak the truth, it is the poet that they await.”³⁵ It is the poet who names things and, to turn to Heidegger, gathers them in a presence. Yet “what the poet says is unexpected”.³⁶ The poet so “speaks of the new, and if he (or she) manifests anew, he (or she) does so by taking leave of everyday experiences and everyday interrogations”.³⁷ It, in effect, makes little sense to say that the clouds are silk sacks, as Hopkins does, to the farmer who is watching the weather and hopes for rain. Yet the poet reminds us (and possibly the farmer) that “before him (or her) we had not really seen [and] that we suffered from a lack of seeing”.³⁸

The poet’s speech, for Lacoste, offers an “over-phenomenalization through language”³⁹: poetry accords an evidence to and for things that intuition alone cannot. In this regard, it grants a beyond of the phenomenon—it is closer to Heidegger’s *thing* than to Kant’s object. If the phenomenon is that which you and I can see, for instance, when seeing these clouds, then it falls to the poet to make us see something about these phenomena that we otherwise (and ordinarily) would not have seen—we would look up to the clouds and possibly mimic the scientist’s vocabulary. It is this that poetry does: it brings truth to speech. What is essential to the poem, however, is that its experience needs to be *communicated* to its readers. In this regard, there is no truth for one alone. The poet thus speaks from out of an

³³ *Ibid.*, 259.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

³⁵ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Thèses sur le vrai* (Paris: PUF, 2018), 117. For an analysis of this important work, see my “Jean-Yves Lacoste’s Thesis on Truth,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 53 (2020).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

“intersubjective accord”⁴⁰ and what he (or she) communicates is possible only first of all because it is so *that* there is communication and language prior to what is being said and, secondly, because there is a sense in which one can say that the question of being and the question of language allow for considerable overlap (which explains Heidegger’s later emphasis on “hearing”, say, the voice of being rather than on phenomenological “seeing” *per se*). The difference between Lacoste and Heidegger resides in that for Lacoste the *dichter* helps the *denker* in his or her thinking of truth, where Heidegger, more often than not, claims to understand the poets better than the poets understand themselves.⁴¹

In both thinkers, however, there seems to be an unquestioned priority of *Dichters* and *Denkers*. Their point can, however, be made in more mundane a manner. One might think of the phenomenon of a trend. #Metoo, for instance, does of course not mean that belittling women (or worse) did not exist before Alyssa Milano tweeted her story in 2017. Yet it is through this tweet that both the phenomenon—how it appears, through which medium—and the thing “in itself”—what it is—quickly gained some traction in contemporary culture. One might say: it is through the *naming* of the event in 2017 that we are able to point to similar extant situations happening before 2017, just as Heidegger argued, with Georg Trakl in mind, that no thing is if there is no word for the thing in question. It is also in this direction that one might be inclined to interpret Heidegger’s somewhat odd claim in *Being and Time*: “Before Newton’s laws were discovered, they were not ‘true’”.⁴²

Heidegger so thinks the event of a thing coming to language. It is such an event that will be more and more named as *Ereignis* and less and less with the terms being and beings. The event of a decent poem just as Alyssa Milano’s tweet, make for the fact that for the time being this word will resound in our culture (and so constitute a world of its own). We still need to understand that nothing conditions such an event. It pops up without a subject constituting it and the few conditions that have given rise to it, the poet taking up his pen, Milano picking up her phone, never contain the effects that such events brings along. There is more reality in the effect than in the cause—to counter a scholastic and Cartesian tradition.

It is true that such a concern for the event, how a being brings something to light, is a concern for Heidegger throughout his career. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the claims about the temple and the work of art make Heidegger say that the work of such unconcealment, of truth, “is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again”.⁴³ Once the poem has spoken to us, everything is (supposed

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Heidegger, “Der Fehl heiliger Namen”, in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 234.

⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 269.

⁴³ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings*, 187.

to be) entirely different than before. In any case, its event brings something new to light and it will do so in a manner that cannot be repeated or reproduced in any manner. The event does so, once and for all. In effect one will find the later Heidegger stress the *Jeweiligkeit* of these things coming to be more and more. Heidegger, one might say, wanted us to notice the coming and going of things (and then to learn us think about this coming and going).

There is one more peculiarity about this return of phenomenology we need to note. From *Being and Time* onward, Heidegger had a particular reluctance towards proofs—in *Being and Time*, for instance, he somewhat ridicules the modern attempts to prove the existence of the outside world. Similarly, he has always been critical about the *Gottesbeweise* that permeate the theological tradition. Heidegger always queried from whence these proofs get their force, their binding character. What is it in such a proof that makes for the fact that anything at all is considered proven. This, of course, is philosophy at its very best. “Is it accidental that the question about the Being of Nature aims at the ‘condition of its possibility’? On what is such inquiry based? [We] cannot leave aside the question: *why* are entities [...] understood in their Being, if they are disclosed in accordance with the conditions of their possibility? Kant’s [...] presupposition is something that cannot be left without demonstrating how it is justified”.⁴⁴

It is not enough to prove an argument, follow it to its conclusion and then form all kind of opinions based on this argument. Philosophy, for Heidegger demands more—and his critiques of the state of philosophy in *Vorläufiges* are (quite rightly) devastating.⁴⁵ It is hard to say what this more that is demanded precisely is. One can gather something from Heidegger’s mention of Tolstoy’s Iwan Illich, who protested the syllogism ‘All men are mortal—Socrates is mortal’ by claiming that it not did not pertain to him. It is also present in his later distinction between “what is correct” and “what is true”—something might be correct without being true.

In this later stage of his thinking something similar pops up in the difference between a “method” for thinking and a “way” or path for thinking, which he obviously prefers, and which he thinks possible for a “phenomenology proper”.⁴⁶ This distinction again rests on precisely the forceful character of what these methods actually are trying to prove. Here Heidegger turns to Husserl rather than to Kant. Yet the argument is directed, once more, to the presuppositions preestablished for (and *before*) thinking: “what the

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184. For Heidegger on these proofs, 249.

⁴⁵ See Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 170, 218, 304 where he for example argues that thinking is more than transcribing citations.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 144 and 148. For the distinction between “method” and “path”, see “Der Fehl heiliger Namen”, 233 and the parallel in Heidegger, *Gedachtes*, GA 81 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2007), 41.

matter of philosophy is presumed to be decided from the outset"⁴⁷: the "presence of what is present" is sufficiently, adequately proven if this presence accords with the conditions laid out by the subjectivity of the subject. Heidegger echoes *Being and Time*: "where does 'the principles of all principles' get its unshakable right? [T]he answer would be: from transcendental subjectivity, which is already presupposed as the matter of philosophy"⁴⁸. A phenomenon is a phenomenon if and only if its intuition agrees with the intention originating in the absolute ego. Yet from whence this force that made itself known and showed itself to thinkers? If thinking does not lead to a conclusion, as the premises of an argument do, from whence the need that compelled these thinkers? Heidegger here keeps looking for a *Verbindlichkeit* that is proper to being showing us beings: we "owe" our witnessing of beings to being granting these presences.

Now, what if, the "essence of truth" could be shown as other than this craving for correctness, for conditions, and interpretations? What if the multiple accounts of truth (correspondence, verification, certainty, and so on) could be shown to have a history? This, in effect, is what Heidegger later attempts. For something to be present in truth as corresponding to this state of affairs, or as verified by that state of affairs, or as ascertained in its appearance by the constitution and conditions of the subject, it is necessary that it first *come to presence*. It is brought forth (which is not solely our own making) and given over to *Dasein* which then preserves it as this or that being.⁴⁹ This *presencing* is a coming into the open, an unconcealment, which however is never exhausted—something is always withheld from view: the light casts a shadow, the open is not entirely visible and the unconcealed always retains an element that is concealed. With the latter, we have reached Heidegger's critique of the *Gestell* which knows not of anything inexhaustible. On the contrary, it lives off the total and utter transparency and manageability that now no longer pertains to nature alone but has reached the human being as well.⁵⁰

Yet we need to see how for Heidegger this event of presencing undoes all conditions that would be preestablished by a subject or interpretations that come after the fact of its presencing. Heidegger makes it clear that we are now outside of transcendental phenomenology: not only is the *Gegend*, the *Eignis* as he prefers to call it in this present notebook, "before any horizon", which is always thought only "from out of the human being"⁵¹, the very event of presencing which he had only noticed through the "step back", *Schritt zurück*, from metaphysics allows for no "transcendental-

⁴⁷ Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy", 438.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁴⁹ See for this, and to turn to the mentioned magical realist strand once more, Heidegger—in 1942-1943—*Parmenides*, GA 54 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 1992), 116.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 359.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

philosophical *Hinterfrage*”, a question about what lies behind the phenomenon as its condition. Of this event, it makes little sense to ask what makes what possible. It happens while it happens. Nothing is first or its ultimate cause—everything happens all at once and gathers itself around this thing presencing here: “there is neither a transcendental foundation in Dasein nor an “initiatory” role by being”.⁵²

The Sacrifice of the Ontological Difference?

Perhaps Heidegger never was more clear about the end of metaphysics than in *Vorläufiges*: “One still has not understood that the end of metaphysics remains metaphysical itself, and probably for a long and lasting epoch that, however, because of the self-distortion of the human being, can suddenly be broken off”.⁵³ Heidegger’s theatricality, however, is never far away—right after a quite sensible understanding of metaphysics, in line with the diffidence the editors underlined, there is again the Heidegger who hopes for a sudden breakthrough and, perhaps, another beginning amidst the devastation he sees happening now that even the human being is ordered and administered along the lines of the Gestell.

Yet these lines, as we will see, go somewhat against Heidegger’s position in this last notebook. More than once Heidegger adds that the thinking of *Eignis* is anything but hopeful—hope still waits for something and *counts* the days to this coming.⁵⁴ Another viewpoint on the problem of metaphysics here arises, obliquely as it were: after *Identity and Difference* Heidegger never said much about metaphysics as ontotheology. To be sure, metaphysics as the forgetting of being through its attention for beings got caught on the “wrong side” of the ontological difference. *Vorläufiges* will make clear, however, that at issue is a *Preisgabe*, a sacrifice or collapse perhaps, of the ontological difference.⁵⁵ The ontological difference taught Heidegger, after a long period of thinking, that the entire effort to see being from out of being itself is in vain. In and through the ontological difference one only

⁵² *Ibid.*, 352-3 for the two last quotes. For this, and what follows, see also *Was Heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1971), 74 where he argues that thinking does not go from the human being in the direction of being, or from being towards the human being but only ever starts from within the relations between them. It is this that is meant when Heidegger says that being *braucht*, needs, the human being to be brought to speech.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179 and 216.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, e.g. 269 and 299. Credit must go to Andrew Mitchell who sensed what was going on quite early, see his *The Fourfold. Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2015), 316. The next to last volume, *Winke I und II. Schwarze Hefte 1957-1959*, GA 101 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2020), 51 and 58 speaks of a similar *Preisgabe* but mostly that of “transcendence and difference” or of “being for *Es gibt*”. Heidegger must have sensed that the ontological difference was not the final word of his thinking, see *Anmerkungen VI-X*, 299 for another intimation of the coming collapse.

gets at the being of beings. This, perhaps, is the easiest way to explain this: although the being of beings puts us on the way of the question of being, on its path that is, away from beings, the fact that we think only the being of beings in fact returns us to beings—the ontological difference is never, so to say, crossed out but always already filled in: a being sooner or later will receive priority.

It is true that, later, Heidegger worried less about how a supreme being, or the being of this being, grounds and founds the entirety of being. Early on he made clear that this (theological) answer to the question of being did not suffice—Heidegger was not the man who sought answers—and fell neatly into the blueprint of ontotheology he devised later: the being of beings is grounded by the supreme being; yet the supreme being, in turn, is founded by the being of beings—a square circle if ever there was one! Nothing, therefore, in reality gets grounded and founded at all, even though such *Ergründen* and *Begründen* now dominate our entire “*Tun und Lassen*”.⁵⁶ Heidegger, after Nietzsche, wanted to show just this and, in a rare Nietzschean moment of the *Vorläufiges*, admonishes us to say “yes to the abyss”.⁵⁷ His aim was not to ridicule theology or abandon religious thought altogether, his aim was to show that there never has been any such ground and that this “metaphysical situation” now is what we have to deal with.

For a while the ontological difference was the way into the question of metaphysics and Heidegger thought to “step outside” the twofold nature of being and beings by “leaping” outside the metaphysical tradition by confronting it head-on as it were. Along with the decisionism of the thirties, there was an entire discourse that tried to show being “from out of being itself” —“*was im hinsehen auf des Sein aus ihm her es selbst zeigt*”.⁵⁸ This attempt is known as Heidegger’s *Kehre*. It is to this *Kehre* that Heidegger often turns in the notebook under discussion, along with a discussion of the ontological difference in which he now says to be “*verstrickt*” —entangled.⁵⁹ The way into metaphysics in the end offered no way out. The embroilment in the ontological difference ultimately leaves us entangled in metaphysics.⁶⁰ In a rare moment of self-criticism, Heidegger now admits that he “lingered too long on the scaffold of the ontological difference”⁶¹: the only “Being” we will get is only ever the being *of* beings and for a long while, he now admits, this particular being will be thought along metaphysical and ontotheological lines.

Yet the entanglement is no impasse for Heidegger: what is needed, rather, is indeed a “step back”, a *Schritt zurück*, to behold the presencing

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), 26.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 105.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), 74.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 134.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 102, 131 and 136. See also *Winke I und II*, 136.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

of what is present. What is present, is always and already a being — though Heidegger thinks it better to drop the term being/beings altogether and allow what appears to be “things” gathering all kind of presences, such as heaven and earth, around its phenomenon. The relation between being and beings is ultimately *one*: it is from out of what is present that one senses the event of presencing just as it is from out of what appears that one notices that the appearing of appearing, itself, does not appear. The term being and beings do not suffice for this event. It is this *Verhältnis* of presencing and presence (being and beings if you still prefer) that now comes to the fore: over and against the twofold of the difference, the stress is now on the simple, *Einfaltige* of the entire event. Suddenly Heidegger writes: it is in and through this relation (*Verhältnis*) that we can experience the *Eignis* and “all talk in the manner of the “is” and of “being” turns out to be improper [*uneigentlich*]”.⁶² This event happens while it happens even if we only know about it through the particular beings that are happening. This is what the *Kehre*, years later, has learned Heidegger and through which lens he now turns to *Being and Time* too. Before we go there, we need to mention a surprising absence from the notebook: Heidegger carefully avoids any discussion of the “Es gibt”, turned famous after the publication, during the same period, of *Zeit und Sein*. This book is in effect mentioned only two or three times or so and almost always quite critical. One such criticism is that the lecture “risks but little in the open”.⁶³

One might say that *Vorläufiges* takes precisely this risk and it remains for us to show just how and, in a final section, to ponder upon the implications for theological thinking this dwelling in the open might have. Let us, for now, turn to Heidegger’s account of the *Kehre*, and its repercussions for reading *Sein und Zeit*.

It is true that the simplicity of the event of presencing, and the blind spot at heart of all appearing it entails, dawned upon Heidegger a bit earlier. Even the earlier attempt to gain sight of being directly quickly learned to distinguish between the being of beings and the truth of being. Metaphysics, he says, thinks being from within the being of beings without however thinking the truth of being.⁶⁴ What dawns upon Heidegger in and through his *Kehre* is that is not up to us to overcome, or even unwind, metaphysics: this is a matter of the *Seinsgeschick*, which will liberate us from metaphysics and its ontotheologies or not.⁶⁵ We would only be outside of metaphysics, Heidegger mentions, when returning to the

⁶² *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁴ See Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 1998), 47. Compare Schellings *Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995), 77.

⁶⁵ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 97.

postface of *What is Metaphysics?* in this last notebook, if the word “says being”, if “it shows the truth of being as presencing—as letting presence [Anwesen-Lassen]”.⁶⁶

The question of being, then, can no longer be confronted head-on, that is, by asking about “being itself”, nor can it be asked properly through the detour of beings. “If “being” is not something pertaining to beings and cannot be found from out of beings, where can we find it?”⁶⁷ The ontological difference for Heidegger now seems an obstacle, a *Wegsperre*, a blockage for the question of being. It blocks “the awakening to *Ereignis* out of the concealing semblance that is experienced in the *Gestell*”.⁶⁸ How, then, to say being? “By pointing to the presencing of what is present [*Anwesenlassen von Anwesendem*] with a word [*Sagen*] in which “being”, and so the ontological difference, vanish”.⁶⁹

One might say: the ontological difference steps into metaphysics by repeating it, laying it bare as it were. It thinks being from out of beings and is confronted with a question of ground which is now out of joint. This, in a sense, is the story told by *Der Satz vom Grund*: if we leap from the question of foundation “outside” metaphysics, we sense how the question of ground pertains to being and how the question of being, as foundation, is used to (and used to) ground beings. If “ground” there is, then it is always the foundation of beings. Yet the ground of the ground, so to say, the being of Being, is without ground: it presences.⁷⁰

Metaphysics will have its way with the *Grundhafte* pertaining to being. Quickly, Heidegger says, the foundation will be labelled as an *arche*—and a command and a beginning will enter the fabric of being as creation.⁷¹ No one is at fault for such a history of being, but this history makes for the fact that we, still, ask after the “from whence of presencing”.⁷² Heidegger now realizes that metaphysics and its ontotheology can hardly be avoided as long as we think from out of the ontological difference between being and beings. This, however, is now—contrary to appearances in *Identity and Difference*—not something we should deplore. The question of metaphysics, to begin with, was never the main goal of the question of being: it only ever wanted to show how metaphysics’ answers are insufficient to encounter the question of being.⁷³ Heidegger now even implies that there can be forgetting of being even when we no longer think metaphysically. What remains, for us thinkers, is to meet being where it meets us: in and through beings. Yet we need to think what is

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁰ See for this Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, 185.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷² Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 276.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 130.

given to thought once we no longer have to, can, or even should, think metaphysically.

This is where Heidegger's *Kehre* comes in and everything turns: "[T]he *Kehre* is therefore no construction of the thinker, yet the *lightning strike* [*Blitzschlag*] in the relation of "being" to "Dasein".⁷⁴ In effect, "with [...] collapse [of the ontological difference] the distinction between ontic-ontological, between "being and beings" becomes invalid. But with the difference, identity also falls, that is, every attempt to think the difference in the manner of representation as an overarching connection of the difference" or between its terms.⁷⁵

In its place, comes a stepping back from what is present to presencing, from what is in the limelight to the lightning strike that enlightens it. This presencing is nothing pertaining to beings, yet it is nothing that "distinguishes or separates. It is rather a carrying away the one from the other [*Auseinandertragen*] out of the enlightening. This is neither a *synthesis* nor an identity distinguished from difference. Enlightenment: [the coming to light] of the inseparability as presencing—that is: the presencing of what is present".⁷⁶ Heidegger here tries to name what he answered when asking what *Ereignis* is: "the sending of Being [that] lies in the extending [*Reichen*], opening and concealing of manifold presence into the open realm of time-space".⁷⁷ It is in these sendings, if you like, that being "takes on body", opening space and making room for beings to relate to one another—as if it is necessary nonetheless that the true embody itself.

If metaphysics "questions what is present only with regard to its presence"⁷⁸, of which it then can represent its beingness or its essence, the *Kehre* aims, through the presencing of what is present, for this sheer happening of presencing. It sees both, one might say, what is present in the light and the light that enlightens what is so present. "Presencing names, strictly speaking, the relation of keeping away [*Auseinanderhalten*] presencing and what presences from one another; and so neither being nor solely the whole of beings".⁷⁹ This brings an utter temporality to thought: for what so presences, only ever presences here, now, for the while that it presences. Even the various epochs and sending of beings are not a "necessary process".⁸⁰ Yet what so presences is not per se a being—if with a being one means something identifiable through one or the other essence or *res extensa* or even something up for use as *Being and Time* has it—what presences is rather a thing in which all kinds of actors gather for the time being. This

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁷⁷ Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1969), 20/"Zeit und Sein", in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 25.

⁷⁸ Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy", 446.

⁷⁹ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges*, 319.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

“insight” lasts, if it lasts, probably no longer than the lightning strike itself. Usually indeed, there are beings and only rarely we notice that there is being.

If the *Gestell* shows us “how the world now works” (and perhaps should not work by keeping us precisely from experiencing presencing), the event of presencing shows us “how the world worlds”. For this event, it is obvious that the definition of world offered up by *Being and Time* as a *Bewandtnis* of useful beings, does not suffice. “The world is an insufficient name for the *Geviert*”,⁸¹ in which presencing gathers presences like the mortals and the divinities around its event. Similarly, *Dasein* is folded into the event as the one to whom the event is given and who is called upon to witness presencing precisely. To be sure, presencing needs the human being to present its presence, but its “thrownness” is now of the one to whom—in the dative case—the *Entwurf*, the pro-ject of coming to terms with presencing belongs.⁸²

What, then, is to be done at the end of metaphysics, knowing well it still is “ending” and this particular sending of being will last its time? It is to recognize both the unavoidability of metaphysics and attempting to look beyond the onto(theo)logical difference between being and beings. For Heidegger, this means first of all the consideration of the thinking of Ereignis: “Was das Ereignis gibt, *hat* Es selber nicht; es ist kein Anwesendes, “ist” schlechthin nicht”.⁸³ The event of presencing gives what itself does not have. It gives leeway to beings and things without belonging to the order of being itself. Presencing, to turn to the language of phenomenology again, is what lets appear without appearing itself.

We need to dwell on this giving of presencing what it does not have. This means that it hides and conceals itself in order to make room for other, particular presences. “Ereignis dispossesses itself in the *Geviert*”.⁸⁴ It neither claims beings nor possesses them. It is this movement that is met by the phenomenological gaze’s *Hervorbringen*—it brings to the fore what *already* has been brought before the gaze. Unconcealment of beings is always and already something that was allowed by presencing. Presencing allows what is present to be in the limelight. There is an ontological clinamen here: it is as if “being” turns away, and refrains from all appearance, in order for beings to be able to appear.

There is a risk, however: it might always be the case that some of these beings take precedence over being itself. Heidegger will now admit this risk to a certain extent is indeed unavoidable. “Presencing as such cannot be represented. When represented, it will be necessarily be done as something

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 44. Compare 73, “Was sagt dies, wenn die Anwesenheit selber nichts Anwesendes “sein” kann?”.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

that is present, *Anwesendes*,”⁸⁵ as for instance when one would query *who* is *causing*—from whence—the event of presencing. What is present, will be talked about and discussed—it will be made to signify and have meaning—as this rather than that and so “the “is”-saying of the logos will more and more come to the fore” and take over presencing as such.⁸⁶ The truth will, then, reside more and more in the judgement (s as s is p) rather than in the event of presencing. This event, so to say, will become present-at-hand and it will be claimed, too, by the *Machenschaft* that is part of the Gestell.

What does this mean for the question of ontotheology (and a fortiori that of theology)? Heidegger writes that metaphysics will only be overcome “when “transcendence” (the passing over beings to being) and rescendance (the backfall of what is most beingful into being), and difference between being and beings have unwound and so any beginning of an onto-theo-logic has vanished”.⁸⁷ The passing beyond being and beings is necessary if we are to avoid ontotheology. However, since Heidegger himself has shown that not all judgement is to be excluded from the event of presencing, it is quite likely that, here or there, ontotheological turns will indeed be taken and that the collapse of the ontological difference will not always succeed.

Theology in the Last Notebook?

It is obvious from the four or so last notebooks that the question of theology and of Christian faith somewhat vanished from Heidegger’s radar, especially when considering the vehement anti-Christian tone of the *Schwarze Hefte* of the thirties.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Heidegger’s relation to theology has always been somewhat a flirtatious one. In a letter to Rudolf Bultmann from 1967, Heidegger for instance states that he still follows the positions and trends in contemporary theology, although, he says, mainly because of the theological interests of his brother.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 55. Compare p. 282 where Heidegger says that words are *just* words when they *bedeuten* or *bezeichnen*, they then no longer preserve the word for being.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 33. These movements (from beings to transcendent Being, and, reversely, to interpret what is most in being, or most beingful, *as* being per se) need to be abandoned when the difference collapses. Inkings of this collapse must have led Heidegger to mention more clearly what is “wrong” with metaphysics and what distinguishes the thought after the collapse of the distinction between being and beings from metaphysics. See for the “erring” of metaphysics, especially Heidegger, *Anmerkungen* VI-IX, 149.

⁸⁸ On these notebooks of the thirties, see Judith Wolfe, “Religion in the Black Notebooks,” in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology*, ed. Marten Björk and Jayne Svenungson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 23-48.

⁸⁹ Martin Heidegger-Rudolf Bultmann, *Briefwechsel 1925-1975* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2009), 227.

Needless to say, perhaps, but Heidegger wasn't particularly impressed by the state of theology. Even in the notebooks leading up to this final one, his stance toward faith and theology remains ambivalent to say the least. If the *Anmerkungen I-V* from 1942 to 1948 for the most part rehearse the rift between philosophy and theology that we know from *Phänomenologie und Theologie*—"thinking is for believing but a dryness, and faith for a thinking is what is impossible"⁹⁰—and if he up to the seventies remains critical (and cynical) about theology's leaning toward and lending from ("Anleihen"⁹¹) philosophy, he simultaneously will write "that the human being can become a believer only if he or she first is a thinker".⁹² Apart from this keenness to separate the question of the (Christian) God from the thinking of being, this notebook repeats what we know from the *Letter on Humanism* on how the (last) God might spiral through, along with the divinities, within the sacred built for it on earth.⁹³ *Anmerkungen VI-IX* continues Heidegger's harangue on, broadly, Latinized *Christentum* that forgot all about *das Christliche*—it contains even some rather naïve thoughts on Jesus separated from Christ—and in this regard seems to underscore once more the demythologization of Christianity proposed by his old friend Bultmann.⁹⁴ The *Vier Hefte* from 1947-1950 prolongs the separation of theology from philosophy: "As soon as we bring God in view of Being [...] no longer a path to the God of Christian faith, which teaches God in Christ, can be experienced".⁹⁵ It is only in *Vigiliae und Notturmo* 1952-1957 that things seems to turn, as if Heidegger realized that he targeted theology in too broad a manner. More than once he condemns the godlessness of rational metaphysics that identifies God as the *cause* of all beings.⁹⁶ Heidegger, throughout, took to Protestantism—*sola fide; sola gratia*—more than to Catholicism's insistence on a dialogue between thinking and believing. All-in all Heidegger felt little for a "natural reason" seeking understanding with or without the help of revelation. But Heidegger, it seems, never denied that if God is and would appear, God is and appears as the "sender of salvation".⁹⁷

To this urge to separate theology from the thinking of theology, where those who are saved obviously do not need to think and those who think

⁹⁰ Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I-V*, GA 97 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2015), 206.

⁹¹ See Heidegger, "Phänomenologie und Theologie", in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2004), 69. The quote is from the letter to the conference in 1964.

⁹² Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I-V*, 193.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁹⁴ The distinction is already in play in *Anmerkungen I-V*, see 204-205. For *Anmerkungen VI-IX*, see 102-3. In *Vorläufiges* Heidegger still wonders about "demythologization", a "task for theology worthy of question" and asks what Plato and Aristotle would have been without Parmenides' poem, see 62-3.

⁹⁵ Heidegger, *Vier Hefte I und II. Schwarze Hefte 1947-1950*, GA 99 (Frankfurt a. M: Klostermann, 2019), 139.

⁹⁶ Heidegger, *Vigiliae und Notturmo*, 37 and 130.

⁹⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *Anmerkungen VI-IX*, 98.

are obviously not saved, Heidegger's last years in effect bring some notable exceptions. Not only is there the avowal in 1970 that the discipline of theology admits of its own *Fragwürdigkeit*⁹⁸—Heidegger, recall, was not one to block questioning—*Vorläufiges* in a rare occurrence abandons the mutual exclusion of believing and thinking. "Whether or not [the thinking of being] can be performed from out of faith, or rather from out of unfaith, whether this either-or perhaps can also be a both-and, or even something else, it is the task of theology to decide".⁹⁹

It is Heidegger himself who with regard to the relation of his later thought and theology countered Lacoste's (perhaps ironical) suggestion "that theology has nothing to learn here"¹⁰⁰ and decided ultimately in favor of a "both-and" rather than an "either-or". For Heidegger's flirt with theology persists to very late in his career. Very much in an Eckhartian vein, many of these suggestions imply that the death of God by no means entail the end of the "living God".¹⁰¹ In the *Four Seminars* similar instances can be found: here Heidegger concludes a session, which seems to have left his audience in amazement, as follows, referring once more to Eckhart: what if "being 'istet' God, that is, Being lets God be God"?¹⁰²

It is on this point, namely on just how God is held by, and bound to, being that the later notebooks shed some light. For it might not be the case, as many, such as Marion and Levinas, have thought that God's belonging to being would give, without further ado, way to idolatry. In one of the stranger passages on the connection between being and God, where he already must have sensed that it will be hard to distinguish between metaphysics as ontotheology and the thinking of being after the collapse of the ontological difference, Heidegger writes: even when God is thought as the highest being, and independent of any other being, then God is "still in the highest measure obedient to being. That God can allow this, this is God's divinity".¹⁰³ But this need and this obedience, for Heidegger, traverses being and need not mean that God is servant to being or Ereignis—as in effect the theologians fear. Even within the event of being, of *Ereignis*, God remains at a distance. It is this that the late Heidegger wanted us to understand: "only when we are near [*in einer Nähe*] can the God, who is, first be far from us".¹⁰⁴

We need to think both of this movement of drawing near and of belonging and "complying" to being if we want to understand the relation between

⁹⁸ Heidegger, "Phänomenologie und Theologie", 45.

