

Only Theology saves Metaphysics: on the Modalities of Terror.¹

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1. *The end of the end of metaphysics*

The 20thC, on one characterisation, might be regarded as the age of the anti-metaphysical. Analytic philosophy initially sought to show that metaphysical speculation, and the invention of metaphysical entities, was based on logical and linguistic confusion. Phenomenology, for its part, claimed to displace ontology with a strict science of appearances. In either case, a claim was made to be able to establish certain finite bounds of the knowable, whether in terms of transcendental categories of meaning, or else transcendental categories of the fundamental kinds of things that can be shown to us. Certain ethical hopes were invested in this enterprise: if there can be a consensus around the nature of the limits of our understanding, then perhaps a certain chastened human solidarity should result. From henceforwards human beings would pursue together what can be pursued and not seek through reason the ineffable. Since such a quest is impossible, it is all too likely to engender cruel dissent and finally bloodshed.

¹ This title deliberately inverts that of my earlier essay 'Only theology overcomes metaphysics' in John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 36-55. However, this denotes no change of heart. The 'metaphysics' that is overcome in the former piece, is the onto-theological science of transcendental ontology that has prevailed at least since Suarez. The 'metaphysics' that is saved in the present piece is the perennial 'realism' that lasted from Plato to Aquinas and then was reworked by Eckhart and Cusanus. Here, characteristically, being is not a transcendental framework that includes even the divine; rather being and God are identified as the transcendent source in which all else participates.

Of course, the history of the 20thC was in part one of unparalleled state terror, of unbridled economic, international and inter-ethnic conflict. But this is naturally no proof that the anti-metaphysical endeavour was in any way the cause of these things, nor even that it was an impotent salve in the face of such violence. To the contrary, one could claim that the mood of sober finitism which prevailed in 20thC philosophy was intended in part to counteract ideologies which stemmed from 19thC idealist narratives about the necessary direction of history, but much more from positivist ideas about a new era in which physical science would support metaphysics by usurping its role and providing a new, scientific, all-encompassing world-view. From this perspective, one can see Marxism as a Comtianism of the left, and Fascism as a Comtianism of the right.

Despite the complicity of many famous 20thC philosophers in fostering these naturalistic ideologies, one could argue that, by and large, 20thC philosophy in both its major currents was as adverse to naturalistic reduction as it was to metaphysical or quasi-religious speculation. This is shown, above all, in Frege and Husserl's shared refusal of psychologism, or the view that the supposedly objective 'reasoning' carried out by 'mental process' is merely an epiphenomenon of the contingent physical operations of the brain of the human animal organism.²

Perhaps, in consequence, the overwhelming mood of 20thC philosophy was neither atheism nor religiosity but rather agnosticism.³ Indeed one could claim that it was just this agnosticism which distinguished it from 19thC philosophy. This was exhibited in

² See Martin Kusch, *Psychologism: a case study in the sociology of psychological knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1995)

³ This is asserted by Quentin Meillassoux in his *Après la finitude: essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006) 39-69

two ways: the one philosophical, the other religious in tone. Philosophically it was shown by what Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’. For this perspective, the non speculative-idealist view that our thought is indeed about a world external to us is balanced by an equal stress that the only world we know is the world *as* it is known to us.⁴ (Of course there are many exceptions to this, but as a generalisation it holds good.) The overall tone of 20thC philosophy was Kantian in the sense that epistemology not ontology dominated, but an epistemology of a quasi-realist bent. Dogmatism about how the world is in itself was largely eschewed, but likewise eschewed was any hypostasisation of human thinking-processes themselves.

Such a philosophical agnosticism encourages also a religious agnosticism. And here Wittgenstein was not atypical but rather representative in suggesting that there may well be a realm of mystery that can disclose itself to an awareness in excess of the rational. In social and political terms this view did not favour the intrusion of the religious into the public and political realm, governed by norms of free, open, rational discourse, but it did favour a respectful tolerance of private belief, and even, in Wittgenstein’s case, a sense of the importance of a religious social space of ritual and collective ethical activity. Again, Meillassoux is not without warrant in speaking of a new sort of ‘plural fideism’ here, still linked, as are all fideisms, with a certain measure of rational scepticism. However, this is no longer the committed fideism of, say, Pierre Bayle in the past – totally sceptical and indeed almost nihilistic by dint of his reasonings, committed Huguenot in Dutch exile by bent of his faith. This is now rather a more general formal recognition of the validity of faith as an idiom – a kind of faith in faith, if you like. Hence one has a general rational acknowledgement of the

⁴ Meillassoux, 13-111

possibility of many approaches to the one mystery, or else of a myriad private modes of access to rival mysteries.

One could contend, by contrast, as I have already suggested, that the terror of the 20thC in fact sprang from a 19thC hangover: from the persisting influence of idealist and positivist ideologies – and so from both metaphysical speculation and also from an unwarranted scientific claim to take the place of this speculation. From such a viewpoint, 1990 saw the final defeat of a certain reading of Hegel, besides the defeat of Marx, Comte and Spencer. The twin agnostic thrust of both phenomenology and analysis could be regarded as entirely in keeping with this moment. Hence the reputations of Frege, Wittgenstein, Husserl and even Heidegger (despite everything) naturally survived it. Thus it might be argued that the final arrival of a post-ideological era was fully in keeping with the anti-metaphysical thrust of 20thC philosophy.

I hasten to say that I regard this verdict as an overstatement, but, for the moment, let it stand.

As we now know, the end of history lasted, if that is not an oxymoron, for about eleven years. Since 9/11 we have been confronted with the apparent displacement of ideological terror by religious terror, whether perpetrated by small groups or by nation states. (Or at least we can speak of state and anti-state terror that is in part propelled by religious belief.)

In the face of this situation, Quentin Meillassoux argues that we should become less sanguine about the anti-metaphysical and ‘correlational’ character of 20thC philosophy. Is its modest, bounded humanism really as bland as it seems? Or does the self-limiting abjuration of the speculative tend to leave the field free for the voices of religious fanatics, whose rival claims a plural fideism is powerless to adjudicate? It is all very well for philosophy to foreswear any talk about ultimate reality, final truth and the nature of the good, but are there not social exigencies which tend inevitably to require at least implicit collective stances on these matters? Where reason has retreated, there, it seems, faith has now rushed in, often with violent consequences.

So if Meillassoux is right, the contemporary ‘return of religion’ is not evidence of either atavism or recidivism. Rather, we are talking about a fideism that is the inevitable complement of a modern, post-Kantian rationalism. And to Meillassoux one needs to add, I think, a further point. This is that the ‘modesty’ of modern epistemology can, of itself, be a source of terror. For in a neo-liberal world, where there is only consensus as to formal procedures which promote narrowly-defined utilitarian benefit combined with negative freedom of choice, all positive preferences, including fideistic ones, have to be simultaneously encouraged and yet severely policed if they are not to invade the rights of others. For plural fideism is inherently unstable – by insisting that the public sphere lie under the governance of transcendental reason, one cannot rule out the claims of religious belief, and yet these same claims, in their traditional forms, are most unlikely to accept their exclusion from the public forum, since their faith-perspectives include strong views as to how this realm should be both constituted and conducted.

Hence the more anti-metaphysical modernity encourages pure faith, the more it must also rein back its socio-political intrusions through the deployment of excessive policing; the more also it must strictly confine the public realm to the procedural and the pragmatically measurable. But the more it seeks to do these things, the more it must perforce generate a new sort of liberal totalitarianism involving constant surveillance and ever-more exhaustive indexing and categorising of all citizens and all their activities.

There are, therefore, some good reasons for now being concerned about a style of philosophy which eschews the business of trying to determine the ultimate categories of being (or of reality) and the fundamental ways in which they may be said – to put it in Aristotelian terms. Is it simply enough, by contrast, to try to determine merely the ultimate presuppositions of our human mode of thinking about the world and of living within it? For this can still leave the way open to a species-relativism which brackets the questions of an objective truth and goodness and thereby leaves them to be answered by the assertions of irrational cults. Do we not after all need a public rational discourse about substantive truth, goodness and beauty which will rescue these universal and necessary concerns from the hands of fanaticism?

Were this perception to take hold (and perhaps it is already beginning to do so), then it is possible that 21st C philosophy will revert to something more like a 19th C battle between naturalism on the one hand and more religiously-inclined speculations on the other.

But it is not precisely the case that we face the prospect of a new ‘return of metaphysics’. For it is now time to qualify certain statements made above. The substitution of epistemology for metaphysics could itself sometimes bend back into the metaphysical. So, for example, in the case of both Russell and the early Wittgenstein, logical atomism became the basis for an ontology which could declare that ‘the world is everything that is the case’. And Heidegger’s relation to Husserl essentially repeated Hegel’s relation to Kant. The latter (to oversimplify) restricted valid theoretical philosophy to a listing of the fundamental modes under which we can know; Hegel turned this critique of speculation into a new sort of speculation by giving ontologically absolute status to the human process of knowing and its historical unfolding. Somewhat similarly, Husserl restricted philosophical knowledge to the exploration of the fundamental modes of givenness in appearance; Heidegger later turned the givenness of being to problematic human awareness and practice (*Dasein*) into a disclosure, again unfolding through history, of Being itself.

At times, therefore, in 20thC thought, agnosticism was somewhat breached, by hypostasising the epistemological. In both the two cases cited however, it was at the same time confirmed. Wittgenstein offered a purely immanent ontology which still reserved ‘the mystical’; Heidegger, while mostly plundering and usurping (dishonestly) the theological legacy,⁵ in order to articulate a new sort of quasi-religious ontology of his own, nevertheless left open a Lutheran space for a positive discourse of revelation that might possibly break through the field of ‘being in general’.

⁵ See, for example Phillippe Capelle, ‘Heidegger, lecteur de Saint Augustin’ in *Finitude et Mystère* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), 155-68

And in both cases one appears to have a speculative excess which exceeds the inherent scope of either the logical or the phenomenological, respectively -- how can the discourse of what there can be pronounce on what there most fundamentally is? How can the discourse of the modes of appearance say how being itself ineluctably appears to us, much less what being in itself may be?

So one is left after all with a confirmation of the anti-metaphysical agnostic character of 20th thought . But for the reasons we have seen, should not this idiom be questioned in the face of religious and neo-liberal violence – both the terror of pure faith and the terror of pure reason, whose collusional purity agnosticism helps to promote and preserve? Should not both its correlationism and its encouragement of plural fideism be called into question.⁶

However, the agnosticism of 20thC thought, as we have seen, charted a mid-course between naturalism and religious speculation. So it would seem that if one questions it, then one must veer either to the left or to the right. And there is considerable evidence that this is already happening. One reaction, in part, to (understandable) fear of neo-religiosity is to espouse again a scientism of the Dawkins of Hawkings variety where, essentially, science itself does the work of metaphysics and offers a comprehensive vision of all of reality. A large public readership for difficult works expounding such views suggests that this scientism fulfils an immense social and psychological need. Meanwhile, within philosophy itself there are many endorsements of this physicalism or else what one might describe as expositions of a kind of ‘neo-pythagoreanism’. By this I mean the view that that the only categories of

⁶ This question can be seen as also in the spirit of Pope Benedict’s Regensburg address.

the real presupposed by the physical sciences are those of mathematics: physical reality is then regarded as the aleatory instantiation of pre-existing mathematical possibilities. At times Quine seemed to suggest that mathematics itself supplied an ontology; much more recently, in terms of a philosophy that somewhat bridges the analytic/continental divide, Alain Badiou has attempted to present set theory as an ontology, and category theory as the link between the ontological ground and the realm of actual appearances.⁷ Badiou's political alliances are specifically Marxist and Maoist, and his tolerance for revolutionary terror as a temporary measure of the State leave one fearful that his mode of evading an agnosticism that colludes with fideistic violence merely passes one back into the arms of an equally dangerous naturalistic ideology.

For all that, Badiou and his follower (in some measure) Meillassoux make two important points about the post-Kantian metaphysical legacy which broadly run in favour of the pre-Kantian and yet already modern metaphysical approaches of Galileo, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. The first point is Badiou's: Kant's (and later Wittgenstein's) finitism is at variance with the specifically modern discovery of the immanence of the infinite with Cusanus, the primacy of the infinite (over the finite) with Descartes, the calculability of infinite quantities with Leibniz and finally the plurality and non-totality of the infinite with Cantor (who, as Badiou points out, was in many ways a Thomistic philosopher and theologian).⁸ For this reason, it is not that a speculative use of mathematics by philosophy is arbitrary; it is rather that mathematics has itself made a controlled speculation about the infinite newly possible. (One can agree with Badiou about the primacy of the infinite while still

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* trans Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum 2005); *Logiques des Mondes: L'être et l'événement, 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2006)

insisting that Nicholas of Cusa's more 'negative' understanding of this priority – the infinite is projected by us as in-finite, is preferable to the Scotist-Cartesian tendency to say that we can grasp infinity 'clearly and distinctly' as a 'positive' notion, even if we cannot fully comprehend it.)

The second point is Meillassoux's, in part after Jean-René Vernes.⁹ Ever since Galileo and Descartes, and still more since Darwin, modern science has presumed to speak of the way that physical reality really is, in itself, independently of human observation. But the post Kantian 'correlationist' view, which transcendently restricts us to talk about how the world is for us only, is again at variance with this. One can add here, that this is based in Kant upon a wholly dubious claim to be able to intuit *a priori* extra-logical necessities (the doctrine of *a priori* synthesis). Without this claim, the Kantian 'middle' of critical idealism is surely derailed.

This second point, however, is not as clearly defensible as the first. Surely Meillassoux exaggerates his case, by playing down the role of the divine observer in Galileo and Descartes, as guaranteeing the objectivity of external reality. Moreover his supporting claim that correlationism especially breaks down with relation to the non-human past seems entirely doubtful. Why do evolutionary theories as developed by strictly scientific techniques of tested hypothesis (insofar as such theories do, indeed, respect such protocols) necessarily imply the strongest mode of realism as Meillassoux avers? Surely they only require the minimum philosophical assertion that

⁹ Jean-René Vernes, *Critique de la Raison Aleatoire ou Descartes contre Kant* (Paris: Aubier Montagne, 1982)

they establish (approximately) how the pre-human natural world would have appeared to human beings had they been present to observe it?

Nevertheless, Meillassoux surely has a point. Modern science is scarcely epistemologically neutral, in the way that strict correlationism requires. Rather, it has an innate drive towards situating humanity in terms of the cosmos and not the inverse -- a drive to 'round upon' the human subject itself in explanatory terms, even if certain branches of science, like Quantum physics, may have discovered in objective, 'cosmological' terms that the bounds of human perspective is itself an aspect of a perspectival and relativised physical reality. And it does seem that Kant was at times at variance with this constitutive thrust of the modern scientific outlook. Thus, for example, the supposedly over-speculative Christian Wolff supported the enterprise of an experimental psychology which the supposedly critical Kant eschewed in the name of a (fantasised) *a priori* rigour.¹⁰ (It is surely possible to suppose that experimental observation of human mental workings will reveal certain patterns contingently rooted in our physicality, even though one would have problematically to allow for cultural variation and one should not dogmatically expect that this approach will by any means account for all or even much of the behaviour of a free and rational animal. But even premodern theology allowed for the influence of the physical humours upon the human mind.)

As against Meillassoux, one may validly doubt the competence of natural science to encompass all of even our material reality (since it not entirely predictable and controllable) and one might wish to argue (with both Aquinas and Descartes, in

¹⁰ See Frédéric Nef, *Qu'est ce que la métaphysique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004) 101-130

different modes) that philosophical realism requires an extra-human presence in the cosmos, since in truth we cannot hope to speak of ‘how things are in themselves’ as being somewhat manifest in ‘the way they are shown to us’ unless we allow that ‘the way they are shown to us’ is irreducibly an appearance of things to consciousness, a being aware of things which we cannot in any way elide from our sense of ‘thing’ as such. To this degree no spiritual metaphysics has ever avoided some sort of ‘hypostasisation’ of the correlational, although older realisms, as opposed to speculative idealisms, posited rather a participation of our mode of correlation in a higher, hidden one, as opposed to an absolutisation of our cognitive situation or its gradual development.

However, as with the contrast between Kant and Wolff just given, it remains the case that Meillassoux is right insofar as Kant’s attempt to give science an anthropomorphic shape (which sometimes went to almost anthroposophical lengths, as with his absolutisation of left and right handedness, on which his entire doctrine of absolute space depends), rather than an immanently cosmic or transcendently theological one, is at variance with the basic thrust of the scientific enterprise.

But to these points of Badiou and Meillassoux concerning the post -Kantian correlationism which dominated 20thC philosophy, one can add three further ones, which considerably qualify their Galilean and Cartesian orientations.

The first is that the correlationist enterprise does not concern real constitutive relations between being and thinking. Such relations would involve the Aristotelian idea that finite being in some sense ‘realises’ itself as human thought, and

equivalently that the thought of a thing is so really related to that thing that in some sense it is identical with it. The ontological basis for this in Aristotle is, of course, the notion that the same form can exist in one mode as materially instantiated, and in another, more abstract mode within a human or other sort of mind. By contrast, the 'correlation' of mind and world in 20thC philosophy is more one of accidental conjuncture ultimately determined by physical causality. Here the mind 'represents' to itself elements of the world with which it can by no means become identical, or at least it represents the appearances of these elements. To sustain a 'correlation' here, involves showing how the *a priori* thought-processes of the mind can be somehow 'matched' with empirical information. To exhibit this connection one must first of all show the separation: both the 'givenness' on the side of the transcendental categories of understanding, and the equal 'givenness' of items of information which instance these categories in some measure or idiom.

To a considerable degree, analytic philosophy in its classical guise depended upon this dividing and ruling, this Kantian benign synthesis of rationalism and empiricism. However, a post-analytic phase was inaugurated after the deconstruction of 'the myth of the given'. Sellars and then Quine and finally Rorty showed that the analytic is always already selectively synthetic, that the empirical is always already over-determined by an interpretative application of the categorial. Inversely the latter is but contingently constructed through an approximate and often culturally specific sense of the general culled from a selective empirical trawl.

In this way, within post-analytic thought, metaphysical and transcendental presuppositions, along with the practice of empirical observation, were once more

historicised, in an effective reversion to the position of Collingwood. For this new outlook, one could say that the strange and yet basic ideas which we must presuppose in order to think at all (the ‘grammar’ of normal ‘empirical’ ideas which are ideas of ‘things’ in an everyday, common-sense fashion) may indeed be to a large extent those fundamental (‘transcendental’, ‘metaphysical’, whatever.....) ideas which humans as such must presuppose, but since we can only reason by deploying the linguistic terms that we inherit, and we can never fully ‘round upon’ these terms to assess their own fundamental presuppositions – since they themselves are what we must most basically assume as the only terms which permit us to think at all – we cannot perfectly isolate metaphysical from cultural presuppositions, even if we rightly wish to eschew any relativistic counter-dogmatism.

In this way, the ‘linguistic turn’ itself finally defeated not only the reductive analytic programme, but also any merely transcendentalist or phenomenalist construal of the significance of this turn. Instead, one might say that those post-Baroque ‘metaphysicians of language’, namely Vico, Lowthh, Hamann and Herder were retrospectively vindicated: the linguistic turn, most radically understood, is *not* a ‘linguistic idealism’ which merely treats the fundamental grammar of human language (whether cultural or universal) as though it were a linguistification of the Kantian *a priori* categories of pre-linguistic thought. In terms of the latter, we ‘inwardly’ construct a human world by theoretically and imaginatively organising sensory information according to inwardly constrained norms. In the linguistified version of this, the constraints of language force us to construct within the space of interpersonal culture our human version of nature which is external to this. However, language belongs surely within our primary artisanal interaction with the external

world, such that we only reflexively possess an ‘interiority’ as a result of this interaction – this was perhaps the later Wittgenstein’s most crucial message. But clearly this interaction is always both receptive and *externally* constructive (as of matter by the moulding of the hand, not of sensation by mind), such that it is impossible to disentangle the two components. The world is how we take it, yet what we take and modify is always the real world and always involves us in real relations to that world. (Trees are seen and are at once seen as shelter; they are buildings before buildings, while wooden buildings allow us to see both trees anew, and shelter anew, and then to observe the trees now more for themselves and for the other relations in which they stand. Far down the line of human history, the British WW 2 *De Havilland Mosquito* fighter-plane revealed anew the suppleness of the ash-tree – of which it was constructed – beyond even anything that had been disclosed by Anglo-Saxon spearshafts. Likewise, water observed is already water drunk and traversed and channelled, while fountains show us new and symbolic aspects of this liquid foundation for our lives.)

Thus our ideas of what is there, involve always material symbols which historically became gradually abstracted into the spoken and written signs of language. In consequence, any word at once denotes a fact and an interpretation, in such a fashion as to render both empiricism and even a Kantian, critical idealism impossible. For we always arrive too late to disentangle what we have received from what we have constructed or what we have constructed from what we have stumbled upon. (The manipulation of wood discovers new properties of wood and ‘arrives’ at the actuality of the realised wooden dwelling.) For this reason if the natural is always already for

us cultural, the cultural never exits the natural and what is ‘fundamental’ for culture remains an attempt to discern what is ‘fundamental’ for nature.