⁹⁹ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Lacoste, "Heidegger", in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* vol. 2 (3. Vols.), ed. J-Y Lacoste (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 679.

¹⁰¹ See Heidegger, "Aufzeichnungen aus der Werkstatt", in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 154. The text dates from 1959. A parallel can be found in *Winke I und II*, 160.

¹⁰² Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, 34.

¹⁰³ Heidegger, *Vier Hefte I und II*, 140.

¹⁰⁴ Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I-V*, 266.

God and *Ereignis*. Heidegger made it clear that God, too, would need to comply to being (if God is). God is bound to being, just as much as any other being is folded into the event of being: “God too belongs to being and presences from out of the fourfold”.¹⁰⁵ We need to understand that this movement of “drawing near” and of “belonging” has a special status in Heidegger’s later philosophy and that these movements have to do with the reach and the range of *Ereignis*.

Heidegger, in his turn to a peculiar brand of phenomenology stressing the *Hervorbringen* of a phenomenon (thing rather) will in effect stress that this *bringing* to the fore is indeed in consequence of *Ereignis* which concerns a “*reichen*”, that is, a reaching, a reaching out, which the human being will measure. The phenomenon is *zugereicht* and will be met half-way, if the human being listens, remarks, and senses its presencing. The phenomenological movement we traced above, the *Hervorbringen* amounting in a *poiesis* (for the thing brings a word with its own appearance) will have a theological component which is not very far from the theological tradition Heidegger used to criticize.

Let us begin with a question that Heidegger posed to theology, itself tirelessly proving the existence of this God, once: when will they finally ask if this “God [...] ‘is’ [*sei*] and whether God presences [*anwese*] and how”?¹⁰⁶ These are questions, we would say, that Heidegger in fact did take up and that we now need to unpack. This movement of *Näherung* of being (in *Ereignis*), or rather of beings (in being), is to be remarked upon.¹⁰⁷ In the *Letter on Humanism* for instance, Heidegger thinks of this movement of nearing, of this coming forward of the phenomenon out of the happening of *Ereignis*, as a “concern for man”, *eine Bemühung um den Menschen*.¹⁰⁸ Yet what draws near in this way, is always and already a being. The movement of drawing near, and its concern, itself holds back or is held back. The *Enteignis* of *Ereignis* is such that it, in a sense, moves away from beings only to let beings themselves come into the open. Heidegger often turns to metaphors that must sound familiar for theology, for this “reserve” is a *Bergen* as much as a *Verbergen*: a concealing that is a sheltering and a preserving. We have mentioned that there is a risk here, and this risk pertains to God just as well. Heidegger writes: “in this retreat” reigns the possibility that these beings are “released [*entlassen*] in such a way that “they seem left on their own. This is why the gods and the God appear as the for-itself

¹⁰⁵ Heidegger, *Vier Hefte I und II*, 37.

¹⁰⁶ Heidegger, *Anmerkungen VI-IX*, 230.

¹⁰⁷ When asking what sums up his thinking, Heidegger writes, “Die Summe meines Denken [besteht] in den einfachen Schritt aus dem vorstellenden zum be-wegenden Denken”, *Anmerkungen VI-IX*, 57. It is this thinking in motion that transpires in these notebooks—twisting, turning and changing—and perhaps still is to be preferred over the “opiniated” philosophies one today sees everywhere.

¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, 223; *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2000), 11.

[*an sich*], present from out of itself [*von sich her Anwesende*]”.¹⁰⁹ Left to themselves, these beings and these God will sooner or later appear as *causa sui*, unrelated to anything that this God supposedly has created or—more modern—as the self-made man that doesn’t owe anything to anyone.

Heidegger is far from idolatrous here. That the God—if God is—is related to the human being, *involved* in these relations between heaven and earth, the gods and the mortals is rather a way to preserve, for Heidegger at least, the divine. For this drawing near does not result in an appropriation of the human being of what draws near. On the contrary, this nearness can never be adequately grasped and it remains for Heidegger one of the mysteries of being, a matter of *Geheimnis*, why this event would need (*brauchen*) to call upon the human being. This response of the human being, our *Entsprechen*, remains risky, tentative and *spürend*: the human being “at first fails to the nearest and attaches himself to the next nearest. He even thinks that this is the nearest. But nearer than the nearest [is] nearness itself”.¹¹⁰ What is near will be mistaken for nearness itself, just as “what is present” will take precedence over presencing itself.

This movement of co-responding—what Heidegger first called *Entsprechen*—to Ereignis has nothing unchristian about it: never will anyone succeed, if he or she is so inclined, to comprehend the God. Not only does it remain mysterious why the event calls upon us mortals, and from whence “this priority for the least”¹¹¹ of the fourfold, the event itself cannot be touched, incorporated or appropriated. This movement of drawing near, this “nighness” which we know only through its “movement of paving the way for the face-to-face of the regions of the world’s fourfold”, that is to say, through its embodiment and materialization in and through beings, this movement, itself, “remains unapproachable [*Ünnahbare*]”.¹¹² What was perceived as an idolatrous intake of God in being, is actually a way to preserve the mysteriousness of beings and of God all the way up and all the way down. In this way, Heidegger’s strict separation between philosophy and theology might even be interpreted as a way of being respectful for what would be the *Sache* of theology.

Yet one needs to understand how the unfolding of this event echoes the Christian tradition precisely. If being indeed approaches beings, and if God is to gesture towards beings, then such a God will ‘take the hint’ as it were and accommodate to the conditions of the receiver, knowing well that the receiver will possibly distort this very approach. If God then chooses to appear (and this freedom, contrary to what theologians as Jean-Luc Marion think, is not contradicted here) then God will appear in being and as a

¹⁰⁹ Heidegger, *Anmerkungen VI-IX*, 116.

¹¹⁰ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, 235.

¹¹¹ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 156 “Vorrang des Geringen”.

¹¹² Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 211. See Heidegger, *On The Way to Language* (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982), 104.

being. The *Offenbarung* will therefore accommodate to the *Offenbarkeit* and unconcealment of beings. It is in this way that Heidegger remained faithful to Aquinas' dictum that God's revelation to humankind always and already occurs according to the mode of the receiver (e.g. *Summa Theologica* 1a. q.75 a.5).¹¹³

Yet we need to probe further and think about the reach and the range, the *Reichen*, of *Ereignis*, for it is here that we will learn about such freedom. It is too soon to speak of this "reaching out" as a desire on the part of *Ereignis*—Heidegger will never do so, all accounts of the *Brauch* considered, but theology might consider its possibility—although one consider it a "greeting", a thought more appropriate, it seems, for this "pleasing nearness" than Heidegger's notion of the *Wink*.¹¹⁴

The connection Heidegger makes between the *Gegend* and *entgegenen*—meeting someone or encountering something—at least seems to indicate this.¹¹⁵ Yet what one needs to tread carefully here, for, if anything, *Ereignis* is neutral. Let us listen to Heidegger on the happening of *Ereignis*:

How are we to determine this giving [*Reichen*] of presencing[?]. Does this giving lie in this, that it reaches us, or does it reach us because it is in itself a reaching? The latter. Approaching, being not yet present, at the same time gives and brings [*reicht*] about what is no longer present, the past, and conversely, what has been offers future to itself. The reciprocal relation of both at the same times gives and brings about the present.¹¹⁶

The phenomenon arrives—from *Ankommen*—because it reaches for us. This arrival makes for the fact that something now appears and that, thus, something else has faded away, is no longer. Yet this past is prolonged, and taken up, by the fact that because of this appearance there is a future. This movement of coming and going, however, is only perceived in the present, say, by a mortal witnessing the coming and going of these presences.

This is why Heidegger proceeds by saying that temporality here does not suffice. Time is not to be seen as a being (showing up in being, in the present, from out of its *Ankommen*). Rather, it gives time. In the language

¹¹³ I have elaborated on this in my "The Later Heidegger and Theology," in *Theological Fringes of Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph Rivera and Joseph O'Leary (London: Routledge: 2023).

¹¹⁴ Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, GA 39 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1999), 32. Throughout, this later Heidegger strikes a more positive tone than the earlier one, see e.g. the thoughts on the "Seligkeit" of thinking, in *Vorläufiges*, 216. Only once, it seems, Heidegger was prepared to see in the greeting a fundamental gesture and word, see *Anmerkungen I-V*, 3. For an ontology of the greeting along Heideggerian lines, one might still consult Schrijvers, *Between Faith and Belief. Toward A Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016).

¹¹⁵ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 316 and esp. 320.

¹¹⁶ Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 13; "Zeit und Sein", 18.

of metaphysics, we would have said that this event hovers above and beyond time and being. The simplicity Heidegger has in mind, however, obliges us to say that there is no *epekeina* here, lest we fall back in the speech about beings (who already arrived). If we want to speak about this “reaching”, this “reaching out” by sending being and beings, no specific language is at our disposal. The event, again, is neuter and its phenomenological description forces us to say only that it describes the happening of the happening of world.

But the most important lies elsewhere. For in this fleeting—ghostly, Derrida would say—passing, from past to future from out the present—something reaches out and hits us. There is encounter. For the time being, rather (be)fore time being, *everything is possible*. There is no way of knowing what will and can appear. Beings have not yet materialized and the spirit of being hovers above the ways of the world.

About this happening not much more can be said. It is clear that for Heidegger it represented an utter temporality: it happens while it happens and as long as it happens. Yet, a few things have been added by Heidegger about the characteristics of this reach, of this coming forward of being *before* (by lack of a better word) it settles for being and time. It is to be noted, first, that Heidegger becomes ever more careful here: the *Entsprechen* now becomes an *Entsagen* for the simple reason that the former still connotes the possibility of a corresponding to the event. For Heidegger, now, late in life, it has become clear that there is no word that “says being” once and for all: there is no right word, not one word. Everything must be unsaid. “Das Denken wird je und je ent-sagender – vorläufiger”.¹¹⁷ Literally, anything can happen. Presencing can “hide” in the *Gestell* forever or we might see the *Gestell* for what it is: a particular brand of presencing that can always be overturned. Long gone, though, the Heidegger that thought that thinkers or regimes could on their very own overturn the *Gestell*.

Heidegger is clear that our language is a speaking about the “Bereich” of the reach to one another. The *Sage* does not so much concern our speech, rather the *Sage* “is determined from out of the reach to determine the reach” through speech precisely. *Ent-sagen*, then, has a positive and a negative component—as in Levinas where all “said” [*dit*] needs to be unsaid and so turned, positively, to the other’s *Dire*: it is both the refusal of judgement, propositions or proofs *and* a coming forward itself, through a speaking with, of that which reaches us in order to be spoken about.¹¹⁸ This is why, in the end, “phenomenology is transformed in *das sich Zuwinkenlassen des ins Nennbare zu rufende Kennen*”¹¹⁹—an extending of the greeting, if you will, to connect to what longs to be named and so calls to be made known. The *Kehre* now is complete: “*Geworfenes Verstehen wird: Ent-sagen im Brauch*”

¹¹⁷ Heidegger, *Winke I und II*, 19.

¹¹⁸ Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 357.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

and the concomitant *Geworfene Ent-wurf* "dem Wurf als Ereignis im Ereignis ent-sprechen".¹²⁰

Long gone, now, the *Unzuhaue* of which *Being and Time* spoke, this back and forth of the word instead makes for, can make for, a familiarity with this reaching out which brings about a sense of belonging—hence Heidegger's positive tone in these later years: "Reichen [is] a Gehören lassen"¹²¹ which is, if not a belonging, than at least an allowing of the mortals to be part of the happening of world.

For Heidegger, again, not much can be said of the event. It is obvious for him that the accompanying *ent-sagen* is an utterly *finite thinking*. Finitude, thought from out *Ereignis*, is infinite¹²²: there is not much more to being, in this regard, for Heidegger than the endless coming and going of beings. Yet the flirt remains: occasionally one sees Heidegger turn to prayer to elaborate on the meeting of what reaches for us and what we reach for in our speech. A fascinating example of this can be found in the *Winke* from late in the fifties, where Heidegger thinks prayer as a desire "to be guarded in and through grace", and "the intimate calling for grace, the listening to [the] call" which, perhaps, is an "infinite *Zuspruches*".¹²³

Heidegger's flirt is legitimate, since in effect no final word can be spoken about this event of world and being. It is clear, however, that, by now, being-in-the-world for Heidegger has become a being-in-the-word. The proximity between Heidegger and the Hebraic and Christian tradition here should not be underestimated, and it is a pity for the future of philosophy and theology that Heidegger did not have the courage to comment upon these remnants of the Hebraic and Christian tradition in his thought.

Heidegger read, perhaps, too much Aristotle to leave any space in his thinking for the idea of creation. It is a pity, too, that Heidegger could not conceive of creation otherwise than as a predecessor of the current *Gestell* as a making and fabricating of world.¹²⁴ Yet the accounts of the Two Testaments insist on creation through the word rather than through producing: God is no handy-man! If the Gospel of John, somewhat succinctly, insists that the word is with God, one can similarly not forget that creation, in *Genesis*, occurs precisely in the magical realist way that Heidegger promotes since at least the fifties: "there is light" if and when God says "let there be light", the thing appears when the word is spoken. The same verses delegate the power of naming beings to the human being precisely and this is what makes the human being stand out and gives it power over beings. In this regard, it is more than noteworthy that at his most theological, namely in his books on Schelling where it is impossible to distinguish

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹²¹ Heidegger, *Winke I und II*, 144.

¹²² Heidegger, *Vorläufiges I-IV*, 142.

¹²³ Heidegger, *Winke I und II*, 166-7 and 170 respectively.

¹²⁴ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 149.

between Heidegger's thinking of being and the former's philosophical theology, Heidegger in a similar vein explains the *Vorrang* of the human being. The human being, he says, is the caretaker of the light because, first, it is in the light, and secondly, because this being alone is able to "speak about the light, *spricht dieses Licht aus*".¹²⁵

One might be inclined to conclude that the later Heidegger learned more from theology than theology can learn from the later Heidegger. This is, at least, what Derrida aimed for in his imagined dialogue between "the theologians" and Heidegger: was this not, the theologians say, what they have been saying all along?¹²⁶ Something comes to meet us half-way. Is this in effect not what theology has been saying all along, and which came to be known, first, as revelation through the Word (Judaism) and then as incarnation in and through a being (Christianity)?

Coda

Was Capobianco right about this particular notebook? To a certain extent. Yet at least this notebook sparks thought—both about what Heidegger meant and, I hope, about that what he was thinking about. And even if it is not the first thing one should read of Heidegger, it likewise won't be the last.

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¹²⁵ Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung*, 170.

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Broken Phenomenology: The Silent Witness from the Decalogue Cycle of Krzysztof Kieslowski and his Philosophical Meaning

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Abstract

1988, as the TV cycle ‘Decalogue’ was finished by Krzysztof Kieslowski, one of the most intriguing appearances throughout its episodes was the character of the silent witness, a young man played by Arthur Barciś. He is the first character who appears at the beginning of Decalogue I and therefore of the whole series and who returns in eight from the ten films of the cycle in very different hypostases: as nomadic camper, surveyor, nurse, bus driver, or rowboat driver, traveler on foot or by bike etc. The film critics were intrigued by this character and interpreted him in different ways, especially in key either religious or ethical. They all and Kieslowski himself agreed that the silent witness is a strange and symbolic appearance that comes out from the frames of everyday life. It is as if a curtain would break or be torn and from beyond it something foreign and strange would appear, difficult to integrate into our categories, but which is surprisingly so eloquent for us. The phenomenology, that Kieslowski describes, is broken in this manner, but, paradoxically, also consolidated by this presence, that gives it meaning and content.

Keywords: Krzysztof Kieslowski, Decalogue, phenomenology, ethics, Catholic moral theology, transcendence, otherness

1. The TV cycle ‘Decalogue’: a phenomenological description of everyday moral life

I^N 1988 KRZYSZTOF KIESLOWSKI WAS finishing filming the TV cycle *Decalogue*, one of the most profound and surprising creation in the history of film. A year later, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. The series of the Polish film director was an invitation to reflection that has not been exhausted

even today. It was and can still be the fruitful occasion of many philosophical and theological debates and investigations.

Kieslowski's approach is part of a long casuistic tradition, specific for the Roman Catholic manner to make moral theology. Each of the ten parts of the TV cycle *Decalogue* illustrates a problematic moral case concerning one divine commandment. It seems that the Polish director tries to show how difficult is to apply the Ten Commandments to the life. The Catholic heritage (or rather: the way of thinking) is very visible in the conception of the whole filmography Kieslowski's and especially of this TV series.

At the same time, the entire TV cycle *Decalogue* offers a phenomenological perspective. Kieslowski discreetly stands in the position of the observer and describes what he sees: a soulless district of Warsaw¹, populated by captive souls of this *topos* with their lives and moral problems. In his book of interviews edited by Danusia Stok, Kieslowski insists that knowledge is describing reality as it presents itself to the observer:

If something hasn't been described, then it doesn't officially exist. So that if we start describing it, we bring it to live. (...) Only when you describe something can you start speculating about it. If something hasn't been described and a record of it doesn't exist – it doesn't matter what form the description takes: a film, a sociological study, a book, or even just a verbal account – then you can't refer to it. You have to describe the thing or situation before you can deal with it. If you understand that, then you understand that certain anomalies, and even corruption, have to be described. If you want to reform the Party, you have to say, 'It's got to be reformed because this, this and this are wrong with it'. Now, where do you get the evidence that this, this and this are wrong? From descriptions. It doesn't matter what sort. Of course, they can take the form of Party reports or Party meetings. They can take the form of discussions in the Press. But something like a statement of fact has to come into existence.²

¹ Kieslowski tells in his discussions with Danusia Stok how he chose this district from Warsaw as place of action in the TV cycle „Decalogue“. *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, edited by Danusia Stok (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1993), 146: „I believe everybody's life is worthy of scrutiny, has its secrets and dramas. People don't talk about their lives because they're embarrassed. They don't want to open old wounds, or are afraid of appearing old-fashioned and sentimental. So we wanted to begin each film in a way which suggested that the main character had been picked by camera as if at random. We thought of a huge stadium in which, from among the hundred thousand faces, we'd focus on one in particular. We also had an idea that the camera should pick somebody out from a crowded street and then follow him or her throughout the rest of the film. In the end we decided to locate the action in a large housing estate, with thousands of similar windows framed in the establishing shot. It's the most beautiful housing estate in Warsaw, which is why I chose it. The fact that characters all live on one estate brings them together. Sometimes they meet, and say: 'May I borrow a cup of sugar?'“.

² *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 55; 58.

In Kieslowski's understanding, this necessary description of the reality as basis of knowledge requires a look that is interested, but at the same time distant and uninvolved. A movie is for the Polish director not so much about justifying as about understanding the reality:

It's not a question of justifying these people. Understanding isn't necessarily associated with justification. Justifications, in this case, would imply making the film through the eyes of the other side. I don't look through the eyes of the other side in my films. I always look through my eyes. Although I did try to understand the other side, I didn't change my point of view because that would be false and insincere, and immediately obvious. But my point of view in no way precludes trying to understand the other side.³

2. Exploring the transcendence of otherness

These features of the observation, i.e. uninvolved but interested description, point a typical phenomenological approach out. In the field of filmography, they are more specific to the documentary film than to the feature movie. But they are limits of this kind of phenomenological description and Kieslowski is aware of them:

Not everything can be described. That's the documentary's great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the more that person shuts him or herself off from it. And that's perfectly natural. It can't go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. If I'm making a film about death, I can't film somebody who's dying because it's such an intimate experience that the person shouldn't be disturbed. And I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more the subjects which interested me shut themselves off. That's probably why I changed to features.⁴

This does not necessarily imply giving up the phenomenological approach that is specific for Kieslowski as director who comes from the field of documentary film. But the phenomenological description begins to concern another kind of reality, i.e. the intimate, inner reality and to take other, more appropriate forms to accomplish its task. Kieslowski confesses:

Basically, my characters behave much as in other films, except that in Decalogue I probably concentrated more on what's going on inside them rather what's happening on the outside.

³ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 59–60.

⁴ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 86.

Before, I often used to deal with the surrounding world, with what's happening all around, how external circumstances and events influence people, and how people eventually influence external events. Now, in my work, I've thrown aside this external world and, more and more frequently, deal with people who come home, lock the door on the inside and remain alone with themselves.⁵

Such a new paradigm leads to the experience of the limits of description's possibilities. In this context, a new problem arises: it is the question that Emmanuel Levinas asks about how we can cross the transcendence of the other's interiority.⁶ On the one hand, Kieslowski resorts to the method of the indiscrete observer. The camera enters the intimate space of the characters, it come close to their faces and bodies and follows their personal lives and experiences.

3. The Silent Witness and its religious and ethical meanings

But for the Eastern European director this mediated phenomenology of the inner life is not enough to emphasize the depth of the experiences and the gravity of the moral situations in which his characters are involved. It seems that Kieslowski wants to transcend the boundaries of the phenomenology and, implicitly, of the subjectivity. But such an approach is very difficult in our post metaphysical constellation. Because a simple return to the omniscient perspective of the metaphysician or of the dogmatist would be almost impossible in the contemporary thought and (cinematographic) art, Kieslowski resorts to a brilliant artifice, introducing a mysterious and mute character into the whole TV cycle. It is the "silent witness", who about whom a lot has been written in the specialized literature.⁷

⁵ Kieslowski on Kieslowski, 146.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-other*, translated from French by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 133-154.

⁷ See Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histoires d'image. Le Décalogue de Krzysztof Kieslowski*, preface de Jean-Louis Leutrat (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1993); Vincent Amiel, *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, textes réunis et présentés par Vincent Amiel, Jean Michel Place, (Positif, 1997); Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, Reihe Aufsätze zu Film und Fernsehen; Bd. 58 (Alfeld: Coppi-Verlag, 1997, 2. Auflage 2000); Annete Indorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski* (New York: Hyperion, 1999); Paul Coates (ed.), *Lucid Dreams. The Films of Krzysztof Kieslowski*, cinema voices series, (Flicks Books, 1999); Margarete Wach, *Krzysztof Kieslowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe* (KIM-Verlag, 2000); Monika Maurer, *Krzysztof Kieslowski*, Harpenden (Herts: Pocket Essential, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle“*, aus dem Englischen von Nikolaus G. Schneider (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 2001); Joseph G. Kickasola, *The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: the limi-*

He appears in almost all movies of the cycle, with the exception of episode VII, where he appears fleetingly, because Kieslowski experienced technical difficulties including him, and of *Decalogue X* given its dark-humor atmosphere, although Kieslowski later regretted not including him there. He confesses in this regard:

There's this guy who wanders around in all films. In don't know who he is; just a guy who comes and watches. He watches us, our lives. He's not very pleased with us. He comes, watches and walks on. He doesn't appear in number 7, because I didn't film right and had to cut him out. And he doesn't appear in film 10, since there are jokes about trading a kidney; I thought that maybe it's not worth showing a guy like that. But I was probably wrong. No doubt I should have shown him in that one, too.⁸

Actually the introduction of this character was not Kieslowski's idea, but Witek Zalewski's, the literary manager, who felt, as he read the *Decalogue* screenplays, that "there's something missing here".⁹ Starting from an anecdote about the Polish writer Wilhelm Mach, who noticed a totally secondary character in a black suit at a screening, ignored even by the film director, Kieslowski and Zalewski decided to introduce a similar, discreet but impressive character. Kieslowski concludes as follows:

...I understood what he felt was missing. He missed this guy in a black suit whom not everyone sees and who the young director didn't know had appeared in the film. But some people saw him, this guy who looks on. He doesn't have any influence on what's happening, but he is a sort of sign or warning to those whom he watches, if they notice him. And I understood, then, that that's what Witek felt missing in the films so I introduced the character whom some called "the angel" and whom the taxi-drivers when they brought him to the set called "the devil". But in the screenplays he was always described as "the young man".¹⁰

tal image (New York – London: Continuum, 2004); Marek Haltof, *The cinema of Krzysztof Kieslowski, variations on destiny and chance* (Columbia University Press, 2004); Ewa Badowska and Francesca Parmeggiani (eds.), *Of Elephants&Toothaches. Ethics, Politics and Religion in Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Rajarajeshwari Ashok, "Listening to the Silent Man's Testimony: A Reading of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue", *Caesurae: Poetics of Cultural Translation* 3, no. 1 (2018), Akademia, 27 July 2023; Valérie Maréchal, *Krzysztof Kieslowski: le Décalogue ou „l'enfer éthique"* (La-Neuville-aux-Joûtes: Jacques Flament Alternative Éditoriale, 2019) etc.

⁸ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 158.

⁹ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 158–159.

¹⁰ *Kieslowski on Kieslowski*, 159.

Unlike the mute and sober character seen only by Wilhelm Much, Kieslowski's always silent witness attracted the interest of most film critics, philosophers and theologians, who have reflected on the filmography of the Polish director. Most of them emphasized his mysterious¹¹ specificity, linking him to the religious universe. As Anette Insdorf shows,

[w]e will never know exactly who he is, but this man is seen at least four more times in 1 and returns throughout *The Decalogue*. Like Antek's ghost *No End*, his presence can be connected to that of the angels in Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire*: they are pure "gaze", able – like a film camera (or director?) – to record human folly and suffering but unable to alter the course of the lives they witness. Kieslowski observed, "He has no influence on the action, but he leads the characters to think about what they are doing ... His intense stare engenders self-examination".¹²

If Anette Insdorf calls him 'the Angel', Christopher Garbowski uses the names 'guardian' or 'messenger, specifying that this character "seems to be a crucified Christ whose only intervention could be the prayer: 'Father forgive them; they do not know what are doing'".¹³

Like Anette Insdorf and Christopher Garbowski, Joseph G. Kickasola insists on his turn on the theological dimension of this very special character, calling him "Theophanes":

Etymologically, Theophanes means "Appearances of God" and this term has been used for various enigmatic characters in the Bible who seem to mark divine presence of some kind. I do mean to overdeify, the character or invest him with too much significance, but he does appear to be a reference point for the biblical themes embodied in the films. Likewise, bears traits of God: his secret knowledge (one perceives that he knows

¹¹ Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 28: "Er wird geschrieben als Engel und auch als Teufel, als Junger Mann. Die Figur ist mysteriös, trägt ein Geheimnis. Die hat eine Bedeutung, die dem Gefühl des Betrachters überlassen wird. Das Wiedererkennen dieser Person, das Auftauchen in wichtigen Situationen der Handlung trägt dramaturgisch zum Aufbau der besonderen Stimmung dieser Filme bei"; Margarete Wach, *Krzysztof Kieslowski. Kino der moralischen Unruhe*, 271: "Nach der Premiere von Dekalog brachen unter Filmkritikern Spekulationen darüber aus, ob der von der Aura eines Geheimnisses umwitterte Mann ein Engel der Vorsehung, ein Abgesandter Gottes oder Kieslowski selbst sei, worauf der Regisseur immer beteuerte, er wisse selbst nicht, wer er sei. Als Taxifahrer den Darsteller Artur Barcis zum Set brachten, sollen sie gerufen haben, daß sie den Teufel mitgebracht hätten. Seine Anwesenheit begründete Kieslowski immer damit, daß er ein Element der Rätselhaftigkeit, Unergründlichkeit; Flüchtigkeit mit einbringe".

¹² Anette Insdorf, *Double Lives, Second Chances*, 73.

¹³ Christopher Garbowski, "Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue: Presenting Religious Topics on Television", *The Polish Review* 37, No 3 (1992), Jstor. Web. 27 July 2023, 327–334, here: 332.

something by his iconic stare), his omnipresence in the lives of these neighbors who barely interact with each other, his apparent affection for certain characters (VI), and the consternation of conscience and judgment he excludes (IV and V). One might say he is in the *Dei oculi*, the “seeing” dimension of God’s connection with the world (...). Theophanes may not be the only dimension of the Creator-creature interface, but he serves as a strong reminder of God’s relentless, searching gaze. Indeed, throughout the Decalogue there are numerous instances where God’s eye may be inferred (e.g., the vaulted angles above the cars in III and the wide shots of the countryside during the murder in V). Theophanes completes the divine omnipresent field of view, complementing the Transcendent angle with an immanent perspective. (...) I call him Theophanes, not because he is God, but because he references Him like an icon, materially bearing His presence and eternal gaze in the broken, desolate community, and reminding us that the commandments have always been perceived (by the faithful) to have a living, transcendent dimension. Although Kieslowski and Piesiwicz simply call him ‘the young man’ in the script, the actor playing him (Artur Barciś) apparently thought of him as Christ. According to Christopher Garbowski, Kieslowski told Barciś to play him “as if you were five centimeters off the ground”. Kieslowski said of him: “He’s not very pleased with us” (...). He is the eternal witness.¹⁴

Not all commentators identified the silent witness with a Christian religious presence like an angel, ‘Theophanes’ or Christ himself. On the set, in the Kieslowski’s entourage, he was called ‘the devil’. His silence leads Slavoj Žižek to compare him to a kind of gnostic demiurge, an intermediate deity, an „evil demon”, who only limits himself to observing and not to intervening in this world.¹⁵ The mute observer reminds Veronique Campan of either “Ahasverus, the legendary Jew condemned to wander, excluded from every place and every era, because he did not want to recognize the image of the divine Jesus”¹⁶, or the Greek god “Hermes, the god of travellers, conductor of souls to hell in Greek mythology, when he appears in a costume of a nurse”¹⁷ in *Decalogue II*.

Other interpretations focused on the ethical dimension of this character. For example when the *Decalogue* was released to the public, the silent witness was identified with the eye of moral conscience.¹⁸ In the same register, before seeing in the silent witness a transcendent, angelic, demonic or even

¹⁴ Joseph G. Kickasola, *The films of Krzysztof Kieslowski: the limital image*, 163.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle“*, 145.

¹⁶ Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histoires d’image*, 51.

¹⁷ Campan, *Dix brèves histoires*, 52.

¹⁸ Campan, *Dix brèves histoires*, 53.

divine presence, we should perhaps discover in his own daily condition of mute observers of the tumult of life.

Perhaps it is only there to remind us, by contrast, of the artificiality of the spectatorial position and gaze. Real life only allows us to be mute observers, confronted for an instant with other individuals without being able to know more about their existence, nor suspect their future, and capable only of casting a surprised or absent look at a closed face, or an unusual attitude.¹⁹

4. Broken phenomenology: Revelation as sense of the moral life

Anyway, he is the first character, who appears in *Decalogue I* (and consequently in the whole TV cycle)²⁰, and at the same time the character, who takes on a different appearance in each episode.

Nomadic camper, surveyor, nurse, bus driver, or rowboat driver, traveler on foot or by bike, the mute observer is the passerby (“passant-passeur”) par excellence. He becomes a stranger when he takes on the figure of the Surveyor, the outsider, the Kafkaesque outcast; or even a ferryman, like a modern Hermes psychopomp (the god of travelers, conductor of souls to hell in Greek mythology), when he appears in the costume of a nurse> so many incarnations of wandering.²¹

All these features indicate the importance of this character and the fact that he does not belong to the mundane phenomenology in which all the other characters of the *Decalogue* cycle are involved. He is a strange appearance as if from another world that evades the laws of the phenomena that make up our daily life. It is as if a curtain would break or be torn and from beyond it something foreign and strange would appear, difficult to integrate into our categories, but which is surprisingly so eloquent for us.

It is a torn and a broken phenomenology whose openness leads, to our huge surprise, to ourselves. In the meeting with this bizarre face we discover ourselves and have the intuition of more than that, which exists independently of us, but confirms or denies us – the intuition of what we call ‘truth’. Or, what is strange about this is with what power it does this. Maybe it is not a coincidence that this is the same question that the Pharisees ask Jesus in bewilderment, when he, in turn, tears apart their entire mundane phenomenology (Luke 20,2). A broken phenomenology remains behind, but from this the truth springs.

¹⁹ Campan, *Dix brèves histories*, 54.

²⁰ Monika Erbstein, *Untersuchungen zur Filmsprache im Werk von Krzysztof Kieslowski*, 28.

²¹ Veronique Campan, *Dix brèves histories*, 52.

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Faith as Experience: A Theo-Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

This text proposes an analysis of the phenomenon of faith in the tradition and spirituality of the Eastern Church. Starting from the relationship between phenomenology and theology, the article uses a theo-phenomenological method to depict the phenomenon of faith both theologically and phenomenologically. This article also argues that non-religious faith—either natural or philosophical—is the foundation of religious faith. According to Orthodox spirituality, faith is not reduced to a set of theoretical teachings and dogmas; they constitute only the first type of faith, “simple faith”. At the same time, faith is also a form of experience, which has ascetical, ethical, and mystical dimensions; they characterize the second type of faith, faith as contemplative sight and knowledge.

Keywords: Faith, Orthodox spirituality, religious experience, Eastern Orthodox Church, theo-phenomenology

Phenomenology and Theology: Theo-Phenomenology as a Method

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE (which we will discuss in this article, distinguishing it from a phenomenology of religion¹) inevitably has to do with faith understood *as experience*, as a “non-intellectualized phenomenon”², in line with Kierkegaard’s assessment that “faith is a

¹ This distinction refers to that between philosophy of religion and philosophy of religious experience, see Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 104.

² Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch, and Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 245.

passion".³ There are phenomena more visible and more relevant to the religious experience than the set of ideas that constitute the core of faith; that theological, doctrinal core, which is perhaps the furthest one from a phenomenological approach. However, even if we were to admit the primacy of experience—a view supported by the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which we will present below—the importance of faith remains.⁴ In Orthodoxy, faith is inextricably linked with experience, according to a principle that could be worded as follows: different theological doctrines lead to different mystics, and vice versa. Therefore, a question about a phenomenology of religious experience must necessarily pass through an analysis of the *phenomenon* of faith. Nevertheless, two questions arise: is there a risk that phenomenology might become theology? Also, isn't religious faith merely a particular and external, often *inexperienced*, adherence to a set of norms and ideas that its adherents support unconditionally and try to impose as truth?

To answer these questions, we will first make use of the way in which faith appears as a general human phenomenon, not as religious faith. Thus, we will start from a phenomenology of philosophical faith, and then we will move on to religious faith. Instead of speaking *theologically* about a particular faith, we will describe the phenomenon of faith starting from what it means to every human being in its *phenomenological* universality. We will accept that every human being understands and knows from his or her own existence what it means to *believe*, even if this knowledge does not involve the religious dimension. Then, after a phenomenology of philosophical faith, we will approach religious faith to find out what makes it unique and different from the common experience of non-religious faith, while also trying to understand whether phenomenology can be useful to such a discourse and in what way. A description of the phenomenon of Christian faith involves exploring the intersection between the realms of phenomenology and theology.

There are several strands to the *phenomenology* of religion, as we have already noted: that of religious studies, which looks for common patterns in different religions; that of Husserlian philosophy, which engages

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Frică și cutremur* [Fear and Trembling], trans. Leo Stan (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002), 134.

⁴ Cristina Gschwandtner, in a remarkable phenomenology of the Holy Liturgy, agrees with the importance expressed by one of the Desert Fathers, who accepts every accusation except that of heretic, Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). However, she does not introduce a chapter on faith, precisely because of the departure from phenomenology that such an approach would entail, as she explains in Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Philosophy and Theology. Again. Two Attempts at a Response," *Crossing: The INPR Journal* 2 (2021). In what follows, we will go on a different path, in which faith will also be understood as *experience*, even if it is expressed through theoretical teachings (dogmas).

religion; and that of the theological turn of French phenomenology, which argues for a phenomenology of religious experience.⁵ Focusing on faith in the tradition of the religious experience of the Orthodox Church, our article engages in a dialogue particularly with the third direction, looking to highlight the specificities of religious phenomena and the appropriate methodology for letting these phenomena speak for themselves, as required by a principle of phenomenology. Without a doubt, the theological dimension will enrich the phenomenological one without confusing them, because to remain only within phenomenology means to risk an impoverishment of the understanding of religious phenomena. Our method will, therefore, be a theo-phenomenological one⁶, to ensure that we do not lose the deeper meaning of religious phenomena by remaining only within the realm of philosophy, thus ignoring the warning of Avva Diadochos of Photiki: "For nothing is so destitute as a mind philosophizing about God when it is without Him".⁷ What will prove relevant, however, will be the connection between faith and religious experience in the case of the Orthodox Christian tradition. And, since a phenomenology of religion needs either empathy towards the phenomenon of faith or towards faith itself to be edified, we will continue our discourse from the perspective of faith. Our view is that a phenomenology of religious experience becomes, in this case, *theo-phenomenology*; in other words, a phenomenological theology that accepts decisive theological premises in order to better and more adequately understand the religious phenomenon that it describes.

Let us consider once again the usefulness of theo-phenomenology.⁸ The existence of religious phenomena is indisputable. For example, an Orthodox liturgy highlights a series of phenomena that can only be understood through a proper theological hermeneutic. The question that arises, then, is whether the concern with religious phenomena remains phenomenological or whether it has already become theological.

⁵ Christina M. Gschwandtner, "What is phenomenology of religion? (Part I): The study of religious phenomena," *Philosophy Compass* 14 (2019).; Christina M. Gschwandtner, "What is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part II): The Phenomenology of Religious Experience," *Philosophy Compass* 14 (2019).

⁶ The term "theo-phenomenology" is borrowed from Natalie Depraz, and Frédéric Mauriac, "Théo-phénoménologie I : l'amour – Jean-Luc Marion et Christos Yannaras," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 74, no. 2 (2012). The major relations between theology and phenomenology can be different, from exclusion to partial overlap (Nicolae Turcan, "The Phenomenology of Prayer and the Relationship between Phenomenology and Theology," *Religions* 14, no. 1 [2023]).

⁷ Sfântul Diadoh al Foticeii, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetical word], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 313, par. 7.

⁸ Another description can be found in Nicolae Turcan, "Religious Call in Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: A Theo-Phenomenological Approach," *Religions* 11, no. 12 (2020), 4–5 In relation to this first description, we now offer a clarification of the term, emphasizing the methodological dimension of theo-phenomenology.

The solution cannot be formulated without considering at least two elements that have been related to phenomenology ever since its inception: (1) the noetico-noematic dimension and (2) the transcendental *ego*. (1) Let us begin with the former, which refers to the contents present in our intentional consciousness and to the processes of access. A religious phenomenon cannot be understood in its non-phenomenological dimension in the absence of a theology that explains it. However, it is no less true that such a phenomenon *arises* for the consciousness of the believer. Even if a miraculous phenomenon, for example, does not appear for all, but only for certain believers, it is no less true that the appearance is still an appearance, which means that it can be analyzed from a phenomenological point of view, provided that such an analysis accepts the revealed, superrational dimension, even when it cannot decide on its truth.

Let us divide, therefore, phenomena into phenomena which occur to *any* consciousness—a *general*, non-religious *phenomenology* usually deals with these—and phenomena which occur only to people worthy of receiving them; mystical phenomena par excellence, some of them invisible to the eyes of others. There is an undisputed phenomenological dimension in the latter, which we might call *regional phenomenology*. This might reveal something about the ways in which these phenomena appear. Given that they cannot be understood without recourse to theology and faith, they are phenomena with a double dimension, theological and phenomenological alike; a *theo-phenomenology* can deal with them. Thus, theo-phenomenology would be the method that applies intentionality, hermeneutics, as well as theological and phenomenological methods in order to best describe a religious phenomenon. The goal is the same: to describe the phenomenon in the best and most adequate way. (2) In this case, an important issue related to the status of the *ego* arises: how could an *ego* that has nothing to do with religion adequately describe a religious phenomenon? Is there not a risk of impoverishing it through misunderstanding? Is a form of empathy enough or is the existence of faith even more appropriate? In other words: should the religious phenomenologist be doubled by the theologian? Our answer is affirmative: only someone who experiences faith and, at the same time, knows the phenomenological method can describe a religious phenomenon in a satisfactory manner. The theo-phenomenological method therefore implies the use of both phenomenology and theology, because, as Natalie Depraz points out, both are legitimate gestures of reason that can enrich understanding and bring greater accuracy to the description of religious phenomena.⁹

⁹ Natalie Depraz, *Corpul slăvit. Fenomenologie practică plecând de la Filocalie și Părinții Bisericii* [The Body in Glory. Practical Phenomenology from Philocalia and the Church Fathers], trans. Maria Cornelia Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2022), 336–37.

The Phenomenon of Philosophical Faith

Faith as a Phenomenon of Anticipation

As a universal phenomenon, unrelated to religious experience, the phenomenon of faith has to do with what is not fully manifested, with what is *still* invisible, with what has not been fulfilled yet. Given that to believe does not mean to know, the phenomenon of faith reveals itself as a phenomenon of anticipation, in which time plays its part. When faith comes true, it becomes knowledge. Involved, therefore, in gnoseology itself, in the manner of the project, of the hypothesis, faith opens up a horizon in which knowledge can be acquired either as a confirmation of anticipation or as a refutation of it. In all his projects, man is committed to the belief that they can be achieved—which is why he does not doubt this belief, nor does he question it.¹⁰ On the other hand, belief as a preliminary energy of the project vanishes once the project is either accomplished or abandoned.

From an existential perspective, faith is part of the ontological structure of the *Dasein* and accompanies any project as an affective disposition towards authenticity or inauthenticity. Unsurprisingly, it is portrayed in Heidegger's writing in the everydayness of the *Dasein* and in its authenticity, although it has a greater weight in the latter.¹¹

Following phenomenological reduction, the noematic content of consciousness involves a series of invisible sides, which are in turn anticipated, assumed, waiting for experience to fill them and to confirm them. Faith finds its place in this expectation of confirming or denying the invisibility of phenomena; it is precisely this intentionality towards what is *still* invisible, only to gradually disappear with the certification of experience and the arrival of the phenomenon to visibility; it is "faith as an eye"¹², which ensures the "seeing" of the unseen. Certainly, there are phenomena for which the visible does not replace all that is invisible, phenomena that involve mystery or lack of knowledge. They can be affirmed as "negative certainties"¹³ and may contain forms of belief that cannot be eliminated.

As existential, faith anticipates that an essential characteristic of the *Dasein*, which is now only a mere supposition or desire, will come into being in the near or distant future, following an appropriate path. A

¹⁰ St. John Damascene, after stressing the importance of faith for both human and spiritual matters, defines faith as "an assent that does not isolate things". Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica* [Dogmatics], trans. D. Fecioru (București: Scripta, 1993), chap. XI.

¹¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp* [Being and Time], trans. Gabriel Liiceanu, and Cătălin Cioabă (București: Humanitas, 2002), §§ 54, 60, 62.

¹² Petru Damaschinul, "Învățăături duhovnicești" [Spiritual Teachings], in *Filocalia*, vol. 5, (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1976), 31.

¹³ Jean-Luc Marion gives us this phrase in *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Grasset, 2010).

“becoming into being”¹⁴ as Noica put it, which would be impossible without the horizon of faith, because the possibility of such a becoming opens up precisely within this horizon. One could say that any horizon of possibilities involves a belief that they have a chance of materializing.

Belief in the reality and rationality of the world

The generality of the phenomenon of faith concerns the *world* that we have consciously or unconsciously constituted over time, particularly our belief in its reality. “Is it therefore possible to *hypothesize* that all things around us exist?”¹⁵ Wittgenstein wondered. Few doubted this, but philosophy is the field in which the most unusual questions are asked. There were, for example, the questions of skepticism, which challenged this confidence in the existence of the world, deeming it unwarranted. What Descartes offered through his *cogito* was precisely the certification of the existence of *the ego* and, with the help of God, the certification of the existence of the world.¹⁶ To Heidegger, the modes of being of the *Dasein* presuppose a belief in a certain rationality that precedes us and, why not, in the reality of the world that appears to us as a positional phenomenon. According to Husserl, acts such as faith are interwoven with all the other types of intentional acts and therefore “with all forms of consciousness in general”.¹⁷ This often pre-reflective trust is precisely the phenomenon of faith: things and the world itself are as they are (with faith being involved here); what is left for us to do is to deepen our knowledge of them.

Confidence in other sciences

Faith also arises in relation to scientific truths that we do not understand and whose arguments and history we have not studied. As limited beings, we exercise our knowledge in the few areas that we master, accepting the expertise of our more knowledgeable peers in all others. This acceptance, however, involves *confidence*, which is also a form of faith, in the competence

¹⁴ Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă* [Becoming into being] (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1981).

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Despre certitudine* [On certainty], trans. Ion Giurgea, and Mircea Flonta (București: Humanitas, 2005), par. 55.

¹⁶ René Descartes, *Meditații despre filozofia primă* [Meditations on the first philosophy], in *Două tratate filozofice: Reguli de îndrumare a minții. Meditații despre filozofia primă* [Two philosophical treatises: Rules for guiding the mind. Meditations on the first philosophy] (București: Humanitas, 1992).

¹⁷ Husserl differentiates between “positional belief”, i.e. actuality, reality, and its “neutral counterpart”, which consists in the simple representation of a thought, Edmund Husserl, *Idei privitoare la o fenomenologie pură și la o filozofie fenomenologică. Cartea întâi: Introducere generală în fenomenologia pură* [Ideas concerning a pure phenomenology and a phenomenological philosophy. Book I: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology], trans. Christian Ferencz-Flatz, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2011), 421 [H 262].

of others, just as we demand their confidence in our own competence when it comes to our field of research. We advance in our research by virtue of unquestioned beliefs; the most eloquent example here is that of the sciences which advance without questioning their foundations, as if the rationality and reality of the world were self-evident.

In the aforementioned cases, faith comes in the form of *trust*: a natural, unquestioned form of trust in the reality and rationality of the world in the first case and trust in science in the second case. What is important here is that the phenomenon of trust conceals an assumed *ignorance*: we trust precisely because we have little knowledge of the fields in question, unlike specialists. It is as if we were saying that *what is invisible to us* — the ignorance we mentioned previously — takes the form of trust, constituting an essential component of this type of faith.

Religious belief

Characteristics of religious faith

The characteristics of the phenomenon of religious faith are similar to those of philosophical or scientific belief, with the difference that their finality is not empirically certifiable in the same way. *Invisibility* takes the form of experiencing the inexhaustible mystery of God and does not await a scientific and definitive confirmation in this life, contenting itself with iconic, symbolic, and mystical experiences which cannot be considered empirical phenomena accessible to the positive sciences. *Anticipation* is not limited to the horizon of the world; instead, as “the confidence of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1), it goes beyond this life and into the next one, becoming eschatological anticipation. *The truth*, which is believed, has a dimension that an autonomous reason cannot truly grasp, because it is no longer about the horizon of the world. Various religious faiths all have in common the idea that there is something that will not be fulfilled in this life, nor will it end with it, but will manifest itself in the age to come.

By embracing faith in Christ as the Son of God, and thus as an ultimate revelation in history, man puts into action a decision of an essentially religious nature. Its consequences are both ethical and theoretical: “The Christian is one who imitates Christ in thought, word and deed, as far as is possible for human beings, believing rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity”¹⁸, writes St. John Climacus. There are effects of an ethical, liturgical, or mystical nature in which the work of God can be seen. Obviously insufficient from an atheist’s point of view, these changes/emotions

¹⁸ Sfântul Ioan Scărarul, “Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș” [The Ladder of Divine Ascent] in *Filocalia*, vol. 9, (București: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980), I, 6.

on the part of the believer are nevertheless a response from God. When they take the form of works of the Holy Spirit, becoming spiritual experiences and graces, they remain largely incommunicable, lacking the philosophical universality of the concept, demanding from others an acknowledgment which in turn implies faith.

To the extent to which they arise from spiritual life, i.e. as an experience of the unutterable mystery of God, these experiences, even when expressed as paradoxes and dogmas of faith, do not offer—*only by simple reading and hermeneutics*—a repetition of the experience. Therefore, their *confirmation* requires a similar effort and way of living which is fulfilled in the life and communion of the Church as the body of Christ.

It has often been pointed out that the truths of faith come from Revelation and go beyond reason. Phenomenologically, we could argue that the affectation of *the ego*—as a change of the self on the path towards virtues—is essential and signifies its transfiguration, its partial de-situation from the objective world and its engagement in a *believed* reality of the future Kingdom, anticipated in the present. Even if religious tradition, understood as hermeneutics, already offers the teachings of faith, faith is not reduced to these teachings, instead advancing towards love: “Just as the thought of fire does not warm the body, so faith without love does not actualize the light of spiritual knowledge in the soul.”¹⁹ Only the unity of faith with experience—the experience of love in this example—offers knowledge; a religious knowledge, of course.

The definitive invisible

Philosophical faith, which we have discussed earlier, appears as the basis of religious faith. We agree here with Emmanuel Falque: a phenomenology of faith—in the non-religious sense—, a philosophical faith, is the foundation of religious faith, with the latter involving a personal decision of a different kind.²⁰ This idea can also be found in Orthodox spirituality: “He who does not know the truth cannot truly have faith; for by nature knowledge precedes faith.”²¹

Religious faith accepts that the invisible in which it believes will not reach successive fillings and confirmations that lead to the disappearance of its invisibility, as in the case of empirical phenomena. The invisibility of religious faith does not become completely visible, even if it makes itself known *through* the visible—as an icon, a symbol, a liturgical work, etc. In this case, we are dealing with faith as the truth of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1) and which,

¹⁹ Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Cele patru sute capete despre dragoste” [The Four Hundred Texts on Love], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 65, Suta întâi, par. 31.

²⁰ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 77, 99.

²¹ Evagrie Ponticul, “Despre legea duhovnicească,” [On the Spiritual Law], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 226, par. 110.

according to St. Mark the Apostle, differs from faith in hearing (Rom. 10:17).²² Even if any revelation goes beyond what we already know, appearing as a saturated phenomenon that overflows our conceptuality, it does not exhaust the invisible and does not make it available as a metaphysics of presence would. Through the phenomena that show the work of God—and which can be of various kinds—the invisibility of God does not disappear, but manifests itself as definitive invisibility. Faith as a gaze would be suspended if the religious phenomena that take place on the stage of the visible did not point iconically to what remains infinitely hidden. We would then have only empirical phenomena that do not require faith, only perception and intuition. Therefore, the phenomenality of faith does not nullify the unknowable mystery of God. However much we know through Revelation, He whom our mind cannot comprehend will remain in His being, unknowable, even as He imparts Himself to the creature through His uncreated energies and through the revelation of the dogmas of faith.

Knowledge by faith: dogmas and experience

To talk about faith means, first of all, to take into consideration simple faith²³, i.e. to believe in the words of Christ, in the Church's proclamation of faith (*kerygma*), and in "the great faith of seeing"²⁴, "which is born in us from the practice of the virtues"²⁵, synonymous with the knowledge of God (theology):

The intellect that begins its search for divine wisdom with simple faith will eventually attain a theology that transcends the intellect and that is characterized by unremitting faith of the highest type and the contemplation of the invisible.²⁶

It is a faith that will be the basis of future virtues, the first of which is the fear of God, from which the observance of God's commandments is born. This link, which we find in the spirituality of the Christian East, shows us that the dogmas of faith are linked to a way of life—ascetic, liturgical, and mystical at the same time.

²² Evagrie Ponticul, "Despre cei ce-și închipuie că se îndreptătesc din fapte" [Of those who think they are justified by works], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), par. 100.

²³ There are different degrees of faith, all presupposing different degrees of personal relationship with God, as we find in Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 11–14.

²⁴ Petru Damaschinul, "Învățăături duhovnicești" [Spiritual teachings], 193.

²⁵ Teognost, "Despre făptuire, contemplație și preoție" [On the practice of the virtues, contemplation and priesthood], in *Filocalia*, vol. 4, (Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1948), par. 39.

²⁶ Talasie Libianul, "Despre dragoste, înfrânare și petrecerea cea după minte" [On love, self-control and life in accordance with the intellect], in *Filocalia*, vol. 4, (Sibiu: Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1948), Suta a patra, par. 80.

Faith is associated with the observance of the commandments and is therefore a form of ethics: "For faith is not only to be baptized into Christ, but also to observe his commandments"²⁷;

Therefore every man who has been baptized in the name of the Triune God and of the life that makes you alive must observe all that the Lord has commanded. For this reason the Lord has joined the keeping of all the commandments to the right faith, knowing that it is not possible to bring salvation to man by one of them alone, separated from the others.²⁸

But faith is also a form of mysticism, with a unifying function:

...he who only believes and does not love, lacks even the faith he thinks he has; for he believes merely with a certain superficiality of intellect and is not energized by the full force of love's glory. The chief part of virtue, then, is faith energized by love.²⁹

The theoretical premises of faith are overcome by the experience of the mystery of God, and the principles of demonstration in this case are different from those presupposed by philosophical or scientific knowledge. A theological gnoseology should take into account the indemonstrability of the principles of faith and the insufficiency of reason, as St Maximus the Confessor pointed out:

To the devout believer God gives something more sure than any proof: the recognition and the faith that He substantively is. Faith is true knowledge, the principles of which are beyond rational demonstration; for faith makes real for us things beyond intellect and reason.³⁰

Faith cannot be understood merely as the acceptance of a doctrinal set, inaccessible to reason, but, more profoundly, as an experience of the ineffable that has a simultaneously adequate and inadequate relationship with our theological knowledge: adequate because the believer does not experience a God other than the one expressed by the faith of the Church, but "makes it even more certain" through the faith of seeing,

²⁷ Marcu Ascetul, "Răspuns aceloră care se îndoiesc despre dumnezeiescul botez" [Answer to those who doubt the divine baptism], in *Filocalia*, vol. 1, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 258.

²⁸ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetical word], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 26, par. 2.

²⁹ St Diadoh al Foticeii, "Cuvânt ascetic" [Ascetic Word], 318, par. 21.

³⁰ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, "Cele două sute de capete despre cunoștința de Dumnezeu și iconomia Fiului lui Dumnezeu" [The Two Hundred Texts on the Knowledge of God and the Iconomy of the Son of God], in *Filocalia*, vol. 2, (București: Harisma, 1993), 152, Suta întâi, par. 9.

“that is, of knowledge”;³¹ inadequate because these teachings are, by themselves and without the help of experience—practice and contemplation—, insufficient.³²

Faith is, therefore, a form of knowledge and also a condition of possibility for higher knowledge.

A perfect intellect is one which by true faith and in a manner beyond all unknowing supremely knows the supremely Unknowable; and which, in surveying the entirety of God’s creation, has received from God an all-embracing knowledge of the providence and judgment which governs it – in so far, of course, as all this is possible to man.³³

As we can observe, knowledge is higher than knowledge, for there is no knowledge of God that is not faced with an even deeper lack of knowledge; at the same time, it is also a knowledge of God’s providence and judgment, that is, a higher knowledge of God’s will, received as a gift on the foundation of faith.

Community and tradition

From the perspective of the experience and life of the Orthodox Church, faith is bestowed upon a community, primarily upon the apostles and those who followed them. Those who became believers were baptized and entered the communion of the Church, thus becoming members of the mystical body of Christ. Without eliminating the decisive importance of the person, the Church’s proclamation of faith (*kerygma*) is not uttered in a philosophical school in which disciples embrace the teachings of the master, but rather is affirmed as a way of living in communion. To become a member of the Church means to pass through the mystery of Holy Baptism and to confess the faith of the Church. Baptism, as the first Sacrament, is also given to children precisely on the basis of the faith of their godparents. This transfer of faith—unimaginable if it were limited to an individual decision—attests to the capital value of communion. Of course, once someone becomes an adult, they will, by their own confession of faith and participation in the mysteries and life of the Church, affirm their membership in the body of Christ. Faith is confessed through the symbol of faith at every Holy Liturgy, where the

³¹ Petru Damaschinul, “Învățăături duhovnicești” [Spiritual teachings], 194.

³² For the importance of experience in relation to the dogmas of faith, see Nicolae Turcan, *Postmodernism și teologie apofatică* [Postmodernism and apophatic theology], (Florești, Cluj: Limes, 2014), 98–105.

³³ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Cele patru sute de capete despre dragoste” [The four hundred texts on love], 123, Suta a treia, par. 99.

Holy Eucharist is celebrated. In this way, the personal freedom of the believer in communion with the entire Church is emphasized.

Communion by faith resembles the communion in the Kingdom of God. St Maximus the Confessor even goes so far as to put the sign of equality between faith and the Kingdom of Heaven, while at the same time admitting their difference:

...faith in God is the same as the Kingdom of God. It differs only in thought from the Kingdom, for faith is the Kingdom of God without form, and the Kingdom is faith which has been given a form in a godly manner.³⁴

According to Saint Maximus, through the observance of the commandments, faith becomes the Kingdom of God, a kingdom “known only to those who have it”. As a “binding power”, faith achieves “the immediate, perfect, and supranatural union of the believer with the God in whom he believes.”³⁵ Thus, the unifying power of faith is based on the doctrine man believes in, but seeks through it the One in whom he believes, the living God. The dogmas of faith now appear as the visible reference points of a path towards encountering the God who has become man.

Conclusions

By analyzing examples from Orthodox spirituality and making use of phenomenology, we have managed to highlight the complex dimension of the phenomenon of faith. Ever-present in our non-religious human attitudes, philosophical faith or natural faith constitutes the phenomenological foundation of religious faith. The faithful disposition and the openings made possible by the horizon of faith are naturally present in all humans, insofar as they deal with the future, thus reflecting their existential dimension.

Religious faith, however, differs from natural faith, even if it is based on it, by broadening the worldly horizon towards the eschatological one, in search of the living God. By setting in motion a subsequent thought and thus encountering philosophy, it nevertheless goes further and gives rise to a non-objectual knowledge, which has more to do with inter-personality, relationship, and communion than with the analysis of objects based on theoretical principles. In fact, Christ, who defined Himself as the Truth (cf. Acts 14:6), has become the “criterion of truth,” even if this statement is made explicit by tradition and is linked to the decisions of

³⁴ St. Maxim Mărturisitorul, “Răspunsuri către Talasie” [Answers to Thalassios], in *Filocalia*, vol. 3, (București: Harisma, 1993), 131, Question 33.