Inevitably, then, the dissolution of the ‘myth of the given’ led to a revived pragmatism. Variants of the latter, however (continuing the blindness of William James in this respect) have usually failed to see that merely ‘what works’ remains too much on the empiricist side of the divide, whereas we can only define the *pragmata* that we seek in all their variety beyond mere utility, in terms of our obscure *theoremata*, which remotely anticipate ‘what they will look like’. Nevertheless, it remains inversely the case that we can only explicate our ‘theorems’ by imagining in advance, and later pursuing in practice, all their consequences and implications. In other words, a non-reductive pragmatism, free of the myth of the given, would still require a mode of metaphysical speculation whose form cannot be dictated simply by ‘pragmatic criteria’ (as even Peirce perhaps too much presupposed).

The second further point is that if we cannot perfectly isolate metaphysical from historical presuppositions, then this goes along with the fact that we also cannot ever perfectly separate ‘grammatical’ category from ‘empirical’ content. A necessary vagueness pervades the meaning of categories like ‘substance’ or ‘accident’, or ‘quality’ or ‘attribute’ or ‘relation’, such that they are not just exemplified in particular empirical instances (as, for example, ‘roundness’ is by a circle), but also further interpreted as categories by these exemplifications, even though the examples cannot ever exhaust their range. It is partly for this reason that philosophers can never agree upon a fundamental list of categories – for example, is ‘relation’ irreducibly categorial, or is it merely short-hand for the relative constancy of merely accidental

and contingent conjunctures? Is there an irreducible category of ‘quality’ as denoting something that must be ‘attached’ to a ‘substance’, or are there in reality only accidental ‘bundles’ of particular items, or indeed bundles of particularised attributes, sometimes today termed ‘tropes’? The most reduced ontology would perhaps only admit the category of *res* taken as a univocal transcendental, thereby denying that reality must occur within any framework of ‘natural necessity’ (for example, always within some combination of the categorial terms listed by Aristotle) or else that it can only be known by us within the bounds of ‘transcendental necessity’ (for example Kant’s *a priori* conditions of understanding). Thereby reality is exiled from any mode of necessity whatsoever, other than that of logical necessity, which can itself be reduced to the diverse modes of consistency that follow upon the adoption of diverse initial axioms.

If, by contrast, one embraces some notion of ‘natural’ or else ‘transcendental’ necessity, then can one come up with an incontrovertible and exhaustive list of fundamental categories? Here it should be remarked that there is something of a divide at the outset of the history of metaphysics: Aristotle sought to provide a definitive repertoire of categories, and so to give a complete list of all the basic ‘hows’ under which things fall? (How does such and such exist? As quantity, accident, relation and so forth.) Plato, on the other hand, was very unclear and fluctuating about the number of forms, and exactly what range of finite kinds of things required formal exemplars. While neoplatonism sometimes sought to be more specific here, one might argue that this unclarity has to do with a sense that the boundary between the ‘grammatical’ and the ‘empirical’, while recognisable, is also murky. And of course this murkiness is most of all shown in Plato’s controversial view that actual things in

this world exist as ‘participating’ in their formal exemplars, while inversely the latter are not simply terms of art, nor just shadowy ‘universal’ aspects of real substantive things as for Aristotle (though also for Plato, insofar as forms are reflected within the material world) but themselves ‘things’ in the most eminent possible sense. (This notion was of course perpetuated by Christian theology in terms of the notion of divine ideas for which for example ‘the tree’ in God is far more tree than any created trees – as Aquinas for example affirms.)

Aristotle’s providing of an exhaustive list of the modes of ‘how’ things can be, is itself linked to his concentration on the question of ‘how’. This concentration provides us with a second important point of contrast with Plato, who is much more interested in the question of derivation or origination of things and so in the ‘why’ as well as the ‘how’, and even in the answer to the ‘why’ as alone fully describing the ‘how’.

Aristotle’s relative neglect of the issue of ‘why’ notoriously gives rise to a lacuna in his thought, as Adrian Pabst has recently once again pointed out.¹¹ Within his metaphysics, the formed substances that emerge in the course of time are lured forward by the first mover to their actualisation, but not clearly generated by the first mover in the first place. Likewise, the distinct modes in which being occurs (which give rise to the ways in which ‘it may be said’) apparently just *are*, and do not proceed from each other – privative being from motion from quality from substance from thinking substance, for example (as in neoplatonism).

¹¹ In an as yet unpublished Cambridge doctoral thesis.

By contrast, in Plato the finite ‘hows’ only exist in terms of the causal ‘whys’ – by participation in the forms. But this priority of the ‘why’ is nonetheless made far clearer within the neoplatonic synthesis of Plato with Aristotle which provided a much more complete account of how hyper-substantive form engenders formalised material thing, and also allowed (from Plotinus onwards) that there is in some sense a form of everything that exists. For now participation is also a hierarchical generation from the One: first of all of the formal categories themselves and then successively of particulars – a *schema* that dominates (via the Syriac and Arabic transmissions) most of the ‘Aristotelianism’ of the early to high Middle Ages. Here, because the ‘how’ is always led back to the question of ‘why’ and only fully answered through this reduction, there is a kind of continuum between ‘grammatical’ category and ‘empirical’ content and a division of the two more in terms of degree than in terms of fundamental kind: qualitative division is subordinate to the ‘quasi-quantitative’ of the quasi-mathematical *series*. And indeed it is Platonism’s greater attention to the mathematical paradigm for all identity and difference that permits this: for a number is ambivalently an empirical ‘thing’ and a category or ‘set’ of kinds of things. (For example, ‘2’ is both an empirical position, and a definition of numbers occurring within a particular set – the set of all ‘2’s’; likewise two apples are really there, but also only really there as a ‘sorting’ of these apples). And arguably, Aristotle is not so much less tyrannically dominated by this mathematical paradigm (a common view) as less attentive to the implications of a paradigm that he, also, embraces, as in his recognition in the *Metaphysics* that *eidōs* is, in one fundamental aspect, number.¹²

¹² See John Milbank, ‘The Thomistic Telescope’ in *The Catholic Philosophical Association of America Quarterly*, forthcoming.

Now I wish to suggest something that may seem bizarre, but which I think merits consideration. There may be a certain structural homology between the neoplatonic tracing of the how back up to the why on the one hand, and the historicist qualification of metaphysics on the other (and again, this is perhaps a very Collingwood-like thought.) For in either case, one claims that one can only fully describe something in terms of origin. In either case also, this ‘tracing back’ only appears fallacious (‘the genetic fallacy’) if one assumes that a static synchronic functionality has priority over a dynamic process of becoming which constantly shifts the relations and emphases within a synchronic system – so in effect begging the question. Of course, in one case one is speaking of a transcendent origin, in the other of an origin within historical time. Nevertheless, historicism, because it avers that the humanly universal and the culturally categorial are not readily separable, tends to have a Platonic bias towards the ‘confusion’ of the grammatical with the empirical. It will tend to see humanly-assumed universals as vague in their generality and also as self-unfolding through empirical exemplification and themselves partially generative of particulars through the course of their self-explication. (Of course one can see something like this in Hegel and Schelling; but one can borrow this from them while still prescinding from their account of dialectical processes or their privileging of identity and will, respectively.)

And if modern historicism often reveals a certain Platonic affinity, then one can also conversely suggest that the requirement in Plato for a very concrete, specific encounter with an event in time as needed in order to ‘trigger’ our recollection of the forms (whereas in Aristotle there is no forgetting of the categories and so no need for the arrival of new events to stimulate our remembering of them), suggests a certain

kind of proto-historicism. This was, indeed, augmented by the ‘theurgic’ reading of Plato’s writings after Iamblichus, for which philosophical speculation can only be completed by the eventful descent of the divine into ever-renewed human ritual enactments. Augustine’s modifications of Plotinus’s ‘interiorisation’ of the Platonic tradition should be seen (against most usual views) as parallel to this: the route to his ‘remembering’ of God lay through his biography and its recollection which both involved crucial events of renewed ‘illumination’, penetrating within. Furthermore, the Christian disclosure of our total dependency on God as created from nothing and hence the drastic consequences of our sinful separation from God, allow Augustine newly to make all of human history central for philosophy: the record of truth as the record of recollection is now indeed the ‘hyper-theurgic’ account of the divine descent into time by forming a worshipping community offering a true sacrifice first as Israel, and then as the Church. The latter arises after the full meaning of this descent (of which Israel was but a foreshadowing) has been revealed in the Incarnation and God’s own fulfilment of atoning sacrifice through the offering of innocent humanity to himself by fully combining this offering with the eternal ‘return’ of the Son to the Father. Indeed, in the *Confessiones*, it is only the recollection of time which ensures that the meaning of time for the soul ceases to be a nihilistic ‘dispersal’, and can become instead a ‘musical’ integration of past, present and future which shadows the eternal. Thus Augustine’s new ‘historicisation’ of both theology and philosophy, while dependent wholly upon a Biblical vision, nonetheless also augments certain latent features of the Platonic legacy. (I would also argue that it is this parallel to the theurgic that assists a later blending of Augustine with Dionysius and the consequent Maximian tradition – directly indebted to pagan theurgy via Proclus – in both Eriugena and Aquinas.)

I shall return to the analogy between Platonism and historicism presently. For now, a third further point needs to be made about the post-Kantian legacy of modern philosophy. This concerns the treatment of being itself. It is all very well to say that ‘ontology’ concerns the main modes in which being must be uttered (as Aristotle declared), but, as Aquinas realised beyond Aristotle (having absorbed Boethius’s more rigorously logical and neoplatonically influenced reflections on *esse*), being is not only transcategorical, it also transcends the contrast between category and content, just like that other transcendental *Unum* (also extremely important for Aquinas who stresses the divine simplicity as much or more than the divine *esse*), which, significantly is hyper-mathematical. (The number ‘one’ both most absolutely is only itself as complete, and at the same time is what most ‘numbers’, allows one ‘to count’ at all, because it is the very paradigm of all singular identity. Of transcendental ‘unity’ this is even more true.)

Being transcends the contrast between the category and content: substance is, but a mouse equally is, and the dirt which the mouse has today picked up on its fur equally is also. For Aquinas, this opened the path to saying that beings, especially the higher sort of beings, are more defined by the actuality of what they do (‘second act’) and by the actual ends which they reach, (‘third act’) than by the initially-given characteristics of their inert substantial being (‘first act’). This means, in effect, that his metaphysics of *esse* itself opens out the excess over ontology of the event, as

argued by Michel Corbin and Phillip Rosemann, and itself confounds the priority of ontology over history, yet without simply reversing this priority.¹³

Similar considerations apply to other transcendental and transcategorical terms like *ens, res, aliquid, unum, verum, bonum* and *pulchrum* (to list the major medieval examples). A particular and a universal both in some sense ‘are’; they are both in some sense ‘things’; they are both also ‘some-thing’ in such a mode that to be at all they must have some mark of distinction from all other things.¹⁴ Likewise, the empirical can be as unified as much as the abstracted; a thing may (for Aquinas) be as ‘true to itself’ as we are to it; excellence may be shown in the flourishing of anything and not just in correct practical judgement. Finally our sense of beauty is forced to hover between vague general norms (proportion, integrity, radiance, partial disclosure etc) and specific exemplums that can never be definitive (such that the history of art is in part the history of the discovery of new and surprising modes of beauty – tending to prove that it is, indeed, a transcendental).

The above statements are, I think, in keeping with ordinary common-sense. And yet the entire Kantian and post-Kantian enterprise depends upon a wholly questionable (and yet not perhaps demonstrably ‘wrong’, for all its counter-intuitivity) handling of the transcendentals which, by rendering them more subjective than objective (reduced to the main ‘aspects of all things for us’), ensures that they become entirely ‘grammatical’ and not at all (in however obscure and problematic a sense, as the Middle Ages admitted) ‘empirical’, and thereby sink to the level of the quasi-

¹³ See John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001); Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omnis ens est Aliquid: Introduction à la lecture du ‘système’ philosophique de Thomas d’Aquin* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1996)

¹⁴ On this, see Rosemann, *Omnis ens est aliquid*, supremely.

categorially general and cease to be genuinely transcategorial. Thus, for example, for Kant, a flower in its entirety, cannot now be true as ‘true to itself’, but can only be related to the category true in so far as it is known about, just as it is only aspects of the flower which for Aristotle would fall under the categories of form, substance, accident and so forth (since categories are not for him or for Aquinas ‘transcendentals’ which apply to anything whatsoever and so to the totality of any particular thing).

A further consequence of this limitation of the meaning of ‘transcendental’ (which begins long before Kant, as far back as Duns Scotus) is that the full ‘convertibility’, the total overlapping of all the transcendentals grounded in divine simplicity -- such that these paradoxically perfectly-coinciding ‘aspects’ or *passiones* are only distinguished by our *modus cognoscendi* -- is now compromised (beginning again with Scotus).¹⁵ For since, in Kant, ‘the good’, for example, concerns only a certain way in which we subjectively take things, things as good need no longer necessarily be beautiful or true, or even ‘be’ as such at all.

But this reduction of the transcendentals to the quasi-categorial then has a de-historicising consequence. In Aquinas, an entirely contingent, freely chosen deed of charity exercised on one particular unique day in time ‘is’ in one sense as much as anything else (even though ‘things’ in their totality may exhibit degrees of participation in being); is a ‘thing’ and ‘some-thing’ as much as anything else; is likewise fully an instantiation of the integrally unified, the true, the good and the beautiful. But in post-Kantian thought an event can only be a subordinate empirical

¹⁵ For most of the points about Scotus in this essay, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: on the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 121-67 and ‘Duns Scotus: his historical and contemporary significance’ in *Modern Theology* Vol 21 No 4 October 2005, 543-74.

instance ‘for us’ of quasi-categorial unity, difference, truth, goodness or beauty. This means that the ‘feed-back loop’ from event to category is now lost: a particular work of charity as performed by a saint or by Jesus can now no longer re-define for us our whole sense of good as such, since this is exhaustively and formally defined by the categorial imperative; a strangely beautiful person or painting can likewise no longer re-configure our entire sense of beauty, since this is also formally and entirely defined as the experience of the ineffable co-ordination of all the faculties.

Hence event has sunk to the level of the ‘illustrative’ and while Hegel of course questioned this, he still, by articulating a material logic of becoming, ultimately folded back the contingent into the categorial, or else reduced it to the indifferently random. This applies also to Kant’s treatment of ‘being’, although this point may be less immediately obvious. Certainly Kant, as inheriting from late scholasticism the thesis of the univocity of being, thinks that anything that is, from the highest to the lowest, equally and fully ‘is’. So it might then appear to be the case that for Kant ‘being’ is much more of a genuine transcategorial transcendental in the traditional sense. And it is relevant here that the *Critique of Pure Reason* mainly concerns the topics of ‘special metaphysics’ -- God, the soul and the cosmos – in the Suarezian tradition as transmitted via Wolff, and not the topic of ‘general metaphysics’ – *ens* as such, and its divisions. For Kant’s implicit and elsewhere more articulated general ontology somewhat crosses the critical divide: both phenomena – experienced only by the positing of ‘the transcendental object’ as that obscure ‘thingness’ which binds appearing properties together -- and noumena equally are, (even if the latter do not reliably disclose the latter) and practical reason *rationally* establishes the existence of the noumena.

However, Kant's famous view that 'being is not a predicate' sustains a post-Scotist reduction of even being to quasi-categoriality, the status of a quasi-genus. This is precisely because, if being is not an attribute, it is in reality for Kant a supposed bare, 'colourless' attribute of mere existence as such. If the thousand thalers exist, then their 'thalerness' has nothing to do with their existing and therefore their 'existence' is like the most thinned-out generic property imaginable – something you can see as being there, yet cannot see as possessing any characteristics – like looking at the most limpid imaginable water. For this reason, existence teaches us nothing, save that an essence has been exemplified. We know all there is to be known about the thousand thalers if they are merely fictional; hence the fact that they exist – their event-status – is once more reduced to the merely illustrative.

By contrast, for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the possible thousand thalers would be regarded as a possibility only gleaned from the fact that, in actuality, there has really arisen such a currency, sometimes traded in terms of such an amount, and only valid because real metals have been taken as valuable and have been stamped with the head of a certain monarch. This modal priority given to the actual means, for Aquinas (if not for Aristotle), that being is not a 'bare attribute' to which other purely essential qualities are super-added, but rather that all the qualities of, say, a coin, are primarily there not as possibilities but as actualities, as new manifestations of being as such, instances of further participation in being. In this way, for Aquinas, a new actuality can reveal to us 'more' of *esse* and there can be a hierarchy of more or less intense disclosures of *esse*: while an accident 'is' in one sense as much as substance, the latter is a more primary site of being, and existential unities of substances, accidents,

qualities etc can be arranged hierarchically: humans existing more richly than stones, for example and humans who reach their true telos through acts of charity more richly than their egotistic fellows.

Therefore, with the shift in meaning of ‘transcendental’ and especially of the transcendental *esse* from Scotus through to Kant and beyond, actuality is modally subordinated to possibility and in consequence the *event is reduced to the status of the illustrative*. The delusion of Protestant historicism (Hegel, Schelling etc, ultimately rooted in Protestant scholasticism) is to imagine that a prizing of novelty favours the possible over the actual, whereas a genuinely Catholic historicism (Augustine, Aquinas, Cusanus, Pico, Bérulle, Vico, Péguy – yet also the confessionally Lutheran Herder) grasps that the reverse is the case. For the possible can only be either the logically pre-determined or else the reserve of sheer power and blind will, whereas the actual alone can present us with a genuinely new possibility (and open out yet further ones, in the way that an original work of art can give rise to an entire new genre), since it can show us a truth or a beauty or a goodness inseparable from its own contingent enactment. If the actual only illustrates the possible then the only novelty it can exhibit will be that of the arbitrary and so of the violent.....But if the possible is abstracted from the actual (and how can we know what even logic would be if we lived under entirely different material circumstances?) then it is truly possible that we may always enjoy an expanded sense of possibility.

In short, post-Kantian philosophy, including 20thC philosophy, has been mostly committed to essentialism and to the priority of the possible over the actual, in such a way as to subordinate event to category. In this lineage, an affirmation of ‘existence’

is seen as merely the punctilinear confirmation that such and such an essence has been here instantiated, rather than as the acknowledgment of a contingently-arriving actuality that might re-define for us what a particular thing is, what it is capable of and how it might be in the future. In the same fashion, as we have seen, after Kant the fundamental modes of truth and goodness and the experience of beauty became sedimented in an *a priori* fixity. As Ludger Honnefelder has shown, this is basically because Kant had inherited, in a long lineage from Duns Scotus, a re-definition of a transcendental term as specifying in advance the exact formal ‘range’ of our access to goodness, truth, beauty and so forth, rather than, as for Aquinas, opening out for us an unlimited and but obscurely anticipated horizon of meaning which is real and objective and yet inexhaustible.¹⁶ This is in part the reason why Aquinas says that everything is more true in God than it is for us. This means that for him, to say something true regarding anything whatsoever, is first of all to identify with that thing and then, as it were, together with that thing attempt to intimate something of its depth of significance. Of course this appears ‘wild’ to modern philosophy -- which is why it is ludicrous for the likes of Anthony Kenny to claim to be Aquinas’s even remote progeny.

The line that stretches from Scotus to Kant attempts to tame this wildness. But the taming depends upon our being able in advance to determine the formal range of transcendental and perfection terms like ‘being’ and ‘goodness’. Such a claim is itself arguably a form of metaphysical dogmatism that lacks even Aquinas’s mystical alibi. At least the latter, one could say, is critically on the side of the inherently wild ‘vagueness’ of transcendental terms. This inherent vagueness tends to encourage,

¹⁶ Ludger Honnefelder, *La métaphysique comme science transcendentale entre le Moyen Âge et les temps modernes* trad. Isabelle Mandrella et al (Paris: PUF 2002)

even if it does not rationally legitimate, the understanding of these terms as ontologically generative in a realist sense, and as raising the instance of the event to ontological equality with general circumstances. (One should, of course, acknowledge that Heidegger in his own albeit questionable mode – due to his contorted dishonesty about his theological sources of inspiration – achieved just these insights.)

One can claim then, that 20thC philosophy, defined as anti-metaphysical correlational agnosticism, has collapsed or is collapsing for five major reasons -- some more recognised than others.

These are: 1. Renewed attention to the implications of the modern priority of the infinite over the finite; 2. Likewise to the implications of the ‘non-humanist’ bias of modern science towards mind-independent reality; 3. The deconstruction of givenness; 4. the resurgence of concern with the category of the event and finally 5. The new genealogical tracing by many intellectual historians of modern philosophy back to its roots in post-Scotist scholasticism, which exposes certain buried metaphysical and even theological presuppositions that may well remain open to a Thomistic critique.