³⁵ St Maxim Mărturisitorul, 131–32, Question 33.

the Ecumenical Synods.³⁶ And this identification of the truth with the divine-human person of Christ necessarily refers to a connection between reason and life, as well as to an understanding of faith as a way of life in the communion of the Church. In this case, an interpersonal knowledge in accordance with the living tradition of the Church takes the place of objective/object-oriented knowledge: “faith is an event and experience of relationship, a road radically different from intellectual certainty and ‘objective’ knowledge.”³⁷

By observing God’s commandments and practicing the virtues, faith changes man, bringing him, by likeness, into union with God. The complexity of this process of deification is set in motion by faith: being knowledge, asceticism, and union at the same time, faith can be found on every step of spiritual life. Faith is a response to the phenomenality of the empirical world, enriching the visible with the data—*incredible* from the world’s perspective—of the invisible. The phenomenon of faith now appears to us in all its richness, as the adventure of man who chooses to give up the banality of life and the horror of death in favor of encountering the God who, by conquering death, has brought true life to those who believe. Far from being reduced to the adherence to a set of opinions and convictions, Christian faith is life in Christ and communion of love, constituting a form of knowledge which is neither reduced to philosophical knowledge, nor completely excludes it, but only goes beyond it on the path towards the interpersonal and mystical encounter in the communion of the Church.

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³⁶ For the way in which the question of hermeneutics is posed in the debates of the early centuries concerning truth, see Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 97–100.

³⁷ Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, 13.

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VARIA

*Vita passibilis, imperturbatio (apatheia),
vita passiva.*

Die pathische Bedingtheit des Menschen
im theologischen Denken
von Maximus dem Bekenner

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Abstract

Vita passibilis, imperturbatio (apatheia), vita passiva. The Passive Condition of Man in the Theological Thought of Maximus the Confessor

Maximus the Confessor distinguishes three stages in the spiritual becoming of man: *vita passibilis* i.e. the way of life in that man is living under the reign of the bodily passions, *apatheia* as state of liberation from the reign of the lower passions, and *vita passiva* as *modus vivendi* in which the human makes the personal experience of the revelation and the presence of God. Thereby being man means according to Maximus suffering under the rule of someone – divine or demonic – or something. The human condition is especially passive. Even contemplation (*theōria*) becomes in this approach a kind of passion: the passive experience of the presence of God. Although there is an old tradition in the classical Greek culture concerning the equivalency *mathein-pathein* (from Aeschylus to Aristotle and until Neo-Platonist thinkers like Proclus) which is received in the Christian tradition first of all by Denys the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor is one of the first Christian theologians who tries to reconstruct the classical conception concerning the typology of the human ways of life (*vita activa-vita contemplativa*) as being based on passion: passion of lower impulses, passion of the demonic temptations and sins, but also passion of the overwhelming divine presence. Man can only lead a passionate life as slave of the lower passions (*pathēmata*) and as such of the devil or as slave of God in the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: *ways of life, contemplation, passion, apatheia, Maximus the Confessor, Denys the Areopagite*

1. *Vita passiva als vita passibilis?* Eine terminologische Erklärung

IN SEINEM DEM LUTHERS LEHRE von der *vita passiva* gewidmeten Buch *Passivität aus Passion. Zur Problemgeschichte einer »categoria non grata«* zeigt Philipp Stoellger¹ zu Recht, daß der deutsche Reformator nicht der eigentliche Initiator dieser Formel ist, sondern im Gegenteil er in einer Tradition stehe, die auf Kirchenväter wie Augustin und auf Vertreter der mittelalterlichen Mystik zurückgeht:

Luther ist weder der begriffsgeschichtliche Stifter des Ausdrucks »vita passiva« noch ist er von deren Tradition ganz frei. So klingt das »leidentliche Leben« der Mystik auch bei ihm noch nach und scheint der problem- wie sprachgeschichtliche Hintergrund der »vita passiva« zu sein: „Denn das leidende leben, das da so versuechet und durchtrieben wird, bringt viel mehr guter werck, kan viel schaffen, radten und andern nuetze sein, wilchs ein unerfarner nicht thun kan, Daruemb mus Lea die aller reicheste und fruchtbarste sein umb yhres elends willen.“²

Luther optiert hier in der von Augustin vertrauten Opposition für Lea, die er nicht als Referenz der »vita activa«, sondern des »leidenden Lebens« anführt. Leas Leben ist einerseits im Sinne Seuses voller Leid und »elend« und darin korrelativ passiv bei aller Aktivität; es ist aber als »reichstes und fruchtbarstes« von einer Passivität vor Gott, die die kreative Passion dieses Lebens bildet. *Diese »vita passiva«* erscheint als Entsprechung zur »theologia practica«, sofern in dieser Passivität diejenige Aktivität wirksam ist, die sich vom »mere passive« her eröffnet“.³

Aus dem Wunsch, seiner Bemerkung Gewicht zu geben, identifiziert Stoellger *vita passiva* mit *vita passibilis* des Maximus des Bekenners, indem er ein Teil der 5. Scholie aus *Questiones ad Thalassium* §61⁴ in der lateinischen Übersetzung des Ioannis Scotus Eriugena zitiert:

Medium proficuum ad extremorum interemptionem recipi dicit domini dolorem et mortem sue propter nos diuine carnis, per quam generationem et natiuitatem mortem que propter nos uoluntarie sustinuit, ut nostram ex libidine generationem et ex passibili uita mortem medius aparens aboleret, et ad

¹ Philipp Stoellger, *Passivität aus Passion. Zur Problemgeschichte einer »categoria non grata«*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 56 (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2010).

² WA 24, 558, 9–12.

³ Stoellger, *Passivität aus Passion*, 299–300.

⁴ PG 90, 642.

alterem nos uitam transduceret, principio ac fine temporali liberam, quam non natura, sed gratia creat.⁵

Aber eine solche Identifizierung ist offensichtlich fehlerhaft. „Vita passibilis“ ist weder bei Maximus (q. 61) noch in der schon zitierten 5. Scholie von q. 61 dasselbe mit der „vita passiva“ im Sinne der theologischen Reflektionen Martin Luthers, Augustins oder der mittelalterlichen Mystik. Im Gegenteil dazu, weist die Formel aus *Questiones ad Thalassium* auf das pathologische Gegenteil dieser Lebensform hin. Es handelt sich in der 5. Scholie um die Pathologie der menschlichen Situierung unter der Herrschaft der unvernünftigen Leidenschaften (*ta pathēmata*). In q. 61 argumentierte Maximus, daß aus diesem pathologischen Zustand die Menschheit dank der Passion Christi gerettet wurde, die in der heiligen Taufe von einem jeden Menschen durch die in der Erfüllung der göttlichen Gebote ständig aktualisierte Adoptionsgnade (*gratiam adoptionis*) wiedererlebt wird.⁶ *Vita passibilis* aus q. 61 ist also eine durch die Gnade der Taufe und dem eigenen asketischen Bemühen des Menschen zu überholende pathologische Lebensform. Abgesehen davon, daß die beiden Konzepte sich phonetisch ähneln, weisen sie auf zwei völlig verschiedene, gegensätzliche *modi vivendi* hin.

In Zusammenstimmung mit der alten und ehrwürdigen asketischen Tradition der Ostkirche, die bis auf mittelplatonisch orientierte kirchliche Schriftsteller wie Origenes und Evagrius Ponticus zurückgeht, neigt Maximus der Bekenner eher dazu, das Pathische in der menschlichen Natur als Folge der Erbsünde anzusehen. In diesem Sinne spricht er in q. 21 über den Durbruch des Pathischen durch die biologische Geburt (*to pathēton kata tēn gennēsīn*) in die menschliche Natur als Folge der Erbsünde. Obwohl Maximus zwischen den Affekten gegen die Natur (*para physin*) und denen der Natur entsprechend (*kata physin*) letzten Endes unterscheidet, äußert sich der Theologe aus dem 7. Jhdt. im allgemeinen zurückhaltend gegenüber der Problematik der menschlichen Leidenschaften (Affekten).⁷

⁵ Stoellger zitiert hier Maximus Confessor sec. tranl. Iohannis Scoti Eriugena: *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* SG 22, schol. ad questionem 61, Vgl. Thomas von Aquin, STh III, q56a.1 resp. Siehe Stoellger, *Passivität aus Passion*, Fußnote 249, 299–300.

⁶ *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, q. 61, PG 90, 635–636.

⁷ Ebd., q. 21, PG 90, 313–314: „Qui aigitur peccatum propter transgressionem, propter peccatum vero patibile per ortum nativitatis (*dia tēn amartian to pathēton kata tēn gennēsīn*) in naturam humanam superintraverant (*tē physei tōn anthrōpōn episeīlthe*), semperque cum nativitatis patibili (*tō pathētō tēs genneseōs*) per peccatum prima transgressio vigeat, nulla spes libertatis reliqua erat; natura per voluntatem, malo vinculo insolubiliter astricta. Quantum enim per generatione mortuque nativitatis ad suam natura incitabatur incolumitatem, tanto amplius se legi peccati astringebat; nempe exercitam atque vigentem in patibili partem (*kata to pathēton*) transgressionem habens. Cum enim in ipso patibili, naturali necessitate peccati fomitem haberet, omnium coelestium Virtutum et Principatum et Potestatum, originali in patibili peccato per in naturales affectus ac passionem (*para physin pathon*), in affectibus qui sunt ex natura (*tois kata physin pathesi*), latentes afflatus habebat“.

2. *Pathein* als eigentliches Paradigma der Theologie. Die Rezeption eines altgriechischen und pseudo-areopagitischen Denkmotivs von Maximus Confessor

Eine Einstellungsänderung von Maximus Confessor gegenüber der pathischen Dimension der menschlichen Existenz scheint mit dem mächtigen Eindruck gehabt zu haben, den ihm die Lektüre des pseudo-areopagitischen Corpus in der Reifezeit seiner theologischen Schöpfung (zu der *Questiones ad Thalassium* gehören⁸) erweckte. Maximus rezipiert offensichtlich eine berühmte Stelle aus der Abhandlung „Über die göttlichen Namen“ des Pseudo-Dionysius, in der von Hierotheus behauptet wird, daß dieser dank einer „göttlicheren Inspiration“ (*theiotes epipnoias*) das Göttliche nicht nur lehrte, sondern auch litt (*ou monon mathōn, alla kai pathōn ta theia*).⁹ Es handelt sich eigentlich um einen in der klassischen griechischen Kultur von Aischylos zu Aristoteles und später bis zu Neuplatonikern wie Proklos anwesenden *Topos*¹⁰, der über Dionysius ins theologische Denken der Kirchenväter eingedrungen ist. Ein direktes Echo dieses Einflusses befindet sich z.B. in q. 9, wo Maximus über Apostel Paulus ähnlicherweise berichtet, daß dieser durchs Leiden die Erfüllung des Gottes Zeichens erkennen will (*gnōnai ... ek tou pathein ton tropon...*).¹¹

Der Kirchenvater aus dem 7. Jhd. gibt sich aber nicht damit zufrieden, den pseudo-areopagitischen *Topos* der pathischen Erfahrung Gottes wiederaufzunehmen, sondern geht weiter und bemüht sich, ihn theologisch zu untermauern. Indem er in q. 6 von zwei Typen von Geburt „aus Gott“ (*ek Theou gennēseōs/ nativitatis ex Deo*) spricht, einer, die es nur als Möglichkeit/

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die „gnostischen Centurien“ des Maximus Confessor* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 1941), 149–156.

⁹ *De divinis nominibus* II,9 in: PG 3, 648. Siehe auch die kritische zweisprachige Auflage Dionisie Areopagitul, *Despre numele divine. Teologia mistică*, ediție bilingvă, traducere din limba greacă, introduce, note, glosar de termeni și bibliografie de Marilena Vlad, în colecția „Biblioteca medievală” (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 84–85. Siehe auch die rum. Üb. D. Stăniloae Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul: *Opere complete și Scoliile Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul*, traducere, introduce și note de pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, ediție îngrijită de Constanța Costea (București: Paideia, 1996), 142.

¹⁰ Andrew Louth, *Dionisie Areopagitul. O introduce*, rum. Üb. Sebastian Moldovan, Vorwort von diac. Ioan I. Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 1997); englische Aufgab: Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers, series edited by Brian Davies OP, Geoffrey Chapman (London: Cassel Publisher Limited, 1989), 57–58. Siehe auch ders.: *Influența lui Dionisie Areopagitul în spiritualitatea creștină răsăriteană și occidental a secolului XIV* [The Influence of Denys the Areopagite on Eastern and Western Spirituality in the Fourteenth Century], vorgetragen an der Tagung des Verbandes St. Alban and St. Sergius (London) im Jahre 1981 und veröffentlicht in: *Sobornost/ incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 4, no. 2 (1982): 185–200, in: ders.: *Dionisie Areopagitul. O introduce*; engl. Auffassung: Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Cassel Publisher Limited, 1989), 216–217.

¹¹ *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, q. 9, PG 90, 285–286.

Potenz (*dynamei/ potenia*) gibt, und einer, die sich aktiv (*in actu / kat'energeian*) in der Zusammenarbeit des Menschen mit Gott äußert, zeigt Maximus Confessor, daß nur der Wille (*proairesis*) der der zweiten Kategorie Gehörenden vom Heiligen Geiste von der Erde zum Himmel erhoben wurde. Durch die so erlangte wahre Erkenntnis verwandelt der Heilige Geist ihr Intellekt (*ton noun metepoiēsen*) und bringt es zu einem Zustand der Vergöttlichung, die durch die Gnade zur Disposition (*hexis/ habitus*) wird. Infolgedessen leidet es „wie ein anderer Gott“ (*hōs hallon ... theon/ deus alius*) diesen göttlichen Zustand, dem Gott selbst auf eine ontologische Weise (*kat'ousian/ per essentiam*) eigen ist.¹²

Hier ist die für die Frühschriften von Maximus dem Bekenner spezifische Zurückhaltung gegenüber Affekten/Pathe nicht mehr zu spüren. Das Leiden (*to pathos*) ist das wahre Paradigma, in dem man die persönliche Erfahrung Gottes und seiner Anwesenheit machen kann. Eigentlich gibt es auch in den ältesten Teile seines Werkes Hinweise zum Pathischen, insbesondere wenn er über die mystische Entrückung des Intellekts von der Liebe zur göttlichen Erkenntnis (*dia tēs agapēs hypo tēs theias gnōseōs ho nous harpagē/ per charitatem divinae scientiae ... raptus animus*)¹³ oder über die Art und Weise, wie es von den *noēmata* zur geistlichen Kontemplation bewegt wird (*eis tēn pneumatikēn theōrian autōn kinetai/ earum contemplationem movetur*)¹⁴, spricht. Auch die Vorliebe für das Thema der Geduld (*hypomonē*) oder der Langmut (*makrothymia*) als zur Vergöttlichung¹⁵ beitragenden Tugenden, die der byzantinische Theologe in seinen ersten Schriften¹⁶ äußert, deutet die künftige Entfaltung des pseudo-dionysischen Denkmotivs in seinen Hauptwerken an.

Der Höhepunkt der Reflektion über das Pathische erreicht Maximus der Bekenner in seinen Frühschriften am Ende der ersten und am Anfang der zweiten Centurie seiner Abhandlung über die Liebe, wo er den schon erwähnten Gedanken der Entrückung des Intellekts (*nous*) von dem göttlichen und unendlichen Licht während des Gebetes bis zu dem Punkt entfaltet, daß er behauptet, das Intellekt fühle sich selbst und die Seienden nicht

¹² Ebd., q. 6, PG 90, 281–282: „Hōn de kata tēn genēsīn, tēn holēn proairesīn labonto Pneuma to hagian, apo tēs gēs pros ouranous di'holou metethēke, kai diatēs kat'energeian alēthous epignōseōs, tais tou Theou kai Patros makariais ton noun metepoiēsen, hōs hallon einai theon nomisthēnai pathonta ta kata tēn hexin dia tēs charitos hoper ou paschōn, all'hyparchōn kat'ousian estin ho Theos [m. Herv. – P.O.]./Quorum vero per nativitatem, Spiritus sanctus totum animum ocupans e terra ad coelos penitus transtullit, ac per veram in actu agnitionem Dei ac Patris beatis fulgoribus transmutavit (*ut deus alius esse existimetur, per munus gratiae ea passus quae sunt habitus: quod qui non patitur, sed per essentiam est, ipse Deus existit*) [m. Herv. – P.O.]”.

¹³ Maximus Confessor, *Capita de charitate* I,12, PG 90, 963–964. Vgl. ders. *Liber asceticus*, PG 90, 921–922.

¹⁴ Ebd. I,87, PG 90, 979–980

¹⁵ *Liber asceticus*, §43, PG 90, 953–954.

¹⁶ Siehe z.B. *Liber asceticus*, PG 90, 911–958, insbesondere §12; §16; §20–22; §33. *Capita de charitate* I, §2; §3, §28; §30; §38; §40; §67 (PG 90, 954–984) usw.

mehr, sondern nur den, der darin durch die Liebe diese Erleuchtung wirkt. (*to en autē tē hormē tēs proseuchēs harpagēnai ton noun hypo tou theiou kai apeirou phōtos ... ei mē monou tou dia tēs agapēs en autō tēn toiautēn hellampsin energountos/ sub ipso orationis impetu rapi animum divina et infinita luce ... ejus duntaxat, qui per charitatem, talem in eo illustrationem afflatu suo operatur*).¹⁷

Man kann sich zurecht fragen, ob dieses *caput* nicht vielleicht ein späterer Zusatz des Autors ist. Ein Argument dafür könnte die Erwähnung der „Theologen“ (*theologoī/viri theologici*) Gregor von Nazianz und (Pseudo-)Dionysius in den letzten Zeilen der ersten Centurie derselben Abhandlung sein, wo Maximus über die Unfähigkeit des vor Verlangen brennenden (*toū pothou phlegomenos/ desiderio flagrans*), pathischen Intellekts spricht, Gott an sich zu erkennen.¹⁸ Obwohl es nicht ausgeschlossen ist, daß Maximus sich mit den Werken dieser Kirchenväter schon in seiner Jugend beschäftigt habe, widmet er ihnen seine vollständige Aufmerksamkeit und rezipiert ihre Gedanken insbesondere in der späteren Zeit, als er seine Hauptwerke konzipierte.

3. *Kakopatheia* als notwendige Erfahrung für das Erreichen der *apatheia* auf dem Weg von der *vita passibilis* zur *vita passiva*

Zwischen der von Pseudo-Dionysius inspirierten Auffassung der Theologie als pathischer Erfahrung des Göttlichen (*ta theia*) und der harten Wirklichkeit des Kampfes mit den Affekten und Leidenschaften (*ta pathēmata*), die der *vita passibilis* als uneigentlicher Lebensform umschrieben sind, gibt es eine scheinbar unüberbrückbare Kluft. Maximus Confessor beschäftigt sich in seinen frühen Schriften insbesondere mit der Art und Weise, wie die Überwindung der „Tyrannei der Affekten“ (*tēs tōn pathōn tyranidos/ affectuum ... tyrannide*)¹⁹ zu verwirklichen sei.

Treu der bis auf Origenes und Evagrius und ihre griechisch-philosophischen Quellen zurückgehenden Tradition postuliert Maximus ausnahmslos als Hauptaufgabe des asketischen Lebens das Erreichen der „Leidenlosigkeit“ (gr. *apatheia*; von hier, *apathia* im Latein, wo es auch das Äquivalent *imperturbatio* gibt). Er definiert *apatheia* als einen „friedlichen Zustand der Seele“ (*eirēnikē katastasis psychēs*; lat. *pacatus est animi status*), in dem sie sich „schwerfällig zum Bösen bewegt“ (*dyskinētos ginetai psychē pros kakian*; lat. *quo is aegre ad vitium movetur*).²⁰ Sie ist das Gegenteil der

¹⁷ *Capita de charitate* II,6, PG 90, 985–986.

¹⁸ Ebd. I,100, PG 90, 981–984. Deswegen muß sich das pathische Intellekt mit der Kontemplation der sich um Gott Befindenden begnügen (*ek de tōn peri auton paramytheitai/ sed ex illis quae circa ipsum, tantis per sibi indulget*).

¹⁹ Ebd. II,30, PG 90, 993–994.

²⁰ Ebd., I, 36, PG 90, 968.

schändlichen Leidenschaft (gr. *pathos ... psektion*/ lat. *affectus vitperium*), die nach Maximus eine „Bewegung gegen die Natur“ (*kinēsis para physin*; lat. *motus ... innaturalis*)²¹ sei.

Das Intellekt (*nous*), das noch nicht die Leidenlosigkeit (*apatheian/ imperturbationem*) erreicht hat, ähnele sich einem gebundenem Vogel, das zu fliegen verhindert ist.²² Mangels der *apatheia* habe es keinen Zugang zur himmlischen Erkenntnis (*tōn ouraniōn gnōsis/ coelestium scientia*) und gebe es keine Möglichkeit, seine Reise zur Erkenntnis der Heiligen Dreieinigkeit zu vollziehen (*epi tēn gnōsin tēs agias Triados tēn poreian poioumenos/ ad sanctae Trinitatis notitiam iter faciens*).²³

Die Befreiung von der Tyrannei der leiblichen Affekten ist möglich aber nur aufgrund der *kakopatheia*²⁴, d.h. des Erlebens einer schlimmen Erfahrung, das selbst ein besonderer Typ von *pathos* ist. Letzten Endes überwindet man die schlimme pathische Erfahrung der lasterhaften Affekten (*ta pathēmata*) nur aufgrund einer neuen pathischen Erfahrung traumatischer Art (*kakopatheia*) um die Leidenlosigkeit (*apatheia*) zu erreichen. Der Grund dafür identifiziert Maximus der Bekenner in der Tatsache, daß alle Sünden eigentlich um des Vergnügens willen begangen werden (*dia hēdonēn ginetai/ ob voluptatem ac libidinis causa committitur*).²⁵ Deswegen sei das Leiden von schlimmen/traumatischen Erlebnissen und Erfahrungen (*kakopatheia*) oder von Traurigkeit (*lypē*) eine Gelegenheit der Buße (*metanoia/ poenitentia*), die man nicht vermeiden oder ablehnen (*mē apanainou/ ne renuas*) darf, wenn man danach strebt, frei von den *pathēmata* zu werden.²⁶ Eher müsse man sich in bezug auf die Ursache der *kakopatheia* fragen (*dia ti zētei/ causam quaere*) und vielmehr das „Absinth der göttlichen Urteile“ (*tōn tou Theou krimatōn apsinthion/ divinorum iudiciorum absinthium*) trinken, um verstehen und die eigene Lebensform ändern zu können.

Das geistliche Wachsen ist auf diese Weise als eine Reihe von Variationen des Pathischen, als eine Phänomenologie des *Pathos* beschrieben zu werden. Das Leben unter der Herrschaft und der Tyrannei der zu Lastern gewordenen Sünden (*pathēmata*) ist ein schmerzhaftes und entfremdendes *Pathos*. Aber die Befreiung davon geschieht ihrerseits als pathische Erfahrung, denn ihre auslösende Ursache ist das Leiden eines schlimmen und traurigen Erlebnisses, einer traumatischen Erfahrung (*kakopatheia*), die die Seele die Demut (*tapeinōsis/ humilitas*) auf eine unmittelbare Weise lehrt und zur „Leidenlosigkeit“ (*apatheia*) führt.

²¹ Ebd., I,35, PG 90, 968.

²² Ebd., I,85, PG 90, 979–980.

²³ Ebd., I,86, PG 90, 979–980.

²⁴ Ebd., I,76, PG 90, 977.

²⁵ Ebd., II,41, PG 90, 997–998.

²⁶ Ebd., II,43, PG 90, 999–1000.

4. Jenseits der *apatheia*.

Pathein als eschatologischer Zustand der Vergöttlichung

Unter diesen Bedingungen kann man sich zurecht fragen – erstens, ob das Pathologische in bezug auf die *pathēmata* das Pathische an sich ist, und zweitens, ob *apatheia* als vollständige Befreiung von *pathēmata* ein Zweck an sich oder nur ein Mittel ist, um etwas Höheres zu erreichen. Zwar stellt sich Maximus der Bekenner diese Fragen nicht ausdrücklich, aber er hat sich mit dieser Problematik schon aus der Zeit seiner Frühschriften intensiv beschäftigt.

In seinen „Centurien über die Liebe“ zeigt der Kirchenvater aus dem 7. Jhd., daß die, die *apatheia* schon erreicht haben, sich auf keinen Fall am Ende des geistlichen Weges der Vergöttlichung befinden. Zwar sind ihre Gedanken einfach (*psiloi logismoi/ rationes simplices*) geworden aber sie sind noch nicht zu dem Göttlichen orientiert. Das ist nach Maximus ein Zeichen, daß man sich immer noch auf der Ebene der praktischen Bemühungen (*epi tōn praktikōn monon/illis ... qui actionem colunt*) befindet und noch nicht zur wahren theologischen Erkenntnis gekommen ist. Die zu dieser Typologie Gehörenden enthalten sich nicht der *pathēmata* aus Hoffnung auf das Reich Gottes, sondern eher aus Angst vor ewiger Qual.²⁷

Apatheia an sich reicht also nicht, die Vergöttlichung (*theōsis*) zu erreichen. Trotz der ihr spezifischen leidenlosen Erkenntnis Gottes (*he aneu pathous tōn theian gnōsis/ sine affectu ac passionis expers divinatorum scientia*) kann sie mangels der glücklichen Leidenschaft der heiligen Liebe (*to makariou pathous tēs agias agapēs/ beato charitatis affectu ac passione*), die das Intellekt an die geistlichen Kontemplationen bindet (*tēs syndesmōsēs ton noun tois pneumatikois theōrēmasi/ spiritualibus contemplationibus ac sensis mentem addicente*)²⁸, in *pathēmata* wieder enden.²⁹

Das pathische Teil der Seele ist also nicht schlimm an sich, sondern muß einfach von den *pathēmata* gereinigt werden (*to pathētikon meros tēs psychēs ekkathairousai/ animi partem affectibus obnoxiam expurgantes*).³⁰ Anders ausgedrückt muß dieses pathische Teil der Seele von *pathēmata* ungestört behalten

²⁷ Ebd., III, 68, PG 90, 1037–1038: „Ou pantōs ho ta pathē ekkapsas, kai psilous tous logismous ergasamenos, ēdē auta kai epi ta theia etrepseu alla dynatai, mēte pros ta anthrōpina paschein, mēte pros ta theia hoper episymbainei epi tōn praktikōn monon, kai mēpō gnōseōs kataxiōthentōn hoi phobō kolaseōs, he elpidi basileias tōn pathōn apechontai./ Non omnino qui affectus ac libidines amputavit, animique rationes simplices reddidit, jam quoque affectus ad divina convertit: sed fieri potest, ut neque humanarum, nec divinarum rerum sensu afficiatur; uti in illis proclive est, qui actionem colunt, ac necdum scientia donari meruerunt, qui nempe supplicii metu aut regni expectatione, ab affectibus atque vitii sese abstinēt“.

²⁸ Ebd., III, 67, PG 90, 1037–1038.

²⁹ Ebd., III, 66, PG 90, 1035–1036.

³⁰ Ebd., IV, 57, PG 90, 1061–1062.

werden³¹, so daß sich das „zu lobende“ Pathos der Liebe (*pathos agapēs epaineton*) nicht zu einem „tadelhaften“ Pathos der Liebe (*pathos agapēs psekton/ dilectionis vituperium labemque habens affectus*)³² entartet wird.

Die Schlußfolgerung, die Maximus der Bekenner aus seiner Analyse zieht, besteht darin, daß nur die Seele, derer pathische Kraft vollständig zu Gott neigt, vollkommen (*teleia/ perfecta*) ist³³, bzw. daß nur das Pathos um Christi willen und dem Christi Beispiel gemäß³⁴ glücklich ist. Alles Andere gehört zur Pathologie des Pathischen.

Aber das Pathische an sich ist nicht etwas Pathologisches. Im Gegenteil ist es unbedingt notwendig, um den Zustand und den Habitus (*hexis*) der Vergöttlichung zu erreichen. Nirgendwo anders artikuliert Maximus diesen Gedanken so klar als in der q. 22 aus *Questiones ad Thalassium* aus. Hier unterscheidet er ausdrücklich zwischen der aktiven und der pathischen Lebensform, bzw. zwischen der Logik der Tätigseins (*ho tou poiein logos/ agendi ratio*) und der Logik der Passivität (*ho tou paschein logos/patiendi ratio*).³⁵ *Ratio agendi* sei spezifisch dieser Welt, in der man im Leibe das eigene Leben führt (*carnis saecula – hoi tēs sarkos aiōnes*). Im Gegenteil sei *ratio patiendi* der künftigen eschatologischen Welt eigen (*hoi mellontes einai tou pneumatos meta tēn parousan zoēn/futura autem spiritus saecula post praesentem vitam*).