One should add that variants of these critical questionings apply to phenomenology as well as to analysis. Heidegger, also, was committed to the priority of the possible over the actual and since he meant this in a non-logicist sense, it helps to foment a nihilistic tone in his *opus*. Similarly, the critique of ‘the myth of the given’ can be matched by a deconstruction of the notion of reduction to a fundamental donation of archi-phenomena to the human mind, as partially carried out by Derrida against Husserl in

his surely (despite attempts) basically irrefutable *Voice and Phenomenon*. The isolation of fundamental categorial donations, supposedly free of speculative decision in the mode of Levinas, Marion and Henry, appears to be a sleight of interpretative hand. One can agree, instead, with Alain Badiou, that there can only be a plural phenomenology of various contingent natural and cultural ‘worlds’ with their own dominant logics of manifestation, always liable to historical revision.¹⁷ By the same token, if there are no *foundational* donations after the manner of Husserl or even Heidegger, then nothing justifies the idea that the appearances of things do not belong to the real ‘transcendent’ exterior world rather than to our interior constitution of such a world, as in Husserl’s transcendentially idealist idiom.

So it would seem that now, in the early 21stC, we are in a post-analytic and post-phenomenological situation. Correlationism has been deconstructed through exposure of the myth of the given, while agnosticism designed to ward off fanaticism appears now to foment it both directly and indirectly. Thus we see a return, in reaction, to a naturalistic ‘metaphysics of the left’. However, this return, as in the case of Dawkins, seems to hold out a prospect of radical intolerance of religion which would surely undermine all human freedoms as such. Likewise, a return, with Badiou, to a materialist version of ‘neo-pythagoreanism’ holds out a new prospect of renewed state terror in the name of an implausibly arriving utopia.

So what of the metaphysically ‘rightwards’ alternative, which I hasten to say I do not in any way correlate with political conservatism. Do we not now need again a rational discourse regarding the mysterious and the transcendent if we are to judge, as we

¹⁷ See Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes*

must, between faith and faith and to enable a dialogue to take place between them? That would mean a recovery of metaphysics as ‘wisdom’, which is one of the terms used to describe this discourse from Aristotle onwards.

2. Faith, Reason and terror in the 21st C

The answer to that is broadly yes, but I must enter some important caveats. This is not an appeal for a restored natural or rational theology. Indeed the latter, a purely post-Kantian early-modern phenomenon, is part of the post-Kantian problem, whether through its perpetuation or through a reaction against it which confuses it with a genuine metaphysics or theological ontology. Pure reason that purports to arrive at God or the soul or an ordered cosmos is deluding itself, and so only further assists the cause of agnosticism or atheism. Moreover, the conclusions that it reaches are so thin that they have to be supplemented with those of faith or revelation. And the very deluded idea of an uninflected reason without arational assumptions or emotional bias encourages, inversely, the notion that faith-commitments are simply ‘beyond reason’. In this way, natural theology, still more than scepticism, is the ally of a partial fideism.

Likewise, all attempts to identify a common rational core between different religious faiths, or even to try to isolate a shared method of reading texts and shared criteria for authentic religious practice, to serve as the basis of dialogue, paradoxically foment

fundamentalisms.¹⁸ For beyond the shared core, the differences tend to become a no-go area, in such a fashion that they are all equally validated in their supra-rationality. It is perfectly possible that a religious fundamentalist will acknowledge in an inter-faith context a shared rational theological core and yet still insist dogmatically upon the least justifiable aspects of his version of his own tradition – in the Islamic case, for example, on the divinely-dictated- to- the- prophet and unerring character of the *Koran*.

Instead of ‘natural theology’ and a ‘common religious core’, what we perhaps need to recover is a sense that philosophy itself, as for the Greeks, for the Indians, for the Muslim Iranians and for the modern Russian Orthodox tradition, can be rooted in a rational reflection upon religious commitments. Inversely, we need to recall that for Augustine and the Greek Church fathers, as for Philo and for several Sufi philosophers, revelation does not basically provide us with new information, but is rather a reflection upon events in performance and in utterance that are deemed to reconfigure our perception of transcendental being as such – or in the case of the event of the Incarnation in Christianity, actually to reconfigure the real ontological relation of finite to infinite being. In Augustine, as in Aquinas, ontology itself was theologically modified in a way that acknowledged the openness of finite being to the possibility of incarnation and the descent of the Spirit, besides that of the human spirit to the deified reception of the beatific vision of the Trinity in the life to come. Accordingly, participation of finite being in God is now expressed in terms of remote relation to a triune God whose nature is obscurely hinted at in every level of the creation. Aquinas’s understanding of finite individual act as advancing from

¹⁸ Despite much common ground with what I am saying here, this is perhaps the case with so-called ‘Scriptural Reasoning’.

substance to operation to finality is an example of this Trinitarian revision of the Aristotelian and neoplatonic inheritance.

One could illustrate the point I am trying to make here about philosophy and revelation in the following way. Our modern assumptions would lead us to suppose that, for the neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, proximity to the divine was achieved finally by knowledge, whereas for the apostle Paul it was attained by faith. But as a matter of textual record the opposite pertains: Proclus says that the sage advances beyond *gnosis* to *pistis*, whereas Paul says that in the end faith falls away and we are left with the direct knowledge of God, albeit in the light of charity.¹⁹

The point is that our modern divisions, which are inherited from Christian scholasticism, are inaccurate for antiquity. Faith, grace, revelation, sacrament and conversion are categories that emerge as much or more from a Greek cultural legacy which also permeated philosophy as from the Hebrew Bible and sometimes the use of them by John or Paul is as ‘philosophical’ as it is ‘religious’, as has been increasingly recognised in (serious, not the general run of ‘Biblical Critical’) Pauline studies since Stanislas Breton’s innovative little book on this subject.²⁰ Conversely, revelation is understood in the New Testament and by the Church fathers as an event that ‘raises the capacity’ of the human mind and extends the reach of its reasonings. A good illustration of this point can be taken from Duns Scotus, who is often rightly taken as a crucial figure in the genesis of the sundering of reason from revelation. Despite that fact, Scotus held that the truth of the univocity of being – often regarded as lying at the core of his proto-secularising intellectual moves – was *more* apparent to human

¹⁹ See David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: CUP 2004), 151

²⁰ Stanislas Breton *St Paul* (Paris: PUF 1988)

beings as a consequence of the Incarnation, which had reminded humans again of the existence and primacy of the infinite. Fallen humans, he held, were more likely to assume that the first object of the mind is material being, and not to see that the mind, by force of its proper created nature, is orientated first to being which, with univocal indifference, may be in finite or finite as well as spiritual or material.²¹

So arguably, the true 21st C alternative would be the encouragement of modes of reflection which integrate faith and reason on the lines of Augustinianism, a properly understood Thomism, the modern Russian Orthodox sophiological tradition or the Hasidic Jewish and Sufistic Islamic ones. All these traditions encourage the mutual interaction of faith and reason, besides a certain sacramental conveyance of spirit by matter and revelation by tradition and interpretation. It should surely be noted, in contrast, that it is an over-purist monotheism that wishes to cut down all the sacred groves and which has abandoned the mediations of sacrament, tradition and reason which appears today to generate the worst religious violence – whether we are talking about Muslims, Israelis or American evangelicals.

3. The return of the metaphysical

To what I have said so far, it could easily be objected that I have neglected to mention the resurgence of metaphysics within analytic philosophy, in varieties that do not necessarily or always involve naturalism, and only in rare cases a pointing towards religious commitments. How is one to position this trend? As a continuation of

²¹ See Pickstock, 'Duns Scotus: his historical and contemporary significance'.

correlational agnosticism or as a break with it? As analytic or post-analytic? I think the answer is that it hovers somewhere in the middle.

Thus, for example, if one is considering the influential ‘plural worlds ontology’ of David Lewis, one could compare the relation of Lewis to Quine to that of Hegel to Kant or of Heidegger to Husserl that I have already spoken of.²² For all his ‘modal realism’ does not contest Quine’s suspicion of a logically modal definition of necessity that would cash-out in terms of ontological essence, rather than stipulating the conditions under which a relation that may effectively be deemed one of necessity might be identified. But where, in Quine, this effectively confines modal considerations to pragmatic interactions with appearances, Lewis in effect hypostasises just these interactions (like Fichte or Hegel hypostasising transcendental understanding, or Heidegger hypostasising the appearance of being to *Dasein*). For Lewis, the modal necessities which we generally recognise are those of our contingent world, but there are other possible worlds and indeed the primacy of possibility over actuality is for Lewis so strong that for him other possible worlds must actually exist (‘modal realism’) – it is as if for him as for Avicenna, the possible ‘insists’ itself into being.

Within plural worlds ontology, the issue of whether or not there are stable essences then generally gets reduced to questions about which things in one world could appear as themselves to things in another world, or what things in one world might have counterparts in another, or finally what things in one world might actually migrate to another one. (I will confess here to preferring C.S. Lewis to David, along with Phillip

²² David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); on analytic metaphysics in general see also Nef, 415-783

Pullmann or Kieslowski's film *The double life of Veronique*; fiction just seem to handle all this with greater philosophical subtlety.)

What might well be asked at this point, is whether, having once gone so far in prioritising possibility in all its infinite variety, one should not logically go in Badiou's 'neo-pythagorean' direction. After all, the most elaborate disquisitions of possibility and on migration from one organised world to another are provided respectively by the mathematics of sets and of categorial 'bundling'. Hence it is arguable that the metaphysics of possible worlds is but a weak version of speculative naturalism, whose most rigorous exponents lie within the French Cartesian tradition of reduction of the material to the mathematical (and so absolutely measurable) and not the analytic one.

By contrast, however, there are other contemporary analytic metaphysicians who accord a certain normative status to the actualities of the world we live in and recognise, beyond the occurrence of contingent bundles of properties, certain genuinely constant essences, irreducible ways in which properties 'belong in' substances, universals in excess of mere abstracted resemblance and even modes of constitutive relation. One can mention here, for example, David Armstrong and Jonathan Lowe. In either case one can again speak to some extent of the 'post-analytic', since clearly the collapse of the 'myth of the given', or the duality of discrete *a priori* and *a posteriori* sources of knowledge must encourage philosophy to

speak of real essences or real ‘meanings’ (as John McDowell avers) out there in the world and not just resulting from a mental processing of empirical fodder.²³

Such a recognition places this mode of philosophy nearer certain traditional metaphysical discourses within the Western faith traditions before the onset, within Christendom, of the terminist revolution. However, thinkers like Armstrong and Lowe are basically trying to argue that the regularity of items and processes known to natural science as well as to ordinary observation involves certain necessary co-belongings or sequences. A defence of ‘natural necessity’ would seem to be involved here, in a way that it not for the plural worlds theorists. While they indeed often speak of items like the constitution of water (as two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen) that might remain the same in different possible worlds, this only amounts to a constancy of definition across possible worlds, not to a real constancy of essence, since different but perhaps analogous contingent factors in different worlds might land up producing the same local result. And in general the positing of ‘trans-world constancies’ has to do with the impossibility of imagining another world *in every respect* different from our own.

So to read, with Lowe, this constancy of definition as a constancy of essence seems questionable. Fundamentally, he supposes that the regularity of composition in our world of water and so forth derives from the regularity of scientific laws which he deems to embody ‘necessity’ and not merely the recording of the entirely contingent normative regularities of the world we happen to inhabit. But nothing within secular reason, it seems to me, warrants this conclusion. Hume was right: within the

²³ David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: CUP 1997); E.J. Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology; a metaphysical foundation for natural science* (Oxford: OUP 2006); John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP 1994)

framework of naturalism the only necessity that one should acknowledge is of the logical kind.

To support my contention here, it is worth considering briefly the history of thought about 'natural necessity'. First of all, the 'natural necessities' which Aristotle recognised in the cosmos were tied to his acknowledgement of the spirituality and (in some sense) eternity of form, which he espoused as much as Plato, even though he held that forms only occurred as incarnate in matter. The reality of forms as spiritual and in some sense eternal was then in turn inseparable from his obscure doctrine (which required, as we have seen, neoplatonic revision) of the calling-forth of forms through the stimulation of the first mover.

In the case of Aristotle, the mode of 'necessity' involved here, which is certainly of an ontological valency, would seem ultimately to be linked to a pagan sense of fate. This is one reason why some Franciscan theologians in the Middle Ages, and later the nominalists, wished to pare down and ultimately (with Ockham and D'Ailly) to get rid of all non-logical necessity, thereby, perhaps, promoting a culturally dangerous sort of theological nihilism. For the nominalists, who were sometimes more extreme than Hume, not only is natural necessity unfathomable by us, it simply does not exist, regularities in nature being but the deposits of the divine will.

In the case of Bonaventure and Aquinas, however, the necessity of fate mutated into a notion of the divine election of the most 'convenient', or we should say the most 'beautiful' ontological patterns. The 'necessities' of the creation can be seen as harmonies which reflect the divine infinite harmony. God elects what is the most

beautiful as he is, in himself, hyper-eminent beauty. Here necessity is neither fate nor sheer force of will, but nor is it yet the Leibnizian divine calculus of the best possible world as that which will present the most complexity through the deployment of the most economy, according to the calculations of an infinite *mathesis* inaccessible to us, but still delivering (in our, univocal sense) a mathematical selection that is then confirmed by an act of pure choice, and not an aesthetic judgement. One could say here that Leibniz combines fate and the will, the pagan element with the nominalist-voluntarist one.

But from this briefly summarised history it can be concluded that, historically, natural necessity and, indeed, essences, universals, real relations and real inherence of qualities in substance have been always undergirded by *either* fate *or* divine beauty *or* divine will *or* divine *mathesis*. Once one has rejected all four of these things, then Hume is surely right, and, indeed, as Meillassoux argues, not radical enough. Without God, without spiritual substance, without form, the order of this world must be seen as a merely contingent given order, whose regularity is not ‘unlikely’ in terms of pure chance, since, after Cantor, there is no ‘total’ sum of possibilities within which, at the ultimate level, we can calculate (like Leibniz’s God) even probabilities or the very contrast between likely and unlikely chances.

It should be noted here that the critique of Hume by Thomas Reid of Aberdeen depended wholly upon Reid’s theism, which posited a divinely appointed link between our ‘common sensing’ and the essential inherence of qualities within things and the reality of cause. This account was, in fact, more ineffable than that of Aristotle since it lacked the immanent mediating factor provided by the Aristotelian

notion that that ‘form’ can migrate from material substance to ‘intellectual being’ as the scholastics later put it. And ultimately it is only this doctrine of knowledge ‘by identity’ which secures metaphysical realism at all, since if forms do not become universal within our minds (or one might now say within our linguistic expression) by virtue of a teleological ordering, then our mere ‘representation’ of how things are, including the apparent instance of constant essences, by a kind of ‘mirroring’, reduces either to a mere registering of appearances or else of an accidental world that might have been otherwise.

From this contention, negatively in favour of Hume, another one follows. Aristotle, notoriously, claimed in Book E of the (later named) *Metaphysics* that the ‘first science’ (which tradition later described as ‘metaphysics’) concerns *both* Being qua Being and its fundamental idioms *and* those entities which abide beyond the moving things described by physics: these are form and substance as relatively stable, separated spiritual substances (gods, later angels for the Biblical traditions) and finally the first mover. Because the first three are somehow linked to the first mover, metaphysics is also, as he says, ‘theology’. Neoplatonism later resolved the resulting *aporia* of which then comes first, Being or God, by deriving all being from a One beyond being or else later (in an anonymous commentary on the *Parmenides* probably *not* by Porphyry – it is now thought – whose influence seems to have passed to Boethius and so eventually to Aquinas) a God who was himself being ‘in the infinitive (*esse*), being that is ‘entirely verbal’, being fully ‘in act’.²⁴

²⁴ See Bradshaw, 101-2

During the course of the Middle Ages however, beginning back in the 12thC but then dominantly from 1300 onwards, most theologians indeed lapsed into ‘onto-theology’ by making being the prime object of metaphysics and God in some sense an object of study within the field of being. Rather like modern analytic philosophers, they tended to regard being as a surd propertyless transcendental presupposition of all of reality, such that being *as such* had and required *no cause*.²⁵ Only finite being as created required a cause. Of course infinite being as uncreated did not require a cause and this might be seen (as by Scotus) as the most primary and paradigmatic instance of being, but the further and subtle point being made here is that for the dominant later medieval viewpoint it was also true that ‘transcendental being’ in itself, neutral as between infinite and finite, did not require a cause. So God created all finite ‘thereness’, but there was a kind of residue of ‘thereness’ which God did not create and which even his own infinite existence in some sense presupposed. This was primarily a logical presupposition, but also one given a certain ontological valency to the extent that infinite and finite started to be seen as both ‘equally’ and univocally existing: that is to say as both occupying a ‘transcendental’ space of being that exceeds the space of formal logic. It was rather (in Scotus, who is the clearest here), a ‘formal’ space, hovering between the sheerly real and the merely logically modal (meaning here the *modus* in which we must perforce conceive things).

It was especially in terms of this new concept of the transcendental of being that metaphysics became independent of theology and transcendently prior to it, in the course of a long process that culminated with Suarez in the early 17thC. But here Aquinas (although he was later followed in this respect by the German Dominicans,

²⁵ Nef, 324-34

by Pico and by Cusa), stands out as a quirky exception: he, quite singularly, avoided ontotheology, because he almost uniquely saw metaphysics as having ‘being’ for its primary field of concern, and yet did *not* include God as an object of study within this field. Instead, for Aquinas, metaphysics could but dimly reason to God as the *cause* of its own subject-matter, himself properly the subject of a higher science, namely his own self-knowledge, in which we can participate only through the grace-given raising of humanity to supernatural life, which, however, is paradoxically never lacking from human nature as such, taken in its concrete specificity.²⁶ In a highly subtle and complex fashion for Aquinas, the bare theological conclusions which metaphysical reason itself gives rise to always already exceed themselves (for example, before Christ universally, in terms of a pointing to Christ who is alone adequate finite truth)²⁷ in the direction of *sacra doctrina*, that knowledge of God’s own higher science which we dimly receive through the mysteries of revelation.

But the important point to register here is that because, for Aquinas, the ‘how’ of being as such taken in the abstract (*ens commune*) is *entirely referred* to the ‘why’ of a higher cause, namely God who is substantively *esse* --and the non-abstract coincidence of being with essence -- this means that existence as such, as we know it as abstractable (in real distinction from essence), *does* have a cause, and not simply a cause *qua* finite being. So for Aquinas, ‘being’ denotes not a surd transcendental fact, as for much of medieval (as well as nearly all modern) thought, but rather a neoplatonic series of actualisations, taking ‘actualisation’ to be convertible with ‘perfecting’. This is one reason why ‘analytic Thomism’ makes about as much sense as, well, ‘market socialism’.

²⁶ See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 19-59

²⁷ See S-Th. Bonino, ‘La théologie de la vérité dans la *Lectura super Loannem* de saint Thomas d’Aquin ‘ in *Revue Thomiste*, *Veritas* special issue, Jan-June 2004, 141-66

So for the ‘majority report’ of later medieval theology, metaphysics became exclusively ontology, such that a complete description of the ‘how’ of the being of finite things might be provided without reference to the ‘why’ of their derivation, while God himself could be situated within the transcendental ontological field first of all (for Scotus) as the *a priori* demonstrable primacy of the infinite, rather than as, initially, a requisite source of contingent existences. For Aquinas, by contrast, metaphysics was yet more exclusively ontology in the sense that (in contrast with Aristotle), God did not himself fall as an object of study within the ontological field.²⁸ Nevertheless, this field for Aquinas is radically fractured in its apparent completeness, such that it points in its entirety beyond itself towards a higher science, of whose reality we require to be fully assured by revelation. This fracturing means that the ‘how’ of *ens commune* is only fully accounted for by displacement of description towards the ‘why’ of derivation, such that God is concluded to within metaphysical (‘rational’) theology as a required cause of all being (if things are to make any ultimate sense and we are to avoid an infinite regress) and as an Averroist source of all motion, rather than as an Avicennian *a priori* demonstration of the primacy of infinite being within the field of being as such. For as the ineffable simple coincidence of being with essence, God lies ‘beyond being’ as we know it, namely as something contingently ‘superadded’ to essence, which always might or might not be (as Ibn Sina had already concluded, but with a bias towards the priority of essence).²⁹

It follows that while, in one sense, Aquinas avoided ontotheology by making metaphysics to be yet more exclusively ontology, in another he avoided the idea that

²⁸ See Milbank, ‘Only theology overcomes metaphysics’

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ontology is transcendently exhaustive, including even God within its scope. Hence, unlike many other medieval theologians, he avoided a reduction of the Aristotelian hesitation between God and Being to an exclusive favouring of being, subordinating God, and rather made metaphysics to be about being in such a way that it was also problematically about God, in that it had to rationally subordinate its own positive knowledge of being entirely to a hesitant, negative knowledge of God, since it concluded that God was entirely the source and ‘explanation’ of being, taken as abstractly general.

The next crucial point to grasp is the link between these onto-theological issues on the one hand, which have been mostly explored by ‘continental’ historians of thought, and ‘modal’ issues (actuality and possibility, necessity and contingency – on which I have already touched) on the other hand, which have been mainly explored by ‘analytic’ historians (Finnish, British and French, though a scholar like Alain de Libera bridges this divide).

For the same shift towards metaphysics as primarily ontology (‘containing’ the theological) and not also, problematically, theology as in excess of ontology, also encouraged the rise of possibilism at the expense of actualism.

For Aristotle, the actual was primary in terms of definition, time and substance. We can define things because we encounter them; some things are possible only because other things are already actual; things that are actual are more real than things that are merely possible; ideas cannot of themselves give rise to things and finally the possible is defined by its tendency to the realisation of an actual *telos*.