Die Erfüllung des vollkommenen Lebens im Gottes Reiche wird in der Überwindung (wörtlich: „Verwandlung“, *metapoïēsis*) der aktiven, weltlichen Lebensform in den passiven, eschatologischen *modus vivendi* bestehen. In dem hiesigen weltlichen Leben bemüht man sich, dieses merkwürdige Leib, mit dem man unerbittlich verbunden ist, zu zähmen, bzw. die Seele von den Einfüssen des Leiblichen, die sich zu *pathēmata* entarten, zu befreien und auf diese Weise die *apatheia* als Unabhängigkeit von der „Tyrannei“ der Sünden und der Laster zu erreichen. Das ist aber nur eine Zwischenstufe, denn das eigentliche Ziel des menschlichen Lebens in der unendlichen Vergöttlichung (*tēs ep’apeiron ...theourgias/ illa in infinitum deificatio*) besteht. Nun ist das Erreichen und das Erleben der unendlichen Vergöttlichung nur eschatologisch endültig möglich, obwohl man aufgrund der asketischen Bemühungen und der Führung einer geistlichen Art von Leben dieses Ziel auch in dieser Welt als Gemeinschaft mit Gott erreichen kann.

Vergöttlichung ist aber kein direktes Ergebnis der eigenen Bemühungen, weil als solche sie dem tätigen Leben eigen wäre. Vergöttlichung ist Pathos, denn sie in dem Erlebnis der göttlichen Anwesenheit und in der persönlichen Gemeinschaft mit Gott besteht.

³¹ Ebd., IV, 79, PG 90, 1067–1068: *äina to pathētikon atarachon diaphyllattōn, anakleipton hexēs to tēs psychēs pheggos/ quo nempe partem animi affectibus obnoxiam, imperturbatam servans, indeficiens animi jubar obtineas*“.

³² Ebd., III, 71, PG 90, 1037–1038.

³³ Ebd., III, 98, PG 90, 1047–1048.

³⁴ Ebd., III, 47, PG 90, 1029–1032.

³⁵ *Questiones ad Thalassium*, q. 22, PG 90, 319–320: *„alia agendi, alia patiendiratio est – heteros ho tou poiein, kai heteros ho tou paschein logos*“.

In der 5. Scholie³⁶ der q. 22 wird deutlich gezeigt, was pathische Erfahrung ist. Man leidet im Allgemeinen etwas, über das man keine Macht hat, weil es nicht der eigenen Natur eigen ist, aber das mächtigen Einfluß auf den eigenen Zustand hat. Es gibt auf eine paradoxe Weise zwei radikal gegensätzliche pathische Zustände, nämlich die Sünde und die Vergöttlichung. In der Sünde, die ein Unfall gegen die Natur (*para physin*) ist, leidet man das Böse. In der Vergöttlichung leidet man durch die göttliche Gnade das Übernatürliche, d.h. die persönliche Anwesenheit Gottes. Weder das Böse, noch das Göttliche, weder das Gegen-Natürliche, noch das Übernatürliche gehören zur menschlichen Natur. Deswegen erlebt man sie durch das Leiden (*pathos*), auf eine pathische Weise. Um die pathische Erfahrung des Bösen zu überwinden und Zugang zum Pathos der Vergöttlichung zu bekommen, braucht man das Erreichen der Zwischenstufe der *apatheia*. Der entscheidende Schritt besteht aber in der Umorientierung der gereinigten *pathē* in die Richtung der Beziehung zu Gott, damit man fähig wird, die Anwesenheit Gottes zu spüren und sein persönliches Wirken zu erleben.

5. Epilog: *Homo patiens*

Maximus Confessor und, auf seine Spuren, der spätere Autor der Scholien konsolidieren einen mit Diadochus von Photice und mit Theodoret von Cyrus im 5. Jhd beginnenden und mit Dionysius Areopagita im 6. Jhd fortfahrenden Trend³⁷ in der patristischen Tradition, der im Unterschied von der von Origenes inspirierten Auffassung des Evagrius, nach der *apatheia* als vollständige Abschaffung der *pathē* das Ziel des menschlichen Lebens sei, eine Überwindung dieser durch die Ausrichtung der *pathē* auf Gott im Zusammenhang eines pathischen *modus vivendi*, einer *vita passiva* als Erfahrung des Heiligen Geistes postuliert.

Maximus der Bekenner bleibt treu der antiken philosophischen und der bisherigen patristischen Tradition, nach der die Betrachtung Gottes (*contemplatio-theōria*) der höchste *modus vivendi* ist, aber er versteht sie nicht mehr einfach als reines visuelles Erlebnis, sondern als organische und pathische Erfahrung der Anwesenheit Gottes. *Theōrein* heißt für ihn und seine theologischen Nachfolger göttliches *pathein*. *Contemplatio* als solche ist infolgedessen *passio*.

Die einzige Art und Weise, wie der Mensch sein Leben führen kann, ist eigentlich eine pathische: entweder als Knecht der niedrigen Affekten und infolgedessen des Bösen, oder als Knecht Gottes im Heiligen Geiste leidet er unter der Herrschaft von jemandem oder von etwas und dient

³⁶ Ebd., PG 90, 323–324.

³⁷ Louth, *Dionysie Areopagitul* (Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, [London: Cassel Publisher Limited, 1989]), 81–82.

er jemandem oder für etwas. Auch die Befreiung von der Knechtschaft der Affekten und das Erreichen der *apatheia* geschieht auf eine pathische Weise, durch die traumatische Erfahrung der *kakopatheia*. Deswegen ist *apatheia* bei Maximus nur als eine Art Zwischenstufe und auf keinen Fall als eine Finalität des menschlichen Lebens angesehen. Im Gegenteil zum *pathein* kann sie den Menschen nicht definieren. Denn der Mensch als solcher ist von der Schöpfung an ein leidendes Geschöpf. Er ist der Knecht Gottes: *homo patiens*.

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The Ascetical Way of Life in St Isaac the Syrian's Writings

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Abstract

The present study deals with a theme of spirituality frequently found in the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian, namely the idea of "way of life" (Syr. ܕܒܪܐܝܐ – *dubara*). Essential to understand the whole of his theology, this theme is treated in a manner little used until recently, but which is now becoming established in current academic research on Isaac, namely by appeal to his Syriac texts. This is achieved practically by pointing out the meanings of the Syriac term *dubara* and its Greek translation by *politeia*. The paper makes important clarifications of Isaac's terminology, and the novelty is that it highlights the connection between the text and the ascetical practices to which it refers. To this end, the study also presents the ideational synonyms of the Syriac term in question, as well as the various theological expressions in which it appears.

Keywords: Isaac the Syrian, monasticism, Syriac mysticism, ascetical terminology, degrees of spiritual life, patristics

Introduction

ALTHOUGH HE IS ONE OF the most translated authors spiritual authors, St Isaac the Syrian hides behind his work, since there is very little information about his life. We know that he was born in Beth Qatraye, in the Persian Gulf region. Living as a hermit in his native region, he was elected bishop of Nineveh (c. 676) and ordained at the monastery of Beth Abe. After only five months, he left the bishopric to retire as a solitary in the Qardu Mountains of the Beth Huzaye region. Because of his intense reading, towards the end of his life he became blind and most of his writings seem to have been dictated to a scribe. He died and was buried

in the Monastery of Rabban Shabur.¹ Today, the authenticity of three collections of writings ascribed to him is recognized. The First Part or Collection was translated into Ancient Greek at the beginning of the ninth century at the Great Lavra of Saint Sabbas in Palestine, while the other two were recently discovered and published.

His writings represent an important stage in the crystallization of East-Syriac spiritual terminology. The Syriac noun ܕܒܪܐ (dubara), on which this study focuses, is very common in the ascetical writings of East-Syriac authors. In such a context, it primarily designates the general way in which a monk lives at a certain point in his life. In the particular case of St Isaac's writings, it is also a synonym for spiritual 'stage' or 'step', indicating the inner spiritual measure the monk has reached. Its rendering into modern languages poses problems for translators, since in ascetical and mystical writings it acquires particular meanings.² But before we turn to the term *dubara*, it is necessary to make a few clarifications regarding the specifics of St. Isaac's ascetical terminology.

1. St Isaac's Ascetical Terminology

The analysis of the terminology of any spiritual author is fundamental for the knowledge of his spiritual universe, especially if this knowledge will not stop at the classifications operated by language. We invite the reader not to register an original nomenclature of terms, but to take a personal foray into the world of the key words used by Saint Isaac to capture the realities and processes of the spiritual life. In other words, the technical terms used by Isaac delineate ways of the spiritual life experienced in the complex spiritual processes and states named by them.

In order to understand the specifics of the term in question, we need to keep in mind some peculiarities of Isaac's writing. Thus, for example, he is averse to rigid, definitive explanations and to being stuck in the pseudo-language of clichés. His language is poetic, musical, metaphorical, which sometimes makes it difficult to understand. Often, if someone follows an idea throughout Isaac's work, he finds that the Syrian hermit has the habit of formulating and reformulating the same idea in several ways, of approaching it from different angles and giving answers whose background coincides behind an obvious (and sought-after?) fluidity of expression. If

¹ The most complete and reliable source of information concerning the life of Isaac of Nineveh is *The Book of Chastity*, a collection of short biographical notes on the famous monks of Syria, composed by Bishop Ishodenah of Basra between 860-870. For further information, see *Le livre de la Chasteté* composé par Jésusdenah, Évêque de Baçrah (ed.) J.-B. Chabot (Rome, 1896), chap. 124.

² In modern languages the Syriac *dubara* was rendered by 'way/mode of life', 'ascetic conduct' (English), 'conduite' (French), 'modo di vivere', 'pratiche ascetiche' (Italian), 'viețuire', 'petrecere', 'conduită' (Romanian).

properly understood by the reader, Isaac's terminology involves him – alongside Isaac – in a tireless reprise and deepening of the great spiritual themes. The challenge of understanding Isaac's texts is to master the game of his terminology.

2. Syriac etymology of *dubara*³

Before presenting the meanings that the term acquires under Isaac's pen, let us dwell for a moment on the etymological perspectives it opens up. First, let us say that the noun ܕܒܪܐ (dubara) is a derivative of the verb ܕܒܪ (dbar), whose meanings are 'to lead a flock', 'to shepherd', 'to lead', 'to guide', 'to govern'. Since the pastures of Syria are in fact vast deserts in which vegetation is present only occasionally, especially along the river valleys, the action of shepherding a flock is linked in the Syrian mind to the desert, to the wilderness which, paradoxically, is one of the few sources of food for the Assyrian people.

In this semantic context, the verb *dbar* has developed a participial noun in the form Pael meaning precisely 'wilderness', 'desert' (ܡܕܒܪܐ – *madbra*), a term used in this sense in the translation of the New Testament.⁴ With the ascetical literature, the noun "wilderness" gave the derivative "desert" or, when it has adjectival value, "hermitical" (ܡܕܒܪܝܐ – *madbraya*).⁵ We see, therefore, that the idea of lifestyle expressed by the term *dubara* is intimately linked to the image of the wilderness and of solitude in general. So dear to the Syrians, the life in the desert is understood as the totality of external and internal conditions which ideally facilitate the fulfilment of the promises of Baptism and monasticism. This is however made possible only to the extent that there is a personal commitment which implies the cultivation of an interior and direct relationship with angels, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Trinity.

3. Greek meanings

The sketched etymological context allows us to distinguish the connotations of the Syriac ܕܒܪܐ from those of πολιτεία, its most frequent equivalent in the Ancient Greek version.⁶ This Greek term, without conveying a false

³ From here, the study takes up and develops the ideas in our introduction to Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte ascetice* (*Cuvintele I-XXX*), vol. 1., bilingual edition, Greek text established by Marcel Pirard, Romanian translation, introduction and commentaries by hieromonk Agapie Corbu, *Philocalica Syriaca* 4 (Arad: Sf. Nectarie, 2022), CVI-CXI.

⁴ See, for example, Mark 1:3, 4, 13 and Acts 7:30, 38, 42, 44.

⁵ See Payne J. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), *s.v.*, and Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), *s.v.*

⁶ Sometimes, the same ܕܒܪܐ is rendered in Isaac's Greek version by διαγωγή or τάξις.

meaning, nevertheless belongs to a lexical field diametrically opposed to the Syriac one.

It is natural for the noun πολιτεία, since it to come from the denominative verb πολιτεύομαι ('to be a citizen', 'to participate in the running of the city', and later, 'to take care of', 'to behave in a certain way', 'to live in a certain way', 'to live according to the law', verb derived from the noun πόλις, 'city'), to denote 'the state of citizenship', 'the assembly of citizens', 'the republican constitution' (as opposed to monarchy, tyranny and oligarchy). Its connection with the city is so close that even in modern translations of the New Testament it has been rendered by 'citizenship' (Eph. 2:12), 'cité'⁷, 'droit de cité'⁸, 'commonwealth'⁹, 'membership'¹⁰, 'cittadinanza'¹¹, 'petrecere'¹², while the old Syriac translation renders it by *dubara*, 'manner or way of life'. The link between the social organization of a group of people and the form of living that the legislation of that social group requires of its members, the citizens, is therefore obvious. This is why, in the Greek mind, the wilderness itself, through the settlement of monks in it, became a city, a *polis*, the term πολιτεία implying to this day the idea and practice of being part of a social system, be it of a monastic nature.

The etymological considerations raised by the two terms show the paradoxical nature of the choice of the Greek translators, as well as the inadequacy of the term chosen, which confirms once again that the terminology of St. Isaac must be studied in the original Syriac. Therefore, in what follows we will try to decipher the content of the term *dubara* as it emerges from the writings of Isaac, taking into consideration the fragments in which some theological synonyms of the term appear.

4. St Isaac's use of *dubara* and its synonyms

Of the many meanings with which the Syriac noun *dubara* is used in the writings of St Isaac¹³, the most important, technical, complex and

⁷ Bible de Jerusalem.

⁸ Louis Segond.

⁹ The Holy Bible, Authorised Version.

¹⁰ Bible of Jerusalem.

¹¹ Bibbia CEI (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana).

¹² Biblia 1914.

¹³ In the present study the writings of Isaac the Syrian will be abbreviated as follows: Isaac the Syrian I = *The Ascetical Homilies* or *The First Part*, (ed.) P. Bedjan (Paris: Otto Harrassowitz, 1909); the Greek translation used in the present study: *Ἰσαάκ τοῦ Σύρου, Λόγοι Ἀσκητικοί* [critical edition of the Greek text, confronted to the Syriac text], (ed.) Marcel Pi-rard (Mount-Athos: Holy Monastery of Iviron, 2012); English translation in *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, translated by Dana Miller (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 20112); Isaac the Syrian II = *The Second Part. Chapters IV-XLI* (ed.) Sebastian Brock, CSCO 555, Syr. 223 (Louvain: Peeters, 1995); Isaac the Syrian, KG = *Chapters on*

representative is that of 'stage of the spiritual life'. With its help, Isaac describes the spiritual journey from the perspective of the ways of life specific to each stage of the ascetical and mystical ascent, synthetically expressing the way in which the connection with God is lived and understood. In general, we can say that each moment in the life of a monk is characterized by a specific way of life, in which case the term takes on the meaning of the totality of the ascetical works performed. Therefore, according to the tripartite division of the spiritual life, there is a bodily one, one according to the soul, and a spiritual way of life.¹⁴

For the stages called "ways of life" we also find, surprisingly, the name "order" (ܩܪܕܐ – *takes*, a rendering of the Greek *τάξις*)¹⁵, also three in number: of the beginners, of the middle and of the perfect. This division describes the spiritual progress from the perspective of the capacity of the members of each order to know God. The kind and extent of the knowledge of God thus defines the spiritual step on which one stands.

Also, as a partial synonym for way of life Isaac uses the term "peak" (ܩܡܩܐ – *aqma*), a formal and semantic calc of the Greek *ἀκμή*. The spiritual vision on which Isaac's choice of terminology is based affirms that the peak represents the summary of the conduct whose culmination it represents. Each spiritual stage reaches full realization and maturity only when it touches its peak, in a dynamic of development impossible to capture through a punctual and rigid approach to the "moment". The peak becomes, in turn, an *initium* for the next stage, the transition from one way of life to another being gradual. Within the hesychast or hermitic life there are three peaks to be conquered.¹⁶

The main criterion by which a monk can judge the step he is on, *id est* "the measure of his way of life" (ܩܘܢܐܢܐ ܕܩܪܕܐ – *mšuhṭa d-dubara*)¹⁷, is not the ascetical deeds he performs, but the thoughts he has in his mind. Therefore, a monk may live outwardly "as a hermit", but his inward "measure" may be that of a cenobite or of a layman. The way in which one should pray is, in Isaac's thinking, closely related to one's own spiritual measure: "Let your prayer fit your ascetical conduct"¹⁸ he writes, urging

Knowledge, Ms Oxford, Bodleian Library, syr. e 7; English translation by S. Brock in *St Isaac of Nineveh, Headings on Spiritual Knowledge (The Second Part, Chapters 1-3)*, Popular Patristics Series 63, (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2022); Isaac the Syrian III = Isacco di Ninive, *Terza collezione*, (ed.) S. Chialà, CSCO 637-638; Syr. 246-247 (Louvain: Peeters, 2011); English translation in *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works*, English translation by Mary Hansbury (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016). I translated myself all the text of the First Part used here. For The Second and Third Part I usually quoted existing translations, modifying the technical terms, is necessary, for the sake of uniformity.

¹⁴ See Isaac the Syrian *KG* 4, 42.

¹⁵ Isaac the Syrian I, 13, 1.

¹⁶ See Isaac the Syrian *KG* 4, 42.

¹⁷ Isaac the Syrian I, 2, 214-228.

¹⁸ Isaac the Syrian I, 3, 317.

monks not to try to pray in a way that either does not yet fit or no longer fits their spiritual age and assumed life. Therefore, the hesychast should not do in the wilderness those things of the cenobites, such as singing a lot, serving the sick, giving alms, guiding the laity, etc.¹⁹

5. Dubara expressing the spiritual journey

a. The bodily way of life (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܥܡܘܬܐ – dubara pagranaya)

The life of bodily stage is sometimes presented by St. Isaac in disparaging terms, calling it “the world in its totality and the contemplation of the flesh”²⁰, implying that in this way of life man has no spiritual knowledge. The inner traits of those in the bodily stage are not so much a life stained by manifest sins as sorrow at the thought of death and fear of it, that is attachment to the transitory life.²¹ The departure from this way of life through asceticism is accompanied by deep sorrow and sharp pains at the remembrance of sins²², the monk on this stage having to read the Psalms and Scripture at length, to torment his body with prolonged hunger, to exert himself in bowing his knees and in other kinds of labors which humble the body.²³

b. The way of life according to the soul (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܢܦܫܐ – dubara napšanaya)

Saint Isaac avoids systematic approaches and almost every reference to bodily way of life is made in the perspective of the passage to the higher stage, called, as the case may be, “way of life” or “practice according to the soul or mind”²⁴, “the middle peak”²⁵, “the middle measure or degree”²⁶, “the step of meditation”²⁷. The painful repentance of the bodily life begins to change into joy, without the will of the monk, who “is vigilant and in fear lest it [this second stage] be an illusion”.²⁸ The sign of the gradual transition from the life of the body to the life of the soul is the appearance of comforting impulses which give rise to thoughts of joy and make the mind gather itself with ease. When the

¹⁹ See Isaac the Syrian I, 6, 157-179.

²⁰ Isaac the Syrian I, 2, 209.

²¹ See Isaac the Syrian I, 1, 208.

²² See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 42.

²³ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 45.

²⁴ Isaac the Syrian I, 4, 10; I, 32, 23; II, 20, 10; KG 4, 47.

²⁵ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 42.

²⁶ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 92.

²⁷ Isaac the Syrian II, 10, title.

²⁸ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 43.

monk observes these changes, especially when sweetness begins to overcome the bitterness of repentance, making the ascetical labors and prayer desirable and pleasurable, he should lessen the former labors, devoting himself more to prayer and unceasing meditation on the divine things.²⁹

**c. The spiritual way of life (ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܘܫܘܐ – *dubara ruhana*³⁰;
ܕܘܒܪܐ ܕܪܘܗ – *dubara d-ruh*³¹)**

The third peak of the hesychast conduct is called by Isaac “spiritual way of life” and the monk enters it through wonder.³² By persisting in the inner practice of the spiritual life, the monk receives, at a certain moment and unexpectedly, the grace of wonder before God, which introduces him into the third stage or spiritual life. The passage is beyond man’s will, the movements³³ of the mind being changed into wonder, and ordinary thoughts disappearing altogether, sometimes for several days. The mind contemplates God and learns a different kind of knowledge from that which it has previously had.

The sign that the monk is approaching the entrance into spiritual life is the gathering of the mind (ܕܘܫܘܐ ܕܪܘܗ – *kunaša d-re’yana*), experienced during the period of soul-life during the time of the offices performed in the monastery and during the particular prayer in the cell, to the extent of keeping the stillness and avoiding encounters with many people. The teaching on the gathering of the mind is taken by Saint Isaac, as he himself confesses, from John of Apamea, who speaks of the existence of a partial gathering of the mind, lived at the liturgical services and during prayer, from which grows as from a seed the full gathering of the mind, proper to the spiritual stage.³⁴ When this seed of partial recollection sprouts, the monk feels that, while reading or meditating on Scripture or praying, he is “struck

²⁹ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 46-47.

³⁰ Isaac the Syrian II, 7, 2.

³¹ Isaac the Syrian II, 20, 6, 19; 32, 4; KG 4, 12-15.

³² To deepen Isaac’s use and theology of ‘wonder’, see Adrian Pirtea’s last contribution on the topic: ‘ōDivine Incomprehensibility and Human Wonder: Tehrā/Temhā in Isaac of Nineveh and Early Syriac Ascetical Literature’, in *Der Mensch als Bild des unergründlichen Gottes. Von der Theologie zur Anthropologie und zurück* (eds.) Georgiana Huian, Beatrice Wyss and Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 259-284. Another enlightening study on the same subject is by Mary Hansbury, “‘Insight without Sight’: Wonder as an aspect of Revelation in the Discourses of Isaac the Syrian”, in *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008): 60-73.

³³ The Syriac ܕܘܫܘܐ (*zaw’a*), ‘movement’ or ‘stirring’ has also particular meanings in the ascetical writings of the East Syriac mystics, and we’ll analyze in a further study its importance for the spiritual life. For some preliminary considerations, see our introduction to Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte ascetice*, vol. 1, XC-XCV.

³⁴ See John the Solitary, *On the Soul*, English translation by Mary Hansbury (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013), 28.

with wonder before God³⁵ and therefore unexpectedly falls silent, remaining motionless for a long time.³⁶

At the same time, in the spiritual life all fear disappears from the soul, and the mind moves in a way proper to the future world, having, by grace, the life of the new man and the inner stirrings of the Kingdom of heaven.³⁷ On the peak of the third stage, the monk further reduces the labors of the second stage, the main ascetical labor now being meditation and prayer of the heart (ܠܒܐ ܕܠܒܐ – *sluta d-leba*).³⁸ Only the latter two are still up to the will and choice of the hermit who has come to the spiritual life. As soon as he begins to pray or meditate on the Scriptures, he is led by grace as a servant to things beyond the knowledge accessible to men, and the mind no longer acts by its own will.

According to the theology of Saint Isaac, the spiritual life includes three kinds of spiritual movements of the mind (*hawna*), positioned on the map of the inner man beyond the purity gained in the way of life according to the soul. These movements are: “second natural knowledge” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܪܬܝܢܐ – *ida'ta kyanaita d-tartain*), in which the mind is taught by grace; “first natural knowledge” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ ܕܩܕܡܝܬܐ ܘܩܝܢܐܝܬܐ – *ida'ta qadmaita w-kyanaita*), in which the mind is perfected, and “the knowledge of the worshipped Trinity” (ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ܕܬܪܝܬܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ – *ida'ta d-tlitayuta sagidta*), in which the mind is crowned. Every movement of the mind is, for Isaac, a certain kind of passive knowledge, produced either by angels or by the Holy Spirit, as the term used by Isaac indicates.³⁹

Therefore, the spiritual life does not mean a continuous rapture in contemplation, but a full availability of the mind to listen to grace, to let itself be taken up without deceit to the heights. Strictness in bodily asceticism is even less than in the life of the soul, “a little Scripture and a few psalms being henceforth sufficient”, for as soon as the monk begins to say the psalms and to pray, he is led as a slave to the knowledge of the spiritual things.⁴⁰

Conclusion

We have had the opportunity to see in the above lines that the terminology used by the Philokalical authors in general and by St. Isaac the Syrian in particular has a technical character. These terms are for the reader interested in spiritual progress like a map for a traveler. Therefore, understanding

³⁵ Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 47.

³⁶ See Isaac the Syrian KG 4, 93.

³⁷ See Isaac the Syrian II, 20, 10-11.

³⁸ Isaac the Syrian I, 29, 171; II, 22, 3; III, 9, 14.

³⁹ The noun ܐܕܐܝܬܐ – *mettzy'anuta*, ‘movement’, derived from the Ettaphal infinitive of the verb ܐܕܐܝܬܐ ‘to move’ (Isaac the Syrian KG 3, 100).

⁴⁰ See Isaac the Syrian II, 22, 6.

them in the context of each author's theology and placing them correctly on the map of the spiritual life is essential for passing from theory to practice. In the case of Isaac the Syrian, it is necessary to know his Syriac terminology, which, as we have seen in the case of the noun *dubara*, has specific meanings in Syriac. Once translated, the term ceases to convey the whole of the author's intended teaching, in some cases even generating misunderstandings.

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Miracle and Humility in “Apophtegmata Patrum”: Analysis of an Intricate Balance

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the perspective on miracles and their relationship to humility offered by the alphabetical collection of *Apophtegmata Patrum*. For the analysis of this relationship, texts that speak directly or indirectly about humility have been selected and an attempt has been made to organize them into a coherent discourse. Then a significant set of accounts of miracles is analysed, which are seen from the perspective of their relationship with humility.

Keywords: miracles, humility, *Apophtegmata Patrum*, Orthodox spirituality, Desert Fathers

Introduction

CHRISTIANITY IS INTIMATELY LINKED TO miracles. From the “founding” miracles that justify its existence in the world, especially the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the “everyday” miracles that are found at every turn in the biographies of the saints honoured by the Church, the Saints have, for the most part, remained in the Church’s consciousness as miracle workers. In the popular consciousness spiritual figures are associated with the power to work miracles. The Synaxaria, those lives of saints that are read in worship, abound in the description of miraculous events. In the Orthodox Church, miracles are still an important criterion for the canonisation of new saints. So, the life of a saint is a mixture of the natural and the supernatural. At the same time, however, from a strictly human, psychological perspective, miracles are manifestations of power that superordinate the one who performs them. In this way, at the very heart

of this fact, so important for the Christian life, lies the danger of pride or vain glory.¹

For the ascetic fathers pride is one of the sure ways to fall, which annihilates all their efforts:

Abba Isidore said, "If you [pl.] are practicing askēsis according to the rules, do not be conceited when you fast. For if you become arrogant on this account, it is better to eat meat; for it is better for a person to eat meat than to become puffed up and boastful." (Isidore the Priest 4)²

Just as miracles are linked to external history, the search for humility is the central event of the inner life of the hermits. Humility, one of the fundamental features of Christian spirituality, was defined as "to see oneself as inferior to all creation" (Sisoēs 13).³

Research question and relevance of the topic

The fundamental question that arises in this context concerns how the gift of miracle-working reconciles and coexists with humility and, implicitly, what is the attitude of the desert fathers towards miracles and manifestations of power. Such a question is relevant today because it reveals the authentic spirit of Christianity in relation to a sensitive issue of modernity: power, i.e. renouncing it, at a time when the Orthodox Church is trying to legitimise itself in the public sphere through manifestations of power that sometimes contradict its nature. Such an analysis is also relevant because it establishes criteria for authentic miracles in order to distinguish them from false ones born of pride and the will to power.

Sources and method

The most appropriate source for such research is the "Apophtegmata Patrum"⁴ (AP), that collection of sayings and deeds of the Fathers in the wilderness of 4th century Egypt, which has several major advantages. Disseminated under the name of the Egyptian Paterikon or Gerontikon, the AP is a fundamental synthesis of authentic Christian spirituality, which has experienced a very wide diffusion and has enjoyed enormous popularity, being read intensively especially in monastic circles. The popularity of this

¹ The theme of prestige as an impediment to the normal course of the spiritual life has been briefly analysed: Oliver Freiburger, "Prestige als Plage. Vergleichende Untersuchungen zu einem asketischen Dilemma", *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 16, 1 (2008).

² *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. John Wortley, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014, p. 162.

³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

⁴ Quotations in this study will be made using the above cited translation of John Wortley, published in 2014.

collection makes it at the same time very influential and came to shape monastic spirituality. The AP in the form it has come down to us was born from the recorded sayings that had previously circulated orally in monastic communities for 100-150 years.⁵ The pressure of orality has resulted in a text stripped of insignificant details and subjectivity and is ultimately a comprehensive expression of the Church's Tradition. The Paterikon is born of tradition and then determines tradition through its wide dissemination.