I would argue that this outlook is basically in keeping with common-sense, and it was taken over and even augmented by Aquinas – for reasons which we shall see presently. For he understood the contingency of the created world in terms of the dependency of its *partial* actualisation (and so its *partial perfection*) upon the divine simple and infinite actuality. In this manner the relative ‘necessities’ of the created order are just as contingent as its apparently more accidental or aleatory features.

For many of the Franciscan theologians however, as I have already mentioned, including Duns Scotus, this paid too much tribute to pagan fatality – although arguably, they only thought this because, for reasons of conceptual paradigm shift, they were *re-interpreting* the biblical legacy, and not because they were attending to it more precisely.³⁰ Instead of the notion of a partial created reflection of eternal glory, they preferred to stress the sheer electedness of the created order. Hence the very notion of ‘contingency’ started to be redefined, with Papal backing at Avignon and Archbishopial backing at Canterbury, as pure possibility that might have been otherwise. For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, an actuality realises a possibility, but does not *continue* to be synchronically shadowed by a real possibility that is a hypostasised logical possibility, because for Aquinas an actuality fulfils in some measure a divinely intended good. By contrast, for Duns Scotus the contingency of a finite actual moment is only guaranteed by the *persistence* in some sense of the real possibility that things might equally have been otherwise.³¹ One could say that this view ignores the non-punctuality of events: the way in which, for a single actuality to have been

³⁰ This is a comment that I would want to make on Emmanuel Perrier OP’s fine article, ‘Duns Scotus facing reality: between absolute contingency and unquestionable consistency’ in *Modern Theology* 21 No 4 Oct 2005, 619-643

³¹ See Nef, 314-371

different, everything would have had to have been different back to the beginning of time. But this is just why, with Leibniz, Scotist modalism shifts into the idiom of possible-worlds theory – the compossibles of the world are perennially shadowed by the compossibles of infinite other worlds. An entirely aleatory construal of this situation, however, is prevented in Leibniz by his Avicennian view that essence of itself ‘urges’ towards existence, that being is still, as for Aquinas, a perfection, and that God chooses the best of all possible worlds.³²

However the real point to note here is the link between attitudes towards the existential on the one hand and attitudes towards the modal on the other. If metaphysics on the post-Scotist view is about being and being concerns just the bare given instance of ‘something as opposed to nothing,’ then actuality can no longer be construed as a rising order of perfections, and the complete ‘nature’ of a thing is fully determined, not by the arriving ‘gift’ of the event of actuality, but by preceding possibility. Thus metaphysics defined as the science of univocal being quickly becomes in effect or even in name the science not so much of every *ens* but rather of every *res* whether actual or possible, with priority given to the possible – and so to logic, to a sheerly indeterminate notion of will and choice and eventually, as with Kant, to knowledge over being, since knowledge has prior access to possibilities.

This gradual slide melds exactly with the shift in meaning of ‘transcendental’. If being is merely the instantiation of possible being, then it exemplifies a pre-determined range for being, unity, truth and goodness – now taken, after Scotus, not as fully convertible with each other, but as formally distinct on pain of losing their separate

³² See Nef, 379-415

meanings, since it is now held that we have a *full and complete insight* into these meanings. This alliance of the redefined transcendental with the priority of the possible then shapes most of post-Kantian philosophy and in the 20th C was just as prevalent within phenomenology as within analysis.

In this way, the idea that natural necessities, essences, inherent formal meanings (*eide*) and so forth arrive only with actualisation as ‘gift’ from God is therefore lost sight of. Instead one has a doubly arid mere *givenness* without taint of generosity or gratitude. Possibilities are just ‘there’ without real receiving, while actuality is a non-predicamental existential instantiation of essence, equally sheerly ‘there’ without the ‘why’ of donation.

If however, metaphysics secularised as transcendental ontology must perforce also be possibilistic, and if, as we have seen, possibilism without God points in all rigour towards a kind of nihilistic pythagoreanism as articulated by Badiou (though with Badiou this is but half the story)³³, then it is fair to conclude that the *destiny* of metaphysics without theology is to be reduced to speculative materialism.

So my first contention is that ‘natural necessity’ can only be upheld by an Aristotelian belief in the spirituality of form, ultimately supported (beyond Aristotle) by the origin of form in God. And my second contention is that the Scotist and then nominalist-voluntarist turn from actualism to possibilism also reduces to speculative materialism, once the voluntarist God has been removed from the picture.

³³ See my unpublished article, ‘The Shares of Being: Gift Relation and Participation; an essay on the metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas and Alain Badiou on the website for the Centre of theology and philosophy, Nottingham and Southwell.

If these conclusions are correct, then the crucial intellectual issue of our time is the following: is the emancipation of metaphysics from theology as pure ontology, with the concomitant rise of possibilism, a tribute to critical progress – or was this shift rather initially to do with *theological* and not philosophical preferences and then later to do with the ungrounded elective preference for a materialist ontology? (Here one should mention that Alain Badiou generously, honestly and fully acknowledges that he has taken an initial axiomatic *decision* in his materialist reading of post-Cantorian mathematics, and that a theological reading, in the wake of Cantor's own Catholicism, remains a possibility.)

The first case, namely that secularised metaphysics has triumphed by force of argument has been most comprehensively presented by the French analytic philosopher Frédéric Nef, in his at once monumental and fascinatingly meandering tome, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* He offers us here a history of metaphysics in a sophisticated analytic idiom that is reasonably sensitive to historical context. And he rightly urges *historical* reasons against the 'melodrama', as he sees it, of the Heideggerian narration. The trouble with the latter is that it exaggerates or misconstrues historical breaks like that between the presocratics and Plato or – along with the entire modern German tradition up until the revisionist intellectual historiography of Honnefelder – that between supposedly pre and post-critical (Kantian) thought. It also concentrates too much on big names and holistic systems, too little on minor figures and the continuous history of certain problems, in parallel with the history of mathematics. It especially fails to realise that the empiricists also offered their own metaphysical pictures and partly for this reason it does not grasp

that the issue of construal of modality (necessary and contingent, actual and possible) is as big or almost as big a constant theme as the treatment of being.³⁴

With all this one can agree, and yet it is striking that, after all his cavils against a history of ruptures and genealogies of the *longue durée*, Nef himself unmistakably makes Duns Scotus and not Kant newly pivotal in the history of philosophy, in a manner that coincides both with Honnfelder's conclusions and with the revisions to Heidegger's historiography made by several French phenomenologists (primarily Courtine, Marion and Boulnois) who now generally see Duns Scotus and not Plato, nor even Aristotle as the instigator of ontotheology (for reasons which I have already alluded to).

And yet, throughout his book, which tells the somewhat whiggish story of the gradual but inexorable rational victory of possibilism, Nef polemicises against the very notion of 'ontotheology' as used by Heidegger, and the idea that this notion should structure the recounting of the history of metaphysics.

In resisting this metanarrative, he is also resisting the idea that metaphysics is a kind of contingent cultural invention, born of later Greek aporetic confusion, whereby God is defined in terms of being as 'a being' and yet being is itself, with a sort of vicious circularity, defined in terms of the exemplarity of the supreme being. Instead, Nef sees metaphysics as a perennial scientific possibility, one that was also pursued by Indian culture, within which it is surely impossible to trace any sort of 'ontotheological' conundrum. Picking up again on an earlier thematic, one might say

³⁴ See Nef, 31-81

that Nef sees the history of metaphysics in terms of ‘how’ certain problems have been tackled, where Heidegger saw it in genetic terms of asking just ‘why’ the question of being and the question of God had been problematically taken together within the Western legacy.

Which perspective is right? I suggested earlier that human beings inhabit both universal natural presuppositions and also inherited cultural ones, and that while it makes no sense perfectly to identify these two, we can never perfectly separate them either. Thus it seems to me sensible to say that yes, in India there has been something very akin to Western metaphysics and that *nevertheless* the legacy of Socrates’ revision of Greek religion, and then the legacy of monotheism both pagan and Biblical, has shaped all of Western philosophy, including Islamic philosophy, in a way that marks it out from Hindu philosophy in certain decisive ways (for example a dominant interest in both being as actual and the ultimate as goodness).

When it comes to the vexed question of ‘ontotheology’, then it seems that, at the minimum, we cannot deny that, since Aristotle, the question of being and the question of God (as manifest to both reason and revelation) have been taken together in a culturally specific way. In this sense, the question of ‘how’ arguments have been made and still more of ‘how’ questions have been posed, is inseparable from the question of ‘why’ questions have been posed and answered in culturally specific fashions. After all, the big story which Nef himself tells is of the emancipation of ontology from theology to achieve a supposedly purer metaphysics, free of the distorting notions of the primacy of act which are linked to ideas of an actual

originating deity. In this way he negatively acknowledges the historical importance of the link between God and Being.

His case, of course, is that ontology frees itself from theology and possibility from actuality by progressive force of argument alone. But in making this claim, one can notice that he commits some interpretative sleights of hand which sometimes make it seem as if the germs of later developments lay there all along. Above all, the orientation of metaphysics towards the knowledge of separate substances in Aristotle and (even) in Aquinas is reduced by Nef to an orientation towards the knowledge of abstractable universals alone (although these fall, for Aristotle short of full separability). Accordingly, Aristotle's assertion that were there *no* separate substances and a final mover in existence then *physics* would be the first philosophy is ignored (*Metaphysics*, 1026a20-34). It is then falsely claimed by Nef that Aristotle locates God within the field of being, whereas he leaves him in an aporetic unclarity that nevertheless falls short of an ontotheological circle.

Equally, Nef misreads Aquinas as espousing an orientation of human beings to an independent philosophical beatitude (as affirmed for example by Siger of Brabant), whereas it is clear that thinks this can only be fulfilled through the grace-given beatific vision and its anticipations spoken of by St Paul.³⁵

Finally, Nef's treatment of Olivier Boulnois' ontotheological construal of Scotus is shoddy: Scotus does indeed see God as transcendently located within being and yet at the same time (with a kind of vicious circularity), being as itself paradigmatically

³⁵ See Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 19-59

instanced by the infinite being of God, which ‘formally’ precedes all his other attributes. It is true that Scotus does not as yet simply see God as ‘a being’, albeit supreme, but Nef ignores the way in which univocity of being opened the way for later theologians idolatrously to describe God as ‘an individual’.

In these ways, Nef underplays the ruptures in the history of philosophy concerning the relationship between God and being; this then assists him in too easily concluding that the decisive rupture in modal considerations which he *does* acknowledge was a fundamentally philosophical rupture and not, as I would argue, a theological-philosophical rupture, and one moreover involving *sacra doctrina* as well as the theology entertained by metaphysics itself.