For all the widespread diffusion of the Paterikon in monastic circles, scholarly studies dedicated to it are not abundant. Alongside highly accurate philological approaches⁶, there is no lack of unusual questions for a theologian, such as the monastic diet in late antique Egypt⁷, but most of the texts deal with specific aspects of the daily life of ascetics and the spiritual content of the texts they left behind. The topic of miracles among the desert fathers is addressed only by David Jasper⁸, and H. A. Drake devotes a chapter to it in his volume *A Century of Miracles*⁹, but the focus has never been on the alphabetical collection of the AP. Moreover, humility in the Apophthegmata Patrum has not been treated in any study and obviously the two have never been analysed in relation to one-another.

In what follows we will analyse the most significant texts on humility in order to set out a possible discourse on this capital virtue, then we will organize and analyse the most important accounts of miracles in the alphabetical collection of the AP, which we will read precisely from the perspective of the relationship with humility.

How are things in the Paterikon?

Systematic reading of the Paterikon can reveal the perfect balance between humility and miracle. Humility appears as a main theme or subtext in many apophthegms. The most important definition can be found in the

⁵ For a brief history of the text and reception see: Paul Siladi, 'Loneliness, Solitude, Community: Insights from the Apophthegmata Patrum', *Religions* 14, 3 (22 February 2023), pp. 2-4.

⁶ The best known work is Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des "Apophthegmata Patrum"*, 1962; He is also the author of the French edition of the systematic collection of the apophthegmata of the Fathers: Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. ; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. du Cerf, Paris, 2003; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophthegmes des Pères : collection systématique*, Éd. du Cerf, Paris, 2005.

⁷ Mary Harlow, Wendy Smith, „Between fasting and feasting: the literary and archaeobotanical evidence for monastic diet in Late Antique Egypt", *Antiquity* 75 (2001); Andrew Jotischky, *Hermit's Cookbook: Monks, Food and Fasting in the Middle Ages*, Continuum International Publishing, London, 2011.

⁸ David Jasper, *The Desert Fathers: Wanderings and Miracles*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, UK, 2008.

⁹ H. A. Drake, *A Century of Miracles*, 1st edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017, pp. 135-156.

work of Abba Sisoës (13).¹⁰ Humility means to see oneself as being lower than all flesh. Such a view means making a downward inward movement, which results in an upward movement, a passage from death to life.

Miracles are, by their very nature, manifestations of power. Miracle-workers have always been admired and sought after precisely because of their superiority over others. Power, especially consciously wielded power, is dangerous because of the corruption it may bring. This is precisely why miracles are not sought by the fathers of the desert, but rather we can see a certain reserve towards them. And here we are not talking about miracles that take place in a very private context, revelations that God makes to hermits during prayer, but we are talking about miracles that happen in a public context, generally healings and exorcisms. The reservation towards miracles was constant, but miracles continued to happen. We can identify two types of strategies that accompany miracles. On the one hand are the strategies employed by the brothers or by those who wanted miracles in order to make the elders to perform them (sometimes against their will); on the other hand, we have the strategies of the elders who when they perform the miracles are wary of the temptation to take credit for them. This brings us to the main research question: power and the pride it causes collide with miracles, which, like humility, are part of the treasury of Christianity, being natural consequences of the restoration of human nature through grace and asceticism. What, then, is the place of miracles in the lives of hermits who seek humility above all else, and how is the balance between miracle and humility achieved?

Humility in Apophthegmata Patrum

The main lines of the spirituality of the Egyptian Desert Fathers are found in the assiduous practice of humility and repentance. Humility is implicitly present in most of the acts the hermits perform, and sometimes the theme of humility appears explicitly in their dialogues. And yet, no one ventures to give a definition of humility that would confine it to a narrow and definitive framework. More often than not, the elders approximate or indicate the directions in which humility can be discovered. However, they constantly insist on its character as a capital virtue, as necessary to man on the spiritual level as air is to the physical life (Poemen 49;¹¹ John the Pythian 21¹²).

The first direct reference to humility is found in the words of the Abba Anthony, in the context of a revelation that God makes to him. The ascetic understands in a vision the multitude of temptations and demonic snares that beset man at every turn. Close to despair he wonders what the escape is, how all this can be avoided. The answer he receives, simply and naturally

¹⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

¹¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 244.

¹² *Give Me a Word*, p. 140.

from God, is "humble-mindedness" (Anthony 7).¹³ The Paterikon almost opens with this reference to the virtue that will later be the main concern of all the residents of the desert.

Although we are warned that this quality plays an overwhelming role in the spiritual life, the fathers do not venture to offer either detailed descriptions of humility or the ways in which it can be acquired. Yet we can find elements of both. Some fathers indicate one aspect or another of humility, depending on their experience and the practical needs of those who come to receive their words, and others even offer little programs of life aimed at humility. We will look at some of them below.

If father Anthony is shown that humility is the only solution in the fight against temptations and trials that come to us at every step from the demons, Macarius the Egyptian goes one step further. The Paterikon preserves two apophthegmata on the account of Abba Macarius the Great in which several encounters with demons on the topic of humility are recounted (Macarius the Egyptian 11¹⁴ and 35¹⁵). The ideological content of the two texts is almost identical. Each time the demons find that the monks have a lot in common with them (they fast, keep vigil, never sleep) and yet the monks overcome them, they are stronger. What differentiates them is humility, which becomes the criterion by which the entire ascetic efforts is judged. The same idea is then taken up by Amma Theodora (6)¹⁶, starting from a similar encounter of an ascetic with demons, which ends with the conclusion that only humility differentiates people from demons and can overcome the latter. A more extensive apophthegm related by Abba Daniel ends with this conclusion born of the experience of the desert fathers: "It is usually the case that the arrogance of the devil falls as a result of the humility [required by] Christ's commandment" (Daniel 3).¹⁷

The fact that humility is the criterion by which asceticism is judged and implicitly the criterion of salvation is clearly stated: "It is neither spiritual discipline nor vigilance nor diverse toil that saves us if there be not genuine humble-mindedness" (Theodora 6).¹⁸

It is precisely because humility plays such a role that Abba John of Thebaida does not shy away from saying in plain language, in the only saying that has remained engraved in the memory of the hermits: "Before all else, the monk ought to attain humble-mindedness for this is the first commandment of the Saviour, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".¹⁹

¹³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 190.

¹⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 199.

¹⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 131.

¹⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

¹⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 131.

¹⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 160.

At the same time humility is the cohesive factor of the spiritual life, which permeates all other qualities and brings them together into a unified whole: “Just as a ship cannot be built without nails, so is it impossible to be saved without humble-mindedness” (*Syncretica* 27).²⁰ Precisely because humility is so important, Abba Poemen says: “A person is as much in need of humble-mindedness and of the fear of God as he is of the breath that comes out of his nose” (*Poemen* 49).²¹ Of these two virtues, Abba John the Pythian says that they surpass all the others (*John the Pythian* 22)²², and “humble-mindedness is the monk’s crown.” (*Or* 9).²³

From all these apophthegms one thing emerges: the paramount importance of humility in the life of the monk and implicitly in the life of the Christian. We are not told much about what humility is and how it is acquired. But we do have a number of stories describing acts of humility by elders, descriptions that can bring us even closer to understanding this quality.

Perhaps the most poignant of these stories is the one that has come down to us under the name Romanus, none other than the well-known ascetic Arsenius, a native of Constantinople, New Rome. The story is as follows:

There was an elder who had a fine disciple but that elder was so contemptuous that he threw the disciple out of the gate together with his sheepskin. The brother, however, just remained there, sitting outside. When the elder opened [the gate] and found him sitting [there] he prostrated himself before him, saying: “Father, the humiliation of your long-suffering patience has overcome my contempt. Come inside; from now on you are the elder and father, I the junior and the disciple.” (*The Roman* 2)²⁴

Humility is revealed to us here as characterized by availability. Openness to receive the truth about yourself and those around you and act accordingly. Even if the elder lacks humility in his daily actions, he proves ready to turn his life upside down when he realizes that he has done wrong and is ready to submit to the one he has until recently oppressed. But the elder’s humility is only the answer to the light brought by the constant humility of his disciple, who endures the former’s whims and injustices without flinching. Here we see two movements, a downward and an upward movement that flow from humility. It is humility that makes the brother accept all the reproaches (the downward movement generated by humility), just as it is humility that turns his life upside down, suddenly placing him in the position of “elder” before his time (the upward movement).

²⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 322.

²¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 243.

²² *Give Me a Word*, p. 139.

²³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 336.

²⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 292.

The two movements that arise from humility are clearly highlighted by the Abba John the Dwarf, in apophthegm 20:

Abba John said, "Who sold Joseph?" and some brother replied, "It was his brothers" [Gen 37.36]. The elder said to him, "No; it was his humility that sold him. He could have said, 'I am their brother' and contradicted them, but he kept quiet-and sold himself by humility. And humility made him as a commander in Egypt."²⁵

The first movement is the downward, descending movement, in which man takes on the vicissitudes of the context without resistance and without hesitation. The consequence of this assumed suffering is rising. But the relationship between the two is never strictly causal. Between the downward and the upward movement comes the great interplay of God's freedom and human freedoms. However, the first kenotic movement is like a crucifixion that passes through death to resurrection: the logic of humility, that of the inverted pyramid, the top of which becomes the base, Christ Himself, His humility being the model and foundation of all others who advance in humility, thus descending towards Him. The logic of humility is therefore paradoxical. In its context self-exaltation is synonymous with falling, while shrinking and self-contempt is rising, for the Lord says: "whoever exalts himself will humble himself, and whoever humbles himself will exalt himself" (Lk 14:11). If at first the movement of descent "to see oneself as inferior to all creation", Sisoës 13.²⁶ is singular, rising to various positions of authority does not cancel it out. The same paradoxical logic continues to operate, the humble person is empowered to lead others, without this altering his relationship with the world and causing him to cease his ascetic exercise of self-denial. The paradox of humility is revealed in the exclamation of a father regarding the same Abba John the Dwarf, whom I quoted earlier: "Who is John who has the whole of Scete hanging on his little finger on account of his humility?" (John Colobos 36).²⁷ The source of his awesome authority is to be found nowhere else but in his humility, whose main thought, truly hard to bear, is to see himself lower than any creature (Wisdom 3).

I said earlier that humility is the criterion according to which all ascetic effort is judged, by which all human spiritual endeavours stand or fall. Somewhat more precise in this direction is a story by the Abba Daniel about his spiritual father, Abba Arsenius. The latter tells of a vision that someone had (the disciples suspect that it was precisely the old man, who out of humility refuses to show himself), during which, through some suggestive images, three possible ways of missing the Kingdom of God are shown. We are interested in the third of these images:

²⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 140.

²⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 298.

²⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 143.

He saw a temple and two persons on horseback carrying a piece of wood crossways, one beside the other. They wanted to enter through the gate but could not because the piece of wood was crossways. One would not humble himself to carry the wood lengthwise behind the other; for that reason they remained outside the gate. "These are they," he said, "who bear the yoke of righteousness with pride and did not humble themselves to put their house in order and to travel the humble way of Christ; so they remain outside the Kingdom of God." (Arsenius 33)²⁸

Miracles in the Apophthegmata Patrum

Even if we consider only the alphabetical collection of Apophthegmata Patrum, it still proves extremely difficult to inventory, without the rest of the wonders that fall into this category. If we were to categorise them, they could be divided into two main groups: 1. "personal" miracles (discoveries, visions, ecstasies, etc.) and 2. public miracles (cures of bodily diseases or even resurrections, exorcisms, mastery of the environment and nature, etc.). In order to limit the body of texts analysed, this study will focus only on miracles of the second category, miracles of a public nature, which show the ascetic as an intimate of God and give him an unusual character, place the monk above the others.

Circumspection about the origin of miracles

Quite paradoxically, the first miracle in this category, which we already find in the words of Abba Anthony, introduces a note of circumspection about the origin of miracles.

Some brothers visited Abba Anthony to report to him some visions they were seeing and to learn from him whether they were genuine or from demons. They had an ass, but it died along the way. When they came to the elder, he anticipated them, saying to them, "How did it come about that the little ass died on the way?" "How do you know that, abba?" they said to him, and he said to them, "The demons showed me," and they said to him, "This is the reason we came to inquire of you because we are seeing visions and they are often genuine, but maybe we are being led astray." The elder convinced them, using the example of the ass, that [visions] are from demons. (Anthony the Great 12)²⁹

In other words, the miracle simply cannot be a criterion for judging the authenticity of the spiritual life. More important than the miracle is its

²⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 28.

source. Excluding the possibility of outright deception, both the work of God and the work of devils can be behind a miracle. That is why circumspection is necessary. But a certain caution, or even a censure of miracles is seen in many cases. Of Anthony we are told that he was full of the Holy Spirit, that he could see what was happening in the world and what would happen in the future, but "he was unwilling to speak on account of people" (Anthony 30).³⁰ Abba Bessarion (about whom we will speak more below), if asked to pray for the casting out of demons he would "not even come into the church" (Bessarion 5).³¹ Similarly, with Abba Daniel we are told that although the Anachorites could cast out demons, they did not do so "out of humility" (Daniel 3).³²

Power over wild animals

A special case of power over the wild beasts, hardly fitting into any particular category, is found in Abba Ammonas (2):

They used to say of Abba Ammonas that he killed a basilisk. He went off into the desert to draw water from a lake. When he saw the basilisk he threw himself face down, saying: "Lord, am I to die or is it?" and the basilisk promptly perished through the power of Christ.³³

What can be seen here is that the ascetic surrenders himself completely into God's hands, and then, when the serpent dies and the elder is saved, full credit for the miracle goes to Christ. There is not the slightest return to self. Ascetics erase themselves altogether to make room for God's work. In this way, humility again proves to be a necessary precondition for God to be able to work, even miraculously.

A miracle we find at Abba Theodore of Pherme belongs in the same category: a snake flees from him and hides in shame in the desert the moment it sees him (Theodore of Pherme 23).³⁴ These miracles, which can be placed in the general context of the restoration of man's mastery over wild nature, can be directly related to Christ's promise in Luke's Gospel: "I give you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (Lk. 10:19).

In the category of scenes in which the connection with the surrounding nature is restored is a scene that we find in Abba James:

³⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 33.

³¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 77.

³² *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

³³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 58.

³⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 124.

He also said that one of the elders said: "When I was staying in the desert there was a youngster living on his own near me. Paying him a fatherly visit I saw him at prayer, beseeching God that he might be at peace with the wild animals. Following the prayer a hyena that was suckling her young came by. The youngster got under her and began suckling with them." (James S1)³⁵

Abba Bessarion, miracles and humility

A special case is Abba Bessarion, who is the greatest miracle worker in the entire alphabetical collection of the Egyptian Paterikon. Of the 12 apophthegmata dedicated to him, the first group of 5 focus on his miracles, most of which are constructed after the model of biblical miracles. In this way the elder appears to be in the lineage of the prophets, saints and Christ Himself, who promised His disciples that those who believe in Him will perform greater miracles than those He performed (cf. In. 14, 12). The elder prays and his disciple drinks water from the sea, but then, when he puts water in the vessel to have for later, the monk forbids him because "God is here, and God is everywhere" (Bessarion 1).³⁶ The two moments of the apophthegmata clearly refer to Moses, who was leading the people through the wilderness. When they were thirsty, Moses struck the rock with his staff from which water flowed (Exodus 17). But when they were fed with manna, they were commanded not to store up in vessels for later and to leave themselves entirely in God's care (Jn 16). In the second apophthegm³⁷ we see him crossing the Chrysoroas river without sinking, which recalls both the crossing of the Red Sea (Jn 14) and Jesus' walk on the sea (Mt 14:25). The third apophthegmata³⁸ shows Bessarion stopping the sun in the sky like Joshua of Navi (Joshua 10:12-13). In the fourth apophthegmata³⁹ following his prayer, his well is filled with water and he gives it to his disciple to drink, recalling the scene in Judges when Gideon prays to the Lord to send him a sign, and the wool he spreads in the field is filled with water, while everything around it is dry (Judges 6:36-38).

"Unsought miracles". Some scenarios

The most interesting of all the miracles, however, is the one in apophthegm 5.⁴⁰ Here his deep humility meets his charismatic dimension, and the way they meet may point to a path of balance in humility and miracle.

³⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 158.

³⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 75.

³⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

³⁸ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

³⁹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ *Give Me a Word*, p. 77.

In Sketis, there came a man subject to demonic possession to ask the fathers to pray for him, but the fierce devil did not come out. This situation echoes the demon that the disciples of the Lord could not cast out because of their lack of faith (Mt. 17:20). Like the Apostles, the clerics humble themselves and ask for further help. In our case, they ask for help from the Abba Bessarion, but for his humility he refuses to try and perform shocking miracles (even though miracles in his life are a matter of course). The fathers of the Sketis community know this and devise a ruse, designed to solve the sick man's problem, but at the same time to undermine the humility of the Abba Bessarion, who did not want to get the reputation of one who casts out demons. The way the whole scene is conceived is clear from the apophthegm. There are just a few elements worth highlighting.

First of all, it is important to see that the community does not leave Bessarion alone in prayer. When they enter the church, they all pray. This creates an atmosphere of communion in prayer that embraces everyone. Humility and prayer form the environment in which healing germinates.

Secondly, it should be noted that, although the possessed man is seated in the place of elder Bessarion, the latter does not bully him at all. He does not intervene to put him in his place. He honours the person more than he respects a local rule or custom.

Then elder Bessarion shows obedience in its purest and most authentic spiritual sense. Obedience is benevolent openness, solicitude towards all who ask for something that is not contrary to the commandments of Christ, and not merely disciplined obedience to a commanding authority. The words of the Abba Bessarion, effective and healing, are the fruit of obedience and humility, and not a bitter reaction to the violation of a form of discipline (a newcomer occupying the place in the Church of a venerable member of the community).

We see here that the miracle is placed in a ritual context, where, if people are sincere, no one can assume "authorship" of the miracle. At the moment they all prayed, no one knows for whose prayers the healing happened (or perhaps it is precisely the chain of common prayer that frees the one trapped by the devil in his snare). Furthermore, Abba Bessarion obeys the community. There we have not only prayer, but also the series of consecutive acts of obedience, in which each one humbles and submits to the other, and this attitude leaves room for God's work.

This miracle is close in structure to another that we find in Abba Sisoës:

A worldling, together with his son, once visited Abba Sisoës at the mountain of Abba Anthony and it came about that his son died on the way. The parent] was not distressed: in faith he took [the son] to the elder and fell down with his son as though making a prostration in order to be blessed by the elder. Then the father got up, leaving the son at the elder's feet, and

went out of the cell. Thinking that [the child] was making a prostration to him, the elder said to him: "Get up and go out," not realizing that he was dead. [The child] immediately got up and went out. His father was astounded when he saw him; in he went and did homage to the elder, reporting the matter to him. But the elder was saddened on hearing it, for he did not want that to happen. His disciple ordered [the parent] not to report it to anybody until the elder's death. (Sisoes 18)⁴¹

The two scenes have in common the fact that the miracle happens without being sought, on the contrary, even overcoming a certain resistance or even resistance of the ascetics to what could be considered a miracle. And the two elders, Bessarion and Sisoes, are similar in their deep, stirring humility.

Following the same pattern, we find another miracle in St. Macarius the Egyptian:

There was a person in Egypt who had a paralyzed son. He brought him to Abba Macarius' cell and, leaving him weeping at the door, went some distance away. The elder peeped out and saw the child weeping. "Who brought you here?" he said to the child. The child said: "My father abandoned me here and went away." "Get up and go after him," the elder said to him. He was instantly made whole; he got up and went after his father and in this way they departed to their house. (Macarie 15)⁴²

Another scene, similar in many ways, is the one mentioned earlier in passing, which we find in Abba Daniel:

Abba Daniel said that there was a daughter of a leading citizen in Babylon possessed of a demon. Her father had a monk whom he cherished, and that one said to him: "No one can cure your daughter except some anchorites I know. If you entreat them, they will not agree to do this out of humility. But let us do this: when they come to market, pretend you want to buy [their] wares; then when they come to get the price of them, we will tell them to offer a prayer, and I believe she will be healed." They went out into the marketplace and found a disciple of the elders sitting there to sell their wares. When the monk came into the house, the woman possessed of a demon came and gave him a slap, but he turned the other cheek, according to the Lord's commandment [Mt 5.39]. Tortured [by this], the demon cried out: "What violence! The commandment of Jesus is casting me out!" and the maiden was immediately purged. When the elders came, they told them what had happened; they glorified God and said, "It is usually the case that the

⁴¹ *Give Me a Word*, p. 300.

⁴² *Give Me a Word*, p. 191.

arrogance of the devil falls as a result of the humility [required by] Christ's commandment." (Daniel 3)⁴³

This time it is no longer about a particular ascetic who refuses to be put in the spotlight, but we are shown that we are dealing with a general reservation about any possibility of being in the limelight. Their withdrawal from the world also implies a refusal of any affirmation before people. But, as is often the case, despair unleashes creativity, and in this way another scenario is created in which the premises for the miracle are found. And it is precisely here that the link between humility and miracle appears most directly and unequivocally. This time the monk is not even a renowned elder, honoured for his asceticism and discernment. He is a simple apprentice, selling monastery products. But he stands out because he takes the words of the gospel seriously, which command humility, and the moment he is slapped, he turns the other cheek. The simple act of obedience to Christ's commandments gives him (entirely unquestioned) power over demons. And in this way he performs the miracle: accidentally, without being sought by the one through whom it was done, as a fruit of obedience and humility, but hoped for by those who set up the whole scenario.

In the same category of miracles, the link between obedience, humility and overcoming the narrow and constraining laws of physics is also part of the first story of the Abba John Colobos, which also opens Tarkovsky's film *Sacrifice*.

They used to say of Abba John Colobos that, having withdrawn from the world to be with an elder from Thebes at Scete, he was living in the desert. His abba took some dry wood, planted it and said to him: "Irrigate it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit." Water was a long way from them, so one had to go in the evening and return at dawn. After three years [the dry wood] became alive and bore fruit. The elder took its fruit and brought it to the church, saying to the brothers: "Take and eat some fruit of obedience." (John Colobos 1)⁴⁴

This time the miracle is not about power either. Or at least it is not about the power of the one who commands, but about the extraordinary power of the one who gives up power and goes deeper in obedience.

Miracles with authors who hide

Among miracle-working ascetics, a very special place is occupied by Abba Longinus, who is very creative in the way he defends his anonymity. There are two relevant apophthegms in this regard.

⁴³ *Give Me a Word*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ *Give Me a Word*, p. 134.

In the first one, the elder directly opposes any praise or acts honouring him, and even chooses to say bad things about himself under the protection of anonymity:

There was a woman with the condition known as cancer in her breast who sought to meet with Abba Longinus when she heard of him. He was staying at the ninth [Enaton] milepost to the west of Alexandria. When the woman came looking for him that blessed one happened to be gathering wood by the sea. When she found him, unaware that it was he, she said to him: "Abba, where is the servant of God Longinus staying?" "What do you want with that imposter?" he said. "Do not go to him for he is an imposter. What is the matter with you?" The woman showed him her condition: the elder made the sign [of the cross] over the place and dismissed her, saying: "Off you go. God is healing you; Longinus cannot be of any benefit to you." The woman went her way believing what was said and was immediately healed. After she had told the matter to some people and said what the characteristics of the elder were she learned that it was Abba Longinus. (Longinus 3)⁴⁵

In the second case, he refuses to intervene for a woman suffering from demonic possession, whom he sends to the Abba Zeno:

Another time too some people brought a person possessed of a demon to him but he said to them: "I can do nothing for you; go rather to Abba Zeno." Subsequently Abba Zeno began to put pressure on the demon, chasing it out. The demon began shouting out: "Now you think I am coming out because of you, Abba Zeno, but see: Abba Longinus is in prayer on the demon, chasing it out. The demon began shouting out: "Now you think I am coming out because of you, Abba Zeno, but see: Abba Longinus is in prayer over there, pleading against me. It is in fear of his prayers that I am coming out; otherwise I would have given you no answer." (Longinus 4)⁴⁶

In both cases the elder refuses to assert himself, to put himself first, although each time he has a compassionate heart and cannot remain indifferent to the suffering he sees around him. He therefore chooses to help and hide at the same time.

Exceptions

The charm of this collection of stories full of patristic and ascetic wisdom lies in its unsystematizable character, it refuses to be locked into monolithic

⁴⁵ *Give Me a Word*, p. 182.

⁴⁶ *Give Me a Word*, p. 182.

structures of thought. Consequently, there are also accounts of miracles that cannot be fitted tightly into the pattern mentioned earlier. Such, for example, is an account from Abba Ammonathas:

A magistrate once came to Pelusium wanting to levy a poll-tax on the monks, as he did on the worldlings. All the brothers gathered around Abba Ammonathas concerning this matter and elected some of the fathers to go to the emperor. But Abba Ammonathas said to them: "It is not necessary to go to that trouble. Do you rather keep hesychia in your cells and fast for two weeks. By the grace of Christ, I will deal with the matter alone." The brothers went off to their own cells and the elder maintained hesychia in his own cell. When the fourteen days were accomplished, the brothers were aggrieved at the elder (for they had never seen him move at all) and they said: "The elder has set our affair aside." On the fifteenth day the brothers gathered together as agreed and the elder came to them bearing the emperor's rescript duly sealed. The brothers were astounded when they saw it, saying, "When did you bring this, abba?" The elder said, "Believe me brothers, this very night I went to the emperor and he wrote this rescript; then I came to Alexandria and got it signed by the magistrates-and so I came to you." They were afraid on hearing this and prostrated themselves before him. Their affair was settled and the magistrate did not trouble them. (Ammonathas)⁴⁷

In this case the miracle is an open manifestation of God's power, through his chosen people, that frightens and subdues. But such cases are far from the norm or pattern of miracles recounted in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

Conclusions

The apophthegms in the alphabetical collection of the *Paterikon* do not focus on miracles and do not use miracles as a justification of the authority and power of spiritually advanced elders. Instances of this kind, while they may occur, are nonetheless uncommon and most often do not concern truly great personalities of the desert. For example, the Abba Poemen, around whom the entire collection is built and to whom the most extensive corpus is dedicated, has an authority that derives not from miracles but from his practical wisdom. The same is the case with the Abba Anthony, in whom we first find a reservation about miracles whose origins are not necessarily divine.

Ascetic topics, like the quest for attaining virtues, among which humility plays a primary role, occupy a much greater place in the universe of monastic concerns, as reflected in the apophthegmata, than the (shallow) extraordinary

⁴⁷ *Give Me a Word*, p. 72.

character of miracles. Precisely because humility is so important, the fathers construct scenarios and contexts that erase as much as possible the authorship of miracles. In this way their humility is untainted, and all honour is directed towards God.

The approach to miracles found in the *Paterikon* is an excellent guide to how to approach miracles in any age: their authenticity is indirectly proportional to how avidly they are sought after. Miracles appear unexpectedly, and when they happen they further accentuate the humility of those through whom they were performed. Genuine miracles have nothing demonstrative about them, they are not done for profit (not even a good image), they are the result of humility and bring glory only to God, who works through saints.

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Critique of Supernatural Revelation

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Abstract

This article argues that the claim of traditional Christian theology and religion to be in possession of supernatural revelation cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. It then notes the consequences for theology if the notion of supernatural revelation is abandoned. It proposes agnosticism about unknowable matters as a way of exercising faith or trust in the limits God’s providence has established for human knowledge.

Keywords: agnosticism, supernatural revelation, onto-epistemology, broad and ugly ditch, theological epistemology, Thomas Aquinas

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT FOUNDATIONAL claim of traditional Christian religion and theology is that it is in possession of supernatural revelation. The essay intends to present an argument by which to call into question the very possibility of substantiating such a claim. It also responds to common arguments in defense of the notion that the occurrence of supernatural revelation would be expected. It concludes by considering the consequences of abandoning the idea of supernatural revelation for theological belief. It proposes principled agnosticism as a distinct way of exercising faith in the providence of God which has established certain limits on the natural possibilities of human knowing.

“Supernatural Revelation” Defined

It is important to begin by defining terms. “Revelation” means uncovering or unveiling (*apokalypsis, revelatio*). In mundane circumstances, a thing that is “revealed” has become uncovered or unveiled and thus newly visible or accessible for someone, as when a curtain is withdrawn or a chest is opened. In these cases, a person is made capable of seeing something by means of

his or her natural powers because the obstacles preventing one from seeing it have been set aside.

The situation is somewhat different when it is a matter of “supernatural” revelation of the sort that Christian theology claims to possess. On the one hand, it is a matter of supernatural knowledge in the sense that it is knowledge gained in a manner that exceeds the powers of knowing and cognitive endowments that belong to human beings by nature. On the other hand, it is supernatural in the sense that it is knowledge of things that are not themselves knowable to human beings such as these are by nature.¹ In the case of supernatural revelation, nature is exceeded both in the mode of knowing (epistemologically) and in the being of the object known (ontologically). One could therefore say that the “supernatural” that is involved in the case of Christian theology is an *onto-epistemological* notion. This point can be explained as follows.

Human beings are by nature capable of knowing things in various ways. One natural “organ” of knowledge is the body’s sensory apparatus: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. The knowledge gained by means of the senses—for example, that the sky is blue or that it is raining outside—is thus natural, and things that can be known by means of the senses can themselves be called natural. A further natural “organ” of knowledge would include reason, whether this is understood merely as acting upon the information previously gained by means of the senses or else as capable of its own form of intuition or perception.² The knowledge gained by means of reason—for example, that a person who has just eaten is no longer hungry, or that *modus ponens* is a valid argument form—is thus also natural, and things that can be known on the basis of reason can themselves be called natural. Memory could perhaps constitute a further natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of memory—for example, that one has eaten breakfast this morning—would thus also be natural, and things that can be known on the basis of memory could themselves be called natural. Some persons might also suggest that moral intuition could

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.1 writes that the “philosophical disciplines” (*philosophicas disciplinas*) are concerned with those things which fall within the grasp of reason (*ea quae rationi subduntur*) and are discovered by natural human reason (*quae sunt secundum rationem inventae*). On the other hand, sacred doctrine is said to concern “those things that are beyond reason” (*ea quae supra rationem sunt*). Its object is a teaching founded on divine revelation (*doctrinam quandam secundum revelationem divinam*). See also the discussion in the prologue of *Scriptum Super Sententiis* 1.

² The difference between empiricist and rationalist philosophies might helpfully be understood as a difference as to whether or not one conceives of reason as an organ of perception or intuition. An empiricist would think that reason acts upon the information gained by means of the senses but cannot itself secure new information apart from them. A rationalist would think that reason is itself a kind of organ of perception whose proper objects are the truths of reason rather than mere sensible objects. Or one might also say that knowledge involves a single organ of which the senses and reason are distinct dimensions or aspects.

constitute a further natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of moral intuition—for example, that murder is wrong, or that helping others is good—would thus also be natural, and things that can be known on the basis of moral intuition would themselves be called natural. (One might be skeptical that memory and moral intuition count as genuine “organs” of knowledge, but I include them here for the sake of being comprehensive.) And one could also mention here the human capacity for transcendental or phenomenological reflection on experience itself as yet another natural “organ” of knowledge. The knowledge gained by means of phenomenological reflection—for example, that at most three sides of a cubic object can ever be seen at one time, or that every object is perceived against the background of some horizon of meaning—is thus also natural, and things that can be known on the basis of phenomenological reflection can themselves be called natural.³

The “natural” is thus an onto-epistemological category. It refers to those dimensions of reality that are open and accessible to the human being such as it is by nature. The concept of “supernatural revelation” can therefore be understood by way of contrast with all these natural modes of knowing and their proper objects. On the one hand, from the point of view of the mode of knowing, supernatural revelation takes place neither by the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by phenomenological reflection. On the other hand, from the point of view of the being of the known object, supernatural revelation principally concerns things that are not themselves of a kind as to be knowable by the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by phenomenological reflection. All this is to say that supernatural revelation represents a *sui generis* category. It is a unique way of knowing, of which the corresponding object is a unique dimension of being. Traditional examples of supernatural knowledge include the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation.⁴

³ Transcendental or phenomenological reflection is aimed at the discovery of the “material *a priori*.” These are truths about necessary truths of experience which are founded not only or even principally in human subjectivity but also in the objective being of the objects of experience themselves. It is as much a fact about consciousness as it is a fact about cubes that at most three sides of a cube can be seen at one time. See Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 74. See also the discussion of the material *a priori* in phenomenological philosophy in Claude Romano, *At the Heart of Reason*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁴ In the case of the Trinity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.3: “Now, in those things which we hold about God there is truth in two ways. For certain things that are true about God wholly surpass the capability of human reason (*quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis excedunt*): for instance, that God is three and one. But there are certain things to which even natural reason can attain (*quae etiam ratio naturalis pertingere potest*), for instance, that God is, that God is one, and others like these, which even the philosophers, being guided by the light of natural reason, proved demonstratively about God.” In the case of the Incarnation, compare Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of*

What is this mode of knowing? It is neither sensory experience, nor rational argument or intuition, (nor memory, nor moral intuition,) nor transcendental or phenomenological reflection, but rather *special divine insight*. One is granted by special divine action a perception of an otherwise inaccessible and unknowable truth. The discussion will return to this point later.

Nature and Supernature Related

Nature is that sphere of reality which is knowable to human beings given the cognitive endowments which belong to them by default. Supernature is that sphere of reality which is not so knowable. That there is nature as defined above is clear from experience. Human beings have senses, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and the power of phenomenological reflection, and each of these powers upon being exercised meets with its proper object in experience. The further question can be asked whether and how nature and supernature are related to one another.

It is clear from what was written above that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of nature. The supernatural is that dimension of reality which is not accessible or knowable to human beings in keeping with their natural powers of knowing and cognitive endowments. This means that nature and supernature are not identical and cannot simply be identified with one another. But it may be possible to understand how they are interrelated in a different way.

On the one hand, one may say that nature and supernature are two coeval and distinct spheres of reality. To say that they are coeval is to say that neither is more fundamental than the other. To say that they are distinct is to say that either differs from and thus cannot be identified with the other. Nature and supernature would thus make up two things relating to one another like two cats or two cups on a table. This way of understanding things is undesirable for various reasons. For example, it would require that both nature and supernature are equally contained within some greater sphere of reality that is reducible to neither. But Christian theology considers nature and supernature to be exhaustive of the whole of reality. It also implies that the relationship between nature and supernature could only be purely a contingent and accidental one. But God, the creator of nature and of all things, is thought to be a resident of the supernatural sphere. This means that the relationship between nature and supernature cannot be conceived of along the lines of such a crass dualism as this.

Christ, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 1: "We cannot compare the fact of Christ with other facts, nor can we deduce the fact of Christ from our knowledge of other facts. The fact of Christ comes breaking into the continuity of our human knowledge as an utterly distinctive and unique fact, which we cannot understand in terms of other facts, which we cannot reduce to what we already know. It is a new and unique fact without analogy anywhere in human experience or knowledge."

On the other hand, one may say that supernature is more fundamental and thus prior to nature. Nature would be an effect of supernature, and supernature is the proper context within which nature must be understood.⁵ This is the position presented by Dumitru Stăniloae as constituting the Eastern Orthodox position on the matter.⁶ It is also maintained by other recent writers such as David Bentley Hart.⁷ This is the view to be considered in the course of this paper.

Nature is thus understood as an effect of supernature, while supernature is the proper context within which nature subsists. But recall from earlier that supernature is also defined as that which exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. Two important consequences follow from this. First, the existence of a real relation between nature and supernature must itself be an effect of supernature. An effect cannot bring itself into existence as the effect of some thing, but rather its cause must bring it into existence and only thus make it to be the effect of that cause. For example, a rock cannot make a man pick it up so that it becomes the rock he threw, but rather the man picks up the rock and himself makes it to be a rock that he has thrown. In order for nature to be related to supernature, supernature itself must bring this relation about as the cause and ground of nature. Second, nothing can be given a complete description in purely natural terms. For a complete description of a thing would at the very least have to include a reference to its origin, and the origin of all things is supernature according to the conception being considered here. These are therefore two important consequences of conceiving of supernature as more fundamental than and the cause of nature.

It is worth mentioning that the nature-supernature distinction still represents a kind of onto-epistemological dualism. Nature is not to be simply identified with supernature, nor are they continuous with one another along a spectrum. There is still a difference between natural and supernatural modes of knowing, and there corresponds to this difference in modalities of knowledge a further difference between the natural and the supernatural as dimensions of reality. It is certainly not the “crass” dualism of the view that says that nature and supernature are coeval and distinct, like two cats or two cups on a table. It is rather that supernature is the ground and foundation of nature. But it is still true that the super-

⁵ The now-classic discussion of this problem is found in Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Lethielleux, 2010).

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1 (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2010), p. 1: “The Orthodox Church does not propose a separation between natural and supernatural Revelation. Natural Revelation is known and understood fully in the light of supernatural Revelation; or natural Revelation is continually given and maintained by God by means of an action of His that is greater than nature” (my translation.)

⁷ See David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022).

natural is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of the natural. This is justification for speaking of an onto-epistemological “dualism.”

Against Supernature

From the point of view of human experience, nature is the default starting place in which each person finds him- or herself.⁸ Human life takes place within the world of experience laid bare by one’s natural powers of knowing. Supernatural revelation must also take place within the natural world if human beings are to become aware of it. Therefore, as a phenomenon, supernatural revelation involves the special “coupling” of some dimension of nature thus defined with the greater context of supernature in such a manner that something naturally unknowable becomes knowable.⁹ Traditional Christian theology and religion maintains that this has happened at various times in history, for example with the doctrines of the Trinity or Incarnation. The question to be addressed here is whether this idea can be justified.

For any x whatsoever appearing in the world of experience to which one might point, it will always be possible to provide a description of that thing in natural terms. This follows from the mere fact of its appearing in the world of experience. It will be describable in the same sorts of terms that apply to all the various objects of sense, or of reason, or of memory, or of moral intuition, or of transcendental or phenomenological reflection. All its various natural properties will be discoverable through these means. But it will always remain an open question whether x should also be described in any supernatural terms at all.¹⁰ That is because the supernatural is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of the

⁸ Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 16: “Human beings were not created without grace, but all the same we find ourselves first in nature (or better in finitude) — that is to say, independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God.”

⁹ Thus Jean-Luc Marion, “The Possible and Revelation,” p. 2, in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 1–17: “Religion attains its highest figure only when it becomes established by and as a revelation, where an authority that is transcendent to experience nevertheless manifests itself experientially. Such an experience, effectively beyond (or outside of) the conditions of possibility of experience, is affirmed not only by its affidavit from privileged or designated individuals, but by words or expositions rightly accessible to everyone (e.g., the Scriptures). Revelation takes its strength of provocation from what it speaks universally, yet without this word being able to ground itself in reason within the limits of the world” (emphasis added).

¹⁰ This argument presents a version of G. E. Lessing’s “broad and ugly ditch.” See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the proof of the spirit and of power,” pp. 83–88, in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also the critical discussion of Lessing’s entire argument in Toshimasa Yasukata, *Lessing’s Philosophy of Religion and the German Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 4.

natural. Any inference from some natural description of a thing to a supernatural description of it will be a *non sequitur*. For example, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected from the dead is equally compatible with a number of supernatural descriptions: that he is the divine Son; that he is a merely human messiah, irrespective of whatever self-conception he may have had; or that he is merely a human being whom God willed to be resurrected from the dead for whatever reason whatsoever.¹¹ On the other hand, any inference from the natural description of a thing to the supernatural description of it on the basis of some proposition about the supernatural would constitute a *petitio principii*. The very question at stake is whether there is reason for believing in a supernature beyond nature in the first place. But if it is not possible to give a valid and non-circular argument in defense of one's supernatural description of some *x*, then the description in supernatural terms of any natural *x* is an unjustifiable assertion.¹²

Traditional Christian theology and religion are founded upon the description of at least some natural things in supernatural terms. For example, the texts of the Old and New Testaments are not only human texts expressing naturally acquired insights. They are also thought to be divinely inspired texts by which God himself speaks in a way that does not apply to simply every text whatsoever.¹³ Likewise, many Christians assert that the teaching hierarchy of the church as a religious institution are not simply merely human leaders. They are also specially guided by God in their thinking and reasoning and in their making definitive declarations of faith and doctrine in a way that does not apply to all other historical religious institutions.¹⁴ So also, Christians do not believe that Christian faith is the same sort of thing as any other religious faith. It is not simply a matter of believing something true without having the thing presented in experience,

¹¹ Cf. Lessing, "On the proof of the spirit," p. 86: "If I have no historical objection to the fact that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I therefore regard it as true that this same risen Christ was the Son of God?"

¹² Compare the discussion of the "logic of the inaccessible" in Steven Nemes, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), ch. 5; and *Theology of the Manifest: Christianity without Metaphysics* (New York: Lexington Press/Fortress Academic, 2023), chs. 1–2. See also the argument of John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 4.19.11, in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: And A Treatise on the Conduct of the Understanding* (Philadelphia: Kay & Troutman, 1846), p. 455.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1: "Scripture, inspired by God (*divinitus inspirata*), is no part of the philosophical disciplines, which were discovered by human reason (*philosophicas disciplinas, quae sunt secundum rationem humanam inventae*)."

¹⁴ This is a common idea among proponents of "high" conceptions of ecclesial authority in theology. For defenses of this idea on historical and dogmatic grounds, see the discussions in Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1983); and Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2017). For an extended critique of this idea on biblical grounds, see Steven Nemes, *Theological Authority in the Church: Reconsidering Traditionalism and Hierarchy* (Eugene: Cascade, 2023).

but of being specially illumined by God to be able to do this.¹⁵ What is more, the thing itself that is believed is of such a sort that it would not naturally occur to a human being at all.¹⁶ Christian faith is supernatural taken both in terms of what is believed (*fides quae creditur*) and as a disposition to assent to such things as are being proposed for belief (*fides qua creditur*).¹⁷ Thus, while the biblical texts, church history, and religious faith are undoubtedly natural phenomena describable in natural terms, they are also asserted by Christian theology and religion to contain a further supernatural dimension. But the argument given above has shown that the supernatural description of any natural phenomenon cannot be justified on valid and non-circular grounds. It can only be asserted without substantiation. It therefore follows that traditional Christian theology and religion are founded on unsubstantiated assertions.

Begin with the example of the Old and New Testament texts. These are obviously at least natural phenomena. They are clearly at least texts written by human beings in which various things are asserted. These things may be either true or false, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or the other. But there is nothing about them simply as natural texts that entails any particular description of them in supernatural terms.¹⁸ This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. One could just as well

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God” (*Quia cum homo, assentiendo his quae sunt fidei, eleuetur supra naturam suam, oportet quod hoc insit ei ex supernaturali principio interius movente, quod est Deus*).

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to man’s knowledge, unless God reveal them” (*Ea enim quae sunt fidei excedunt rationem humanam, unde non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante*).

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*. For the distinction between *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, see Gerald O’Collins, *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 167.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.8.1 gives such reasoning: “What wonderful confirmation ensues when, with keener study, we ponder the economy of the divine wisdom, so well ordered and disposed; the completely heavenly character of its doctrine, savoring of nothing earthly; the beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another—as well as such other qualities as can gain majesty for the writings. But our hearts are more firmly grounded when we reflect that we are captivated with admiration for Scripture more by grandeur of subjects than by grace of language.” In John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. 82. These arguments are clearly contentious at best. On the one hand, modern scholarship has brought to light the diverse and at times even conflicting points of view being expressed in the various biblical texts. This calls into question the “beautiful agreement of all the parts with one another.” On the other hand, whether or not Scripture treats grand subjects is no proof of its divine inspiration. All the works of theologians in subsequent Christian history likewise treat of the same grand subjects and sometimes even grander ones.

imagine a nearly identical set of texts which in some places make the opposite assertions. Neither can one assert that they alone possess various marks by which their supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be to presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which they lack and conclude that they are not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of the Old and New Testament texts in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

Or consider the teaching hierarchy of the church. It is obviously at least a natural phenomenon. It is clearly at least a religious institution that operates according to a certain intelligible pattern as it pursues its own purposes in the light of changing historical and social conditions. The things it says and teaches may or may not be true, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or other. But there is nothing about it simply as a natural institution that demands any particular description of it in supernatural terms. This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. Neither can one assert that it alone possesses various marks by which its supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which it lacks and conclude that it is not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of the teaching hierarchy of the church in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

Or consider the example of faith. This is obviously at least a natural phenomenon. It is clearly at least a matter of believing something about a religious thing apart from the direct experience of the thing in question.¹⁹ The proposition that one believes may be either true or false, although it is impossible to provide definitive proof one way or the other. But there is nothing about faith simply as natural religious belief that entails any particular description of it in supernatural terms. This follows from the assertion that supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of

¹⁹ Compare Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.1.4: "Now those things are said to be seen which, of themselves, move the intellect or the senses to knowledge of them (*illa autem videri dicuntur quae per seipsa movent intellectum nostrum vel sensum ad sui cognitionem*). Wherefore it is evident that neither faith nor opinion can be of things seen either by the senses or by the intellect."

the possibilities of nature. Neither can one assert that Christian faith alone possesses various marks by which its supernatural dimension is discerned. This would be to presuppose that one knows what the supernatural is like and how it would express itself. One could just as well propose some other set of purported marks of the supernatural which it lacks and conclude that they are not specially or uniquely related to the sphere of supernature. In any case, the very question at stake is whether there is a supernature in the first place. Thus, it seems that every argument in defense of the description of Christian faith in supernatural terms will be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. It ultimately cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation.

It would be well now to summarize. Traditional Christian theology and religion is founded on the claim that it possesses supernatural revelation. This means that it is founded on the assertion that some natural things to be found in the world of experience are also specially and uniquely characterizable in supernatural terms. But it is impossible to give a valid and non-circular argument in favor of the characterization of any natural item in particular supernatural terms. For any x whatsoever that appears within the world of experience, it will always remain an open question whether it should be described in any supernatural terms at all, irrespective of the particular natural terms in which it is described. But if it is impossible to give a valid and non-circular argument in favor of the characterization of any natural item in particular supernatural terms, then such a description cannot be argued but only asserted without substantiation. This also holds in the case of the purported instances of supernatural revelation to which Christian theology and religion makes appeal. This means that these are ultimately founded on unsubstantiable assertion.

Responding to Some Initial Objections

One may object to this line of argument in various ways. It would be well to consider them here in order.

First, one may suggest that the existence of God suffices to prove the existence of the supernatural.²⁰ But this is not obvious. This objection seems

²⁰ This argument is presented by Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.2.3. The second argument against God's existence is the following: "Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence." Thomas responds as follows: "Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must

to presuppose a conception of the “natural” other than the one at stake in this essay.²¹ Recall how the “natural” was defined earlier: in terms of what is accessible on the basis of the powers of knowing that belong to human beings such as they are by nature. Put another way, the “natural” includes everything to be found in the spheres of sense, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and transcendental or phenomenological reflection. “Nature” is thus an onto-epistemological notion. It does not simply mean “material” or “physical” (in the sense of modern physics) or anything of the sort. Now, if the existence of God can be known in any of the previously mentioned ways, then his existence is thereby a “natural” reality, much the same as any other thing discoverable by any of these means, and consequently does not by itself a proof of the supernatural. To prove by natural means of knowing the existence of something that exists of itself and is the source of everything else’s reality is not thereby to prove the supernatural. In that case, the objection constitutes a *non sequitur*. But if one says instead that the existence of God cannot be known in any of these ways, then this objection is tantamount to justifying the existence of the supernatural by appeal to the supernatural—a *petitio principii*. The existence of God therefore does not prove the reality of the supernatural as this term is being used in the present context.

Second, one may suggest that the description of things in supernatural terms is not justified inferentially on the basis of the natural, nor merely asserted, but rather immediately intuited on the basis of a supernatural insight.²² This is what was mentioned above. The description of things in supernatural terms is itself made possible by supernatural revelation. Supernatural revelation not only involves knowledge of a supernatural dimension of reality but also a correspondingly supernatural mode of knowing. Natural knowing means knowing by sense, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection. Supernatural knowing therefore means specially enabled direct insight. It is on the basis of such an insight that the supernatural description of certain natural things is ultimately justified.

This objection also does not convince. It is ultimately no different than what was discussed above about faith in the earlier section. Faith is at least a natural phenomenon: religious belief in a proposition apart from the direct experience of the thing itself to which the proposition refers. But whether or not it is further characterizable in supernatural terms as a special

be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.”

²¹ Cf. the characterization of the “natural” in Graham Oppy, *The Best Argument against God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST 2-2.6.1*: “Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to man’s knowledge, unless God reveal them” (*non cadunt in contemplatione hominis nisi Deo revelante*).

divine insight remains an open question. Supernature is defined as what exceeds the limits of the possibility of nature. This means that any attempted inference of some certain supernatural description of it from any of its natural characterizations is a *non sequitur*. Not every belief in a proposition apart from the direct experience of the thing itself to which the proposition refers is characterizable in special supernatural terms. But to suppose that faith has certain marks by which the self-expression of the supernatural is distinguished is to presuppose knowledge of how supernature expresses itself. Yet whether there is a supernatural at all is precisely the question at hand—a *petitio principii*. Something similar can also be said about this purported “special divine insight.” It is at the very least characterizable as a belief about something that is not directly experienced. But there is nothing about it when it is characterized in these terms that requires one to describe it in any particular supernatural terms. Indeed, when considered simply as a belief in something apart from the direct experience of it, there is no differentiating it from delusion.

Neither could one say that the special divine insight by which the supernatural is perceived is itself somehow “self-authenticating” on the basis that the experience of it is also accompanied by the further, concurrent conviction that one is undergoing special divine insight.²³ This would be confused reasoning. One’s sense of sight is self-authenticating in the sense that one cannot be mistaken about the fact that one is undergoing a visual experience. One either feels it happening to one or not. But the firm conviction that one has achieved a special insight into something does not by itself entail or demonstrate that one actually has special insight into anything at all. Being convinced that one is undergoing something is compatible with its not really happening. Indeed, every time a person comes to believe something that makes new sense of all the previously unintelligible data at his or her disposal, this believing is accompanied by the conviction or feeling that he or she is now seeing things clearly. But this is clearly compatible with the belief’s actually being false. For example, a woman may come to be firmly convinced that her husband is being secretive because he is cheating on her, when in fact he is planning a surprise for her. Even the deluded or conspiratorial person can be convinced within himself that he believes correctly or that he is seeing things as they are once a ridiculous theory is hatched in his mind. Thus, one cannot be mistaken about the fact that one seems to see, i.e. that one feels oneself to see, but one can easily be

²³ This is the language used by William Lane Craig and Kevin Diller to describe the “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit,” following Alvin Plantinga. See William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); Kevin Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also the critique of this idea in Nemes, *Theology of the Manifest*, ch. 2.

mistaken about one's conviction that one has in fact achieved some special insight into something. To infer something of supernatural significance from the natural description of this state of being convinced that one has been granted special divine insight into some matter or other is therefore a *non sequitur*. But to propose that this special divine insight possesses certain marks which distinguishes it as an expression of the supernatural is to presuppose knowledge of supernature's way of expressing itself. And this is a *petitio principii*.

This point can further be appreciated from the following point of view. Suppose *A* says that the Old and New Testaments are characterizable in certain supernatural terms as divinely inspired. *B* questions on what basis this claim is made. No supernatural description of the texts can be inferred from its natural description, nor can one non-circularly claim that it specially or uniquely possesses the marks of supernature. *A* responds that the characterization of the Old and New Testaments in supernatural terms as divinely inspired is itself justified on the basis of a special divine insight from which *A* benefits. It is something a person can appreciate once he or she is granted this insight. *B* will then respond that whether or not *A* does benefit from special divine insight is itself a further matter that must be justified. Certainly *A* has the conviction that the Old and New Testaments possess this supernatural dimension. He also has the additional conviction that he possesses this first conviction by way of special divine insight. But convictions in themselves are simply natural phenomena. Not every person who has a conviction about something is therefore right about it—that would be a *non sequitur*. And for *A* to claim that his conviction bears certain marks which distinguishes it as being supernatural is for *A* to presuppose knowledge of the way that supernature expresses itself, which is precisely the question at hand—a *petitio principii*.

Third, one may appeal to the traditional notion of the "motives of credibility."²⁴ The claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation is shown to be credible and probable when it is accompanied by such marks as the performance of miracles, the possession of a certain moral character, and the fulfillment of prophecies.²⁵ But this line of response is subject to all the same sorts of counterarguments as the earlier ones considered thus far.

In the case of miracles, the following should be said. Every purported miracle is at the very least characterizable in natural terms as an event in the world that occurs contrary to reasonable and well-informed expectations

²⁴ Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas Bartholomew Scanell, *A Manual of Catholic Theology: The Sources of Theological Knowledge: God, Creation, and the Supernatural Order* (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1906), p. 122: "We cannot ... accept with certitude any proposition as being the word of God without Motives of Credibility—that is, marks and criteria clearly showing the proposition to be really the Word of God." See also the discussion in Lawrence Feingold, *Faith Comes from What is Heard: An Introduction to Fundamental Theology* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2016), ch. 3.

²⁵ These are familiar arguments raised by Thomas Aquinas, SCG 1.6.

pertaining to the natural tendencies and possibilities of things. But to try to infer a supernatural description of the event in question from this natural description is a *non sequitur*. One could always say instead that some highly rare but otherwise entirely natural power has been at work. This is equally possible whether the power in question belongs to the thing itself performing in the miracle (as in the case of a healer's power to heal) or the thing being miraculously affected (as in the case of someone who is healed by another). On the other hand, merely to assert that there have been "miraculous" events in the sense of events that must be described in supernatural terms in principle is a *petitio principii* in the present context. The very question at hand is whether there is supernature at all.

In the case of moral character, the following should be said. There are persons of morally impressive character who do not make any claims to possess supernatural revelation. There are also persons of equally or at least comparably impressive character who believe incompatible things. The orthodox and the heretics alike make inconsistent claims to special insight about supernatural matters and seem equally endowed with virtues.²⁶ To argue that one rather another person is specially related to the sphere of supernature on the basis of their morally impressive character is a *non sequitur*. To suppose that the supernatural would sooner pair itself to the one sort of person rather than to the other is to presuppose knowledge of the mode of self-expression of the supernatural. But the question at hand is whether there is a supernatural in the first place, so that this response amounts to a *petitio principii*.

In the case of fulfilled prophecy, the following should be said. A fulfilled prophecy is at the very least characterizable in natural terms as an event that seems to have been successfully and unexpectedly predicted by someone in the past. But to try to infer a supernatural description of the event in question from this natural description is a *non sequitur*. It is always possible to say that the prediction was a matter of luck or otherwise the effect of a purely natural insight. What is more, the sort of predicted prophecy that traditional Christian theology and religion found themselves on is questionable. The earliest Christians thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah promised by God for the people of Israel. But some modern scholarship calls into question whether or not there even are messianic predictions in the Old Testament at all.²⁷ Origen carefully

²⁶ Heikki Räisänen speaks about the readiness of many Marcionites to suffer martyrdom. See Heikki Räisänen, "Marcion," p. 107, in Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, eds., *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'* (Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 100–124. There were also very many such persons who willingly submitted to death during the medieval and Reformation eras.

²⁷ See the discussion in Stanley E. Porter, "Introduction: The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments," pp. 1–9, in Stanley E. Porter, ed., *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). See also G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

considered the commonly encountered Jewish criticism that Jesus did not literally fulfill various Old Testament texts purported to speak about the Messiah (*On First Principles* 4.2.1).²⁸ He maintains that Jesus's fulfillment of these texts is spiritual rather than literal and that the spiritual sense of the prediction could only be appreciated after Jesus had already come into the world (*On First Principles* 4.1.6).²⁹ But there is another way of understanding this situation. It happens to some people that they believe God to be speaking to them through texts. They read the words on the page and these stand out as saying something that is particular to them, though the human author of the text in question could not have had them in mind. They understand God to be saying something to them by means of a text which, considered in itself and in its own context, could not mean what they understand it to say. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's experience in 1939 provides a notable historical example of this.³⁰ He read the words "Come before the winter" (2 Tim. 4:21) during his daily readings and was convinced that God was calling him to return from America to Germany.³¹ This is a

²⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 485: "'For the Jews, through their hardness of heart, and because they wish to appear wise in their own sight, have not believed in our Lord and Savior, supposing that those things which were prophesied of him ought to be understood according to the letter, that is, that he ought, perceptibly and visibly, to proclaim release to the captives and that he ought at first to build a city such as they think the city of God truly to be, and at the same time to cut off the chariots of Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem, but also to eat butter and honey in order to choose the good before he should know to bring forth evil...'"

²⁹ Origen, *On First Principles*, pp. 475, 477: "[T]he divine character and the divine inspiration both of the predictions of the Prophets and the Law of Moses have been most clearly brought to light and proved from the point that Christ arrived in this world. For before those things which were foretold by them were fulfilled, although they were true and inspired by God, they nevertheless could not be shown to be true because they were not yet proved to have been fulfilled; but the arrival of Christ proclaimed what had been said to be true and divinely inspired, whereas before it would certainly have been held doubtful whether the accomplishment of those things which had been foretold would be fulfilled... The splendour of Christ's arrival, therefore, illuminating the Law of Moses with the brightness of truth, has taken away that veil which had covered the letter and disclosed, for everyone who believes in him, all the good things which were concealed, buried within."

³⁰ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, ed. Dirk Schulz and Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Claudia D. Bergmann et al., vol. 15, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 230–231; Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 227–228; Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 655–656. See likewise the discussion in Nemes, *Theology of the Manifest*, ch. 4.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground*, p. 232: "'Come before the winter'—it is not a misuse of Scripture if I allow this to be said to me. If God gives me the grace for that" (emphasis added).

common religious experience to which many people attest.³² It is equally possible for something like this to have taken place in the case of Jesus and his earliest disciples. Jesus and his disciples took God to be saying something about Jesus himself as they read or thought about the words of the Old Testament texts.³³ They may even have been right about this. God really could have been speaking to them then and there. But this would not necessarily constitute a fulfillment of a prophecy. Indeed, most of the texts they cite have nothing to do with Jesus when read in context and consequently are not prophecies.³⁴ In the best case, it is a matter of God's saying something to them then and there by making use of the scriptural words in a non-contextual way. Perhaps he does this, not to give his divine endorsement to the texts in question, but because it is situationally useful for him to do so. In the worst case, it is a matter of uncareful readers imposing their own ideas onto their sacred texts. The case for fulfilled prophecies is therefore far from easily made.³⁵

Fourth, one may object that it is true of every intellectual discipline and field of inquiry that it cannot validly and non-circularly justify its foundational principles or axioms. For example, Thomas Aquinas writes that the principles of metaphysics cannot be justified by appeal to any greater or more general science, and there is no proving them to a person who does not accept at least some of them.³⁶ Traditional Christian theology is therefore not in a uniquely troubled position in comparison to the other disciplines.³⁷

³² John Goldingay, "Hearing God Speak from the First Testament," pp. 67–69, in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), pp. 59–77.

³³ Cf. Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 63.

³⁴ The classic example is Matt. 2:15. When Jesus's family returns to Palestine from Egypt, Matthew says that this took place in fulfillment of the prophet Hosea's words: "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Hos. 11:1). But it is clear in context that Hosea is not speaking of the messiah at all, but of sinful Israel during the Exodus: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols." There is nothing about Hosea's text in context that suggests that he is speaking of a future messiah.

³⁵ Defenders of early Christian hermeneutical practice assume that there must be something legitimate about it insofar as Jesus and the apostles did it under supernatural inspiration. But this is clearly a *petitio principii* in the present context. They may rather have simply been mistaken about this point.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.8: "However, it is to be borne in mind, in regard to the philosophical sciences, that the inferior sciences neither prove their principles nor dispute with those who deny them, but leave this to a higher science; whereas the highest of them, viz. metaphysics, can dispute with one who denies its principles, if only the opponent will make some concession; but if he concede nothing, it can have no dispute with him, though it can answer his objections."

³⁷ So Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 109–110: "It is worth reiterating that this [circularity] applies to other disciplines as well. Moral science, for instance, is based on the key principle that we should do good and avoid evil. You cannot argue for the veracity of this principle on the

This may be true. But this response also ignores one of the more important dimensions of the present essay's argument. On the one hand, the endowment of nature is self-evident and given in every experience. It is the "starting place" of human knowledge. It therefore rightly enjoys epistemic priority. As Emmanuel Falque writes: "Human beings were not created without grace, but all the same we find ourselves *first* in nature (or better in finitude)—that is to say, independent of the evidence that will be the revelation of God."³⁸ Nor are natural things all equally susceptible to mutually inconsistent descriptions. One cannot baldly call a red thing white, since simple experience can disprove the claim. On the other hand, the supernatural is not self-evidently given. People of mutually inconsistent convictions all claim knowledge of the supernatural, and there is no clear or easy way to prove one or the other wrong. At best what is plainly given in the supposed case of supernatural revelation is some strong conviction about something that is otherwise imperceptible and unknowable. But supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. This means that any natural description of a thing will be equally compatible with mutually inconsistent characterizations in supernatural terms. And given that the natural is *per se* capable of mutually inconsistent supernatural descriptions, there is no evident non-circular basis for preferring one set of supernatural characterizations over another. This shows that the particular characterization of things in supernatural terms that belongs to traditional Christian theology and religion is a bare assertion that cannot be substantiated.

Fifth, one may abandon the nature-supernature distinction altogether and distinguish instead between material or physical and spiritual forms of perception.³⁹ In addition to their five senses, human beings by nature possess a certain capacity (or perhaps multiple such capacities) for perceiving distinctly spiritual things, and God on occasions activates or stimulates this in such a way as to allow a person to perceive a spiritual truth or reality. But this scheme of things is not really formally different than the onto-epistemological dualism being objected to in this paper. There is still

basis of other moral principles without being guilty of a *petitio principii*. Or again, the foundational principles of physics are derived from mathematics, and you cannot offer proof of these principles as a physicist. As one author puts it: to believe in a principle is to abide by it. We should not attempt to offer rational support for espousing our central beliefs. Indeed, in a very real sense we can't—at least not without transcending the discipline or science of which they are the first principles... [Thomas] is pointing out that theology, like any other scientific discipline, operates with foundational principles it simply assumes and cannot prove within the parameters of its own discourse."

³⁸ Falque, *Metamorphosis of Finitude*, p. 16; emphasis added.

³⁹ See the essays collected in Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Frederick D. Aquino and Paul L. Gavrilyuk, eds., *Perceiving Things Divine: Toward a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022)

a fundamental discontinuity between two forms of knowledge, one of which is uncontroversial and the other of which can be called into question. That means that it does not escape all the arguments that have been brought thus far.

Suppose a person comes to believe that the texts of the Old Testament are divinely inspired. One can describe this process in perfectly natural terms. That person has come to draw a theological conclusion on the basis of the evidence they think is available to them, in accordance with the interpretive possibilities that occur to them at that time and place, given their personal history and broader context. This much at the very least is happening. But whether one says that God has granted the individual a special divine insight into some supernatural matter, or else that God has then and there specially activated an otherwise dormant but normal sense or power of perception that belongs to human beings by nature, the result is the essentially same. Why should one grant this description in the first place? There is no evidence of there existing a natural power of spiritual perception apart from the particular experiences in which it is thought to be operative. But these experiences can be described adequately in ordinary terms, without any reference to such a power at all. No more may be happening than a person's coming to believe something on the basis of the evidence available to him or her, such as he or she interprets it in his or her own particular way, with some sort of feeling accompanying the whole process. It is an ordinary hermeneutical event. To infer that more is happening from the purely ordinary description of the experience is a *non sequitur*. Even if the occurrence of "spiritual perception" is always accompanied by the conviction that one is spiritually perceiving something, it would plainly be a *non sequitur* to infer that this is what is happening. One does not have a sense for discerning others' taste in music simply because one always guesses correctly and feels convinced that one has it. It may be that one's theological preconceptions and worldview are motivating one to interpret one's experience as an instance of spiritual perception, rather than the experience itself giving adequate evidence of a spiritual sense's being activated. But one could just as well interpret the experience within the framework of some other metaphysical or theological scheme.

On the other hand, there are persons who undergo similar experiences yet draw the opposite conclusions. For example, imagine a person who comes to think that the Old Testament texts are at best the works of an inferior lesser god. The true God is not found in them, at least not unambiguously. Or imagine a person who reads the New Testament texts as teaching that Christ is not consubstantial with the Father. Either he is lesser than the Father and of a different nature, though still divine in some attenuated sense, or else he is no more than a human being who is specially used by God and empowered by the Spirit. Many persons throughout

history have had what they considered to be important moments of spiritual perception in which the penny dropped, and they were made newly able to see the true interpretation of the scriptures. Such conclusions would also be supported by much modern scholarship.⁴⁰ Now, it would be just as much a *non sequitur* here as earlier to try to describe these experiences as a form of spiritual perception, rather than simply as another metaphysically ordinary hermeneutical event in the life of an individual mind. The latter sort of description seems more than adequate, irrespective of the feelings and accompanying convictions that may form part of the experience in question. But it is also a *petitio principii* to try to discount such experiences as being false, or else as coming from demons or some other such, on the basis of the knowledge one takes oneself to have of the spiritual realm and how it operates. The very question at hand is precisely how one can justify the pretense to possess a kind of special knowledge of the supernatural or spiritual realm in the first place. It will not do simply to take such knowledge for granted in one's responses to objections.

The appeal to the notion of spiritual perception therefore does not advance the dialectic any further. Whether one speaks of special divine insight into what lies beyond the grasp of nature, or else of a natural human power that is only specially activated by God in certain circumstances, the phenomenological facts of the experience in question would be the same. It is a matter of someone's coming to believe something unobvious and questionable, not immediately evident to everyone, lacking adequate intersubjective confirmation, underdetermined by the publicly accessible evidence available, and attributing that belief's arising to some kind of special divine intervention, so that its truthfulness can be taken for granted in his or her system of thought. But because all such experiences are describable in purely natural terms that appeal neither to special divine insight, nor to spiritual perception, i.e. because there is no need of the categories of the "supernatural" or the "spiritual" in giving an initial description of them, so that they can be seen simply as further instances of other ordinary sorts of experience of which the truthfulness cannot simply be taken for granted, the same formal problem of the *non sequitur* and the *petitio principii* arises. It becomes impossible to substantiate the claim that there is "something more" happening in these experiences in a valid and non-circular manner. What is uncontroversially present in such experiences (the forming of a conviction in a certain lived context, i.e. a hermeneutical event in an individual's mind) does not logically imply describing them in further "supernatural" or "spiritual" terms (hence the *non sequitur*), whereas the description of the experiences in such further terms presupposes one's prior possession of knowledge of the unique sphere of reality to which only

⁴⁰ See for example Steven Nemes, *Trinity and Incarnation: A Post-Catholic Theology* (Eugene: Cascade, 2023).

these experiences described in “supernatural” or “spiritual” terms can give access, which is the very issue at hand (hence the *petitio principii*).

The lesson learned from all this is a general one. For any x whatsoever that appears within the world of experience—whether it is an external reality like the biblical texts, or some religious body, or an historical event, or else an internal reality like one’s own convictions—the thing in question will be describable in natural terms while it always remains an open question how or even whether it should further be described in supernatural terms. And every argument given in defense of the description of a thing in supernatural terms will ultimately be either a *non sequitur* or a *petitio principii*. Hence, the claim to possess supernatural revelation cannot be justified by means of a valid and non-circular argument but only asserted without substantiation. And this means that traditional Christian theology and religion are ultimately founded on an unsubstantiable assertion.⁴¹

Responding to Arguments for Revelation

There have been some arguments given throughout history in favor of the thesis that supernatural revelation is to be expected. It would be well to consider them briefly in the following pages.

First, one could argue that supernatural revelation was necessary for salvation. This is the argument that Thomas Aquinas gives in various places.⁴² Tyron Inbody summarizes it by saying that “the concept of God derived from general revelation is soteriologically inadequate. That is, it is insufficient for our ‘knowing God’ as the source and goal of our salvation.”⁴³ But this argument does not convince. It is founded on the premise that the final end of human beings is a supernatural one. Only thus would salvation

⁴¹ One might further object that the kind of argumentation being proposed in this essay undermines belief in moral intuition. This kind of argument is raised by John Greco, “The Possibility of Spiritual Perception: Objections and Replies,” p. 5, in Aquino and Gavrilyuk, eds., *Perceiving Things Divine*, pp. 3–19. For moral experience may be ultimately describable in terms which make no reference to irreducible moral categories, e.g. a person expresses his or her subjective resonance to a purported moral principle in universal language. Nothing more is happening than a person expressing his or her very strong preferences regarding the way things are at the widest possible level. I would personally endorse this line of argument, though there would be very much more to be said and no space here to say it. I will only note here that the kind of methodological “common-senseism” that takes philosophically controverted ideas for granted seems to me out of place in these sorts of discussions. Pretended knowledge in the sphere of morality can be called into question, just as in the sphere of theology.

⁴² See Thomas Aquinas, *ST 1.1.1*. Balázs M. Mezei, Frances Aran Murphy, and Kenneth Oakes, *Illuminating Faith: An Invitation to Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 28 summarize the point as follows: “God shared his mind with us because we cannot be saved unless he does so.”

⁴³ Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 65.

involve an exceeding of the limits of nature.⁴⁴ But this is itself a supernatural description of human beings. To try to infer it from any natural description of human beings is a *non sequitur*. Supernature is defined in terms of what exceeds the limits of the possibilities of nature. But merely to assert it in defense of the thesis that there has been supernatural revelation is a *petitio principii*. It is itself the sort of proposition that could only be known by way of supernatural revelation.⁴⁵ This kind of argument is therefore circular.

Second, one could argue that various dimensions of natural human life are dissatisfactory or otherwise unfortunate from the point of view of their limitations. Both Thomas and Richard Swinburne give arguments like these.⁴⁶ Human beings either cannot or do not easily come by certain forms of knowledge on the basis of their natural abilities, whether it be knowledge of morality, or knowledge of the ultimate meaning of things, or knowledge of God. Supernatural revelation is therefore to be expected as a way of resolving these problems. It would be better for human beings to know them. But this argument likewise does not convince.

It is true that there are various things of which the knowledge is not naturally possible or easily accomplished for human beings. These are at the very least things which some human beings would prefer to know. But nothing of interest *vis-à-vis* the question of supernatural revelation can be inferred from this. One could just as well argue that their natural inaccessibility to human beings entails that the knowledge of them is not necessary for a well-lived human life. The scope of a happy human life is more modest

⁴⁴ One might also wonder whether this notion is coherent. The idea is that human salvation requires supernatural revelation. "Salvation" (*salus*) can mean deliverance from an evil or else health and well-being in general. Is the idea that "salvation" is a matter of being delivered from nature's limits? That would mean that nature, i.e. creatureliness considered in itself, is an evil from which things have to be freed. This would mean that creation by itself is imposing evil upon created things. But if the idea is that the general health or well-being of the human being requires that its natural capacities be exceeded, then it would seem to be incoherent. For what other measure is there of the well-being of a thing except its nature? The idea that salvation can require supernatural revelation is therefore objectionable.

⁴⁵ Thus Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1 argues that there is need of sacred doctrine in addition to the philosophical disciplines "because the human being is ordered to God as to an end that surpasses the grasp of reason, according to that passage in Isaiah 64" (*quia homo ordinatur ad Deum sicut ad quendam finem qui comprehensionem rationis excedit, secundum illud Isaiae LXIV*)

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.1.1: "Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation." See also Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 79–85.

and restrained than these figures suppose, and within its proper limits the endowment of nature is sufficient.⁴⁷ If the knowledge of these things were truly necessary, then they could have been naturally (more easily) knowable to human beings. Or it could be that God intends precisely that the knowledge of them be hard won and the result of a long process. It is therefore a *non sequitur* to infer the necessity of supernatural revelation from the fact that certain forms of knowledge are not naturally possible or easy for human beings. But suppose someone responds that God is not of such a character that these alternative explanations of the situation could be correct or likely. This is once more the sort of proposition that cannot be inferred from a purely natural description of things but must itself have come to knowledge by means of supernatural revelation. To appeal to it is therefore a *petitio principii* in the present context when the question at hand is whether there is a supernature at all.

Third, one could argue that the possession of the concept of supernatural revelation is itself proof of its reality. This would be a kind of “ontological argument” for the fact of supernatural revelation.⁴⁸ It would likewise not convince. The possession of a concept is not by itself proof that one has experienced the thing of which it is a concept, as David Hume argued.⁴⁹ One may possess the notion of a golden mountain without ever having seen one. The notion of “revelation” is a perfectly natural one. It is gained in ordinary circumstances, as when a door is opened or a rock is lifted and something is made newly visible. One then undergoes an experience in which a new idea comes into one’s mind which utterly changes the meaning or significance of everything else one thinks.⁵⁰ Because the idea does not seem to be the sort of thing that would have occurred to one normally, and especially if the idea seems somehow inconsonant with ordinary modes of thinking which one takes to be natural, one then attributes its occurrence

⁴⁷ Compare the arguments of eighteenth century deists like Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as old as the Creation: Or, the Gospel as a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730).

⁴⁸ Something like this sort of argument is given by Balázs M. Mezei, *Radical Revelation: A Philosophical Approach* (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), p. 30.

⁴⁹ David Hume, *Enquiry* 2.4–5: “Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects... But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.” In David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 13.

⁵⁰ See the introductory discussion in Balázs M. Mezei, “Introduction: the newness of revelation,” in Balázs M. Mezei, Francesca Aran Murphy, and Kenneth Oakes, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. xxi–xxx.

in one's mind to the activity of something beyond nature. This is how the idea of supernatural revelation is formed: the simple modification of the natural concept of revelation or unveiling. But it is clear that a concept so formed need not correspond to anything one has ever experienced. This argument therefore fails.

Consequences of Rejecting Supernatural Revelation

It has been argued to this point that the claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. One might think that the in principle inability to substantiate a claim could constitute reason enough to give it up—granting that it is a matter of a claim about something inaccessible to the senses, reason, (memory, moral intuition,) and transcendental or phenomenological reflection, as the supernatural is supposed to be. It would be well to conclude by noting the consequences of rejecting the idea of supernatural revelation altogether.

Traditional Christian theology is historically committed to the rule or principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*: philosophy is the handmaiden of theology.⁵¹ This idea has precedent in pre-Christian Jewish figures like Philo.⁵² "Theology" is defined as that science which deals with what has been supernaturally revealed by God. "Philosophy" includes all the sciences and forms of knowledge which are naturally possible for human beings given their ordinary powers of knowing and cognitive endowments. To say that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology is to say at least two things. On the one hand, theology as a science enjoys epistemic priority over philosophy. What has been revealed by God is *per se* more certain than any purported knowledge that has come by way of human achievement. This means that theology cannot rightly be corrected or contradicted by philosophy—at least when it is a matter of what is taken as having been

⁵¹ For very helpful historical discussions of this idea, see Bernard Badoux, "Philosophia 'Ancilla Theologiae,'" *Antonianum* 12, no. 4 (1937): pp. 293–326; Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "The Greek Church Fathers and Philosophy," in Oliver D. Crisp, Gavin D'Costa, Mervyn Davies, and Peter Hampson, eds., *Philosophy and Theology: Faith and Reason* (New York: T&T Clark), pp. 17–30; and Malcom de Mowbray, "Philosophy as Handmaid of Theology: Biblical Exegesis in the Service of Scholarship," *Traditio* 59 (2004); pp. 1–37. Badoux's article is written in Latin.

⁵² Philo of Alexandria, *De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratia* 14.79, in Philo, ed. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London, 1929–62], 4:496–97, as cited in de Mowbray, "Philosophy as Handmaid of Theology," p. 5: "But just as the school subjects contribute to the acquirement of philosophy, so does philosophy to the getting of wisdom. For philosophy is the practice or study of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human and their causes. And therefore just as the culture of the schools is the bondservant of philosophy, so must philosophy be the servant of wisdom." Cf. Badoux, "Philosophia 'Ancilla Theologiae,'" pp. 295–296.

divinely revealed in fact and not as merely human commentary or interpretation of that revelation.⁵³ On the other hand, philosophy is granted the privilege of serving the purpose of theology by way of explicating and making sense of and supporting belief in supernatural revelation.⁵⁴ What has been supernaturally revealed cannot be proven philosophically, but philosophy can at least try to explain it and offer reasons for thinking that it is worth believing.⁵⁵

It is clear from all this that the ultimate foundation of the principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* is the idea of supernatural revelation. The reason theology enjoys this form of priority over philosophy is that it is in possession of supernatural revelation. But this essay has argued that this claim cannot be substantiated in a valid and non-circular manner in principle. There would therefore seem to be two options remaining. On the one hand, theology could continue to assert its superiority over philosophy even though it cannot substantiate it. On the other hand, theology can consider itself on a plane with the other “philosophical disciplines.”

If theology were to continue to assert its superiority over philosophy despite being unable to substantiate its claim, it would run the risk of being arrogant and intolerant. The circularity and self-assertion that exists at the theoretical foundations of theology would translate practically into ethically objectionable attitudes. It would be arrogant because it would believe more highly of itself than it has actual reason to do. Theology cannot substantiate to itself or to others its own claim to be privileged and distinguished by its possession of supernatural revelation. The claim cannot be substantiated

⁵³ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 88: “Theology, or the science of God so far as He has been made known to us by revelation, is superior to philosophy. Philosophy is subject to it, neither in its premises nor in its method, but in its conclusions, over which theology exercises a control, thereby constituting itself a negative rule of philosophy.”

⁵⁴ A famous statement of this idea is found in Origen’s metaphor of the “spoiling of the Egyptians” in the *Letter to Gregory*. See Joseph Trigg, ed., *Origen* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 210–213. “For just as the servants of philosophers say concerning geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and geometry [*sic*] that they are adjuncts to philosophy, we say this very thing about philosophy itself with regard to Christianity.” See also Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine* 2.144–145, in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): “Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians...”

⁵⁵ Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 14: “In this traditional Christian view, the natural sciences and philosophy were assigned the role of servant: they had the privilege of being employed in the defense of revealed truths, providing support and aid in achieving soteriological understanding.” Cf. Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Stowbridge (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), p. 129: “[P]hilosophy is an auxiliary, subordinate discipline, which theology makes use of for its own ends.”

by means of the senses, nor by reason, (nor by memory, nor by moral intuition,) nor by transcendental or phenomenological reflection, since none of these sources can reach the supernatural *per se*. Neither can theology give a valid and non-circular reason for characterizing its own conviction regarding the truth of what it believes as being grounded in special divine insight. All it can do is assert its own self-conception and hope that others come to agree with it. Going further, theology would likewise be intolerant because it would always take its own essential commitments for granted in its public dealings with others who disagree. Traditional Christian theology that operates according to the principle of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* does not allow itself to be contradicted by philosophy in its essential commitments.⁵⁶ That is because its axiom and starting point is its notion that it has supernatural revelation on its side. It does not have to take seriously the thought that its opponents may be correct. After all, what God says is more certain than any human thinker. But this also means that it can take for granted that those who disagree with it are wrong. It does not have anything to learn from them except for what it can assimilate into its own system. The available historical evidence suggests that when this way of thinking becomes dominant in a society, that society shows itself violently intolerant toward different ways of thinking and acting. The treatment of heretics in Western Christendom is an example.⁵⁷ “Error has no rights,” as the traditional saying goes.⁵⁸ There are even some in the present day who argue that it would be the right of Christian princes and governments in Christian states (even if not always and everywhere prudent) to punish heretics with death.⁵⁹ These all seem to be expressions of objectionable arrogance and intolerance—if one grants the conclusion of the

⁵⁶ This is not necessarily true for all possible forms of Christian theology or religion. One alternative approach to the question of faith and revelation can be found in the “*anatheism*” of Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Another would be the “*modest fideism*” of John Bishop, *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Still another would be fallibilist scientific approach of Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 1.

⁵⁷ See G. R. Evans, *A Brief History of Heresy* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), p. 134: “As long as it was assumed that there was only one way to heaven, and that a narrow road, the Church’s leaders could not rest while some of the flock were straying from that road and leading others to follow them.”

⁵⁸ See the discussion of the historical development of this idea in Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 70.

⁵⁹ See Alan Fimister and Thomas Crean, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: editiones scholasticae, 2020); Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2022). Fimister and Crean are Roman Catholics whereas Wolfe is a Protestant.

present essay's argument, namely that traditional Christian theology and religion cannot substantiate its claim to be in possession of supernatural revelation in a valid and non-circular manner.

If theology were to consider itself on a plane with the other "philosophical disciplines," then it would have to subject its own claims to the same scrutiny regarding method of argument and evidential support as other disciplines do. One particular mode of argument would seem to have to be done away with: the appeal to authority. It is generally admitted that the appeal to authority is a fallacious argument. The mere fact that someone asserts a proposition does not by itself guarantee that it is true. But the propositions of theology that deal with the domain of supernature are of such a nature that they cannot be verified by means of the senses, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection. They can only be known if at all by means of a special divine insight. This insight does not belong to all persons equally. The tendency in the history of Christian theology has been to assign this direct insight to past heroes (such as the prophets and apostles and scriptural authors) and the institutional hierarchs in the church (such as the episcopate as a whole or even the Pope). Theological argument therefore comes to function by way of the appeal to authority.⁶⁰ A proposition is or is not acceptable, not necessarily on its own merits, but because the right authorities do or do not testify to it or against it.⁶¹ But this is an unscientific method for reasoned discourse. Whether or not a proposition is true is determined only by the thing itself to which that proposition refers. As Aristotle said, truth is a matter of thinking or speaking about things as they are.⁶² But it is clearly possible for anyone's speaking or thinking to be otherwise than things are in principle. The possibility of falsehood proves that being and human thought or speech are two distinct spheres without essential correlation to one another. That is why the appeal to authority is fallacious: because a person's mere say-so does not make things to be a certain way. And the denial of supernatural revelation means that there are no specially gifted authorities in the domain of theology. Every past figure is simply one further participant, however talented or

⁶⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.32.1: "Whoever, then, tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural reason (*naturali ratione*), derogates from faith in two ways. First, as regards the dignity of faith itself, which consists in its being concerned with invisible things, that exceed human reason (*de rebus invisibilibus, quae rationem humanam excedunt*); wherefore the Apostle says that faith is of things that appear not... Therefore, *we must not attempt to prove what is of faith, except by authority alone (quae igitur fidei sunt, non sunt tentanda probare nisi per auctoritates)*, to those who receive the authority" (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Henry Chadwick, "Ego Berengarius," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): pp. 414–445, p. 427 characterizes the debates between Berengarius and Lanfranc of Bec regarding transubstantiation in these terms.

⁶² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b25: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, whereas to say of what is that it is, or what of what is not that it is not, is true." In Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), p. 65.

insightful, in an ongoing human conversation about theological matters. Every past figure can be taken seriously and dialogued with, but does not have to be obeyed simply *per se*.

The Future of Theological Belief

This essay will conclude by considering what follows for theological belief from all this argumentation.

Most traditional Christian theology and religion is founded on the assumption that supernatural revelation has been given which imposes on human beings the obligation to believe certain things. Giving up the idea of supernatural revelation does not necessarily mean that traditional Christian beliefs are all false. But it does mean that there is not any special obligation on anyone to believe them. At most a person can be obligated to believe them because they are true. But this is something that could apply in the case of any kind of belief about any subject matter whatsoever. There is presumably always or at least almost always an obligation to believe what is true. If the beliefs of traditional Christian theology and religion are to be commended to others, it must be on the basis of the evidential support in their favor.

If the possibility of special divine insight has been called into question, there would seem to be very little chance of giving a strong or convincing arguments in favor of traditional Christian beliefs regarding the supernatural. These are beliefs about things that cannot be supported by means of the senses, or reason, (or memory, or moral intuition,) or transcendental or phenomenological reflection in principle. It would therefore seem that these are in the most favorable case opinions that a person is free to hold or not to hold as he or she sees fit. They are matters of speculation for which any person may or may not have the disposition or taste. But these beliefs nevertheless speak about questions that are important to very many human beings. They concern matters of ethics, of human history, of the meaning of things, and of God. The situation therefore presents something of an existential quandary. There are things which are dear to the human heart and which make a difference in the way one understands one's life and one's place in the whole of being. And yet there is no way to know them since by definition they concern things that are beyond the possibility of human knowing.

The following proposal may be made. One might suggest *agnosticism* as a new way of exercising faith in the face of the natural limits of human knowledge. There are very many things which are beyond the natural powers of knowing and cognitive endowments that God has given human beings. Neither does there seem to be any way to substantiate the claim that he has supernaturally revealed them. One can therefore propose that

it is a matter of faith in God and of trust in his providence *not* to strive to know such things but rather to leave them in his hands. The human person can instead focus his or her attention on things which are nearer and more easily determined precisely because they lie within the reach of nature.

This suggestion should be understood correctly. The idea is not that it is a matter of faith to be agnostic about God's existence. It is taken for granted here that it is possible to come to a reasonable belief (if not more than that) in God's existence on the basis of the natural cognitive endowment of human beings. It is rather that it is a matter of faith in God's goodness and providence to remain agnostic and accept ignorance about things that are naturally unknowable for human beings. This counts as "faith" because it is a matter of trusting God not to have left human beings in a truly problematic and difficult situation. What can be trusted can be taken for granted. A trusty tool need not be fretted over. Even to inquire into the trustworthiness of one's car or one's spouse is to that extent to be lacking in trust. To trust in God is therefore not to wonder whether he is trustworthy and to that extent not to seek for signs of his trustworthiness or goodness beyond the realm of what is naturally knowable for human beings. It is to take his goodness as a premise rather than as a conclusion, and to understand everything on that basis as ultimately being for the good, irrespective of whether or not one can know this or prove it.

This proposal can therefore be made regarding the future of theological belief after the rejection of supernatural revelation. It is a kind of *non-theological faith* or *non-dogmatic faith*. It is a way of exercising faith in God apart from a complex theological system of beliefs. It is a distinct way of responding to the perceived limits of the human being's natural power of knowing. Rather than go looking for supernatural revelation that complements nature's lack, it can be argued to be a matter of faith in God to admit ignorance and be agnostic about matters that are beyond the natural limits of human knowledge, especially about matters that have been of historical interest to theologians. One does not feel anxious about them or curious but simply accepts the limits that God has placed upon human nature and lives within them as one thinks best. This is all that nature allows one to do, and perhaps this is also all that God in his providence wants human beings to do.⁶³

⁶³ A reviewer objected that this conception of faith is incompatible with the definition of faith in Heb. 11:1. At first glance, this objection is a *petitio principii*. This article has argued that there is no basis for asserting the special status as revelation of the biblical texts. In that case, there is no reason why Hebrews in particular should be privileged as providing a definition of religious faith. This same reviewer also objected that this notion of faith is practically problematic. A Christianity which rejected the possibility of the direct experience of God would demotivate anyone from believing in it. But this objection is confused. This article does not deny the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, but only calls into question the notion of a supernatural knowledge of him. Whatever can be naturally known about God is worth knowing and cherishing. But God has also imposed certain limits upon

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what human beings can know. It is therefore a matter of trust in his providence to mind these limits and not to reach after more.

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