My own main arguments against Nef’s view that the emancipation of ontology and the possible from theology and the actual was a victory for good argument are, in outline the following.

First of all, as we have seen, it is only theology (rational and revealed) which, in the last analysis sustains a subject matter for metaphysics beyond the physical realm; otherwise one can more coherently transcendentalise physical or mathematical notions. It is here relevant that, only with Suarez, was ‘general metaphysics’ as initial ontology clearly separated from ‘special metaphysics’ dealing with God, the soul and the cosmos. (The contrast here say with neoplatonic modes of metaphysics which begin with God and return to him is clearly stark.)

Suarez' division meant that questions of 'how things are' now transcendently preceded questions of 'why things are'. By contrast, in the main traditions of Christian metaphysics and notably in Aquinas, the 'general' descriptions had also involved (neoplatonically) 'generative' narrations -- hence in Aquinas, *esse* was explained as that hyper-general reality in which all participate (beyond the abstractable created generality of *ens commune*) only in terms of its dynamic descending supervenience upon the created restrictions of *essentia*, existing in this mode or in that.

But nothing objective seems to justify the later sundering of the metaphysical 'how' from the metaphysical 'why'. Rather it rests upon a *decision* to read reality in cold terms as doubly given – once as possibility, secondly as existentiality and not in warm terms as the receiving of a gift – such that only the arriving actuality of a thing fully defines it as what it is: actuality fully realising formal essence.

The 'cold' reading of reality effectively construes *all* of being as merely like instances *within* being. Thus, within the bounds of existence, a bicycle in a shop-window might present to the spectator the possibility of a gift to be given, whereas its later handing-over to a child (after purchase) is the actuality of donation. At first the potential gift is just a 'given' in the window, while it's later becoming a gift is a second 'given' fact of actualisation. Likewise, the 'cold' transcendental ontology regards that being in general which is exhibited in finitude as simply the 'matter of fact' given instantiation of a previously 'given' (and not in any sense donated) possibility of finite being. The same dual givenness applies to the specific general arrangements of the world which we happen to inhabit.

But surely the religious mind tends to read existence as such as only *definable* in terms of gift – as if the bicycle had never first appeared in the window and never had to be bought, but was miraculously conjured up only in that instance when it first appeared to the child on the morning of his birthday. And as if we could only receive and ride bicycles which were presents.

And yet, despite this, the shift from interpreting being as created gift to interpreting it as uncreated givenness *did not* first occur mainly in terms of an exercise of purely philosophical reason. Instead, certain modes of reasoning were adopted in terms of a religious attitude which wished to protect absolute divine freedom beyond even the scope of his generosity, by insisting that God, in relation to the world, mainly considers a range of ‘given’ possibilities and then, as ‘a matter of fact’ takes a certain decision as to which ones will be actualised. Here Aquinas’s alternative religious vision for which God is himself ‘compelled’ in creating by the aesthetic ‘glory’ of his own intellect in the Paternal uttering of the *Verbum*, and the discriminating selective judgements which he makes as to the contents of our world, is dogmatically, not rationally, abandoned. (It should nonetheless be noted here that *actus* in the infinite God does not denote exactly that ‘termination’ of possibility in act that finite act does; hence one could argue that for Aquinas the divine infinite act fulfils as sustaining the ‘active possibility’ that is *virtus*, even if it infinitely fulfils it. This is clearer in Nicholas of Cusa for whom, in God, the contrast of act and possibility is overcome as *possest*. But even his later *posse ipsum* surely denotes an ‘active possibility’ and not the reserved absolute power of the nominalists.)

In the second place, it would seem that there are at least equally good reasons in favour of the priority of the actual as of its reverse. Does not this principle alone conserve a strong realism and indeed a kind of radical empiricism, as G.K.Chesterton divulged? For if we do not first know the fundamental patterns of the world and the kinds of things in it by encountering them in existence, then, as I have already argued, we can never encounter anything radically new, which seems counter-intuitive. All that we could meet with would be instantiations of essences we already knew about, trivially varied. Of course, there is the problem of how we can recognise radically new things or search for unknown ones, but Plato and Augustine recognised that our strange anticipation of the unknown is radically aporetic, and requires an appeal to transcendence (in terms of recollection or illumination), on pain of denying the arrival of the new as something still rationally coherent.

This is the positive argument for the priority of the actual. The negative argument is that, just as we can ask the idealist, with Jonathan Lowe, but what is the reality of your thinking? So also with the possibilist we can ask (as he does not realise), but what is the actuality of your pre-given range of possibilities? Surely they are only the possibilities that we have abstracted by affirmation or else by counterfactual contrast from this actual world, such that to sustain possibilism one would have to argue, in a nihilistic fashion, that the possibilities which *we* can glean are only the faintest degree of the actuality of this world, which itself only instantiates possibilities from a further range of hidden and to us radically counter-intuitive ones. And nihilism itself is forced to speak in paradoxical terms of the void or the repertoire of the sheerly aleatory *as if* they also were actual.

Philosophy habitually describes a possibility that is non-actual as ‘fictional’, but fictions, especially novels, rather show us that thickly-imagined alternative possibilities possess some degree of actuality of their own, because one can only grasp, say, the ‘logic’ of *Bleak House* by treating its world *as* a complex actuality and not at all as a mixture of essential possibilities blended together in varying combinations with certain diverting but inessential variations. Such a reduction of the book to predictable manipulations of structure would simply lose the specificity of the novel and its precondition of narrative genius. This is partly why Chesterton thought that the ‘other realities’ of fictions, especially fairy-tales, revealed by indirection the ‘magical’ and unfathomable curious necessities (‘limitations’) of our own world, which are inseparable from its actuality, yet which we can now, through this indirection, be seen as more than arbitrary, but rather strangely necessary for the achievement of a life that bears aesthetic weight and moral solemnity.³⁶

In these ways the bias of common-sense runs towards the priority of the actual. However, I have already indicated that the counter-intuition of possibilism cannot readily be rationally refused, although it is forced to go to the lengths of nihilism. Hence the bent of the natural mind within this particular world can only be confirmed through resort to the theological. Agnosticism and atheism will rather, for the good Humean reasons which I earlier set out, favour the priority of the possible.

4. *The two rival metaphysics are rival Christianities*

³⁶ See John Milbank, ‘Fictioning things: Gift and Narrative’ in *Religion and Literature*, 37.3 Autumn 2005, 1-37

All that I have said so far tends to suggest that the living viable forms of metaphysics are four in number.

First, there is theological realism inspired by Plato and Aristotle, which takes many different varieties within the three monotheistic faiths.

Secondly, there is the Scotist or Ockhamist version of Christian belief, still alive and well, for example, amongst many modern Franciscans or within the current Oxford theology department. This version allies philosophical possibilism (and so rationalism) with theological voluntarism (and so formalism and extrinsicism).

Thirdly, there is an agnostic non-theological metaphysical realism of the type espoused by Armstrong or Lowe.

Fourthly, there is post-metaphysical speculative materialism as approached by David Lewis but much more systematically realised by Alain Badiou.

The fourth option rests upon a rationally possible decision -- but it too readily opens the way again upon positivistic secular terror. The third option offers much with which the theological realist will sympathise, but fails to see that metaphysical realism is impossible without theology and likewise fails fully to see that this realism favours actualism, not possibilism.

So one is left with the two theological options for metaphysics which I would contend correspond to two rival Christianities. Here a couple of final considerations are in order, with respect to the question of Christianity and actualism.

First of all, as David Bradshaw has shown, *energeia* (which becomes Latin *actus*) dominates in Christian thought not just philosophically because of Aristotle, but also theologically because of St Paul. The latter for the first time spoke of God as giving the gift of his *energeia*, his activity, which is also his *energetic power*, such that our acts are synergially fused with acts that *go out* from God, and yet also *are* God. Later, a parallel fusion of human with divine *energeia* is found in pagan magical and theurgic texts (as Bradshaw further points out), whose suggestions are later fused with the Pauline ones by Dionysius the Areopagite. (Bradshaw follows recent scholarship in insisting, beyond Daniélou and Balthasar, on the crucial importance of this incorporation of the theurgic for later Christian theology.) Only within this Christian tradition does Aristotelian being become emphatically also supreme actuality as supreme *act*, which, like light after Plotinus, goes out from itself while remaining within itself. Although his dubious Palamite biases unfortunately prevent him from seeing this (a great pity, since it would much more fit the general thesis of his book), Aquinas is the supreme consummator of this entire tradition.³⁷

In the end, this tradition is based on the Incarnation, and this is the crucial reason why, if ‘only theology saves metaphysics’, we are talking about *sacra doctrina* as well as purely philosophical theology. Judaism and still more Islam tend to be suspicious of the capacity of image to disclose God, whereas they both consider law

³⁷ Bradshaw, 45-73; 119-153

to be supremely disclosive of God. But Christianity is somewhat suspicious of law as the prime disclosure of God (Paul declared that it is ‘preceded’ by faith) and testifies that one supreme image (Christ) fully manifests God, such that all other images are in some degree sanctified.

Now law prescribes in advance. While it would be utterly crass to say that premodern law wholly favoured possibility over actuality (since it relied greatly upon precedent, narrative and legal fiction) nonetheless law as a category in general does so more than image as a category in general. The primacy of image also entails the primacy of actuality (*this* realised picture beyond any pre-given formula rather than another), whereas any shift towards making law and will the most central considerations will tend also to favour the priority of the possible.

Here it is notable, as Pope Benedict indicated in his Regensburg address, that the post-Scotist stress upon possibility and the viewpoint of the now ‘representing’ subject (sundered from Aristotelian ‘knowledge by identity’) stems eventually from the lineage of the Muslim Ibn Sina. Clearly this point requires some qualification – and perhaps it would have been better if the Pope himself had provided more. Ibn Sina’s essentialism in turn derived ultimately from Plotinus, who (unlike Iamblichus and Proclus who reacted against him) started to bend Platonism towards a philosophy of the *a priori*. It is also notable that the hypostasisation of logical possibility as the foundation of ontology derives not so much from a reading of Aristotle directly as from a reading of Plotinus’s student Porphyry, transmitted via Boethius. Here Gilbert of Porreta is a crucial figure, whose work preceded the decisive Islamic influence.³⁸

³⁸ Again, see the unpublished dissertation of Adrian Pabst.

Nevertheless, the encouragement of possibilism in the dominant currents of Islamic philosophy can certainly be connected to a religion which makes divine will and divine law the fundamental focus. Therefore one can, indeed, with Pope Benedict, speak of the dominant post-1300 tendencies within Christian thought as involving a certain dubious ‘Islamification’ of it – a tendency also reflected in the turn to political absolutism.

Hence to deny the primacy of the actual is to deny the primacy of the image and the exceeding of the law by the incarnate Christ. This is why one can argue that Scotism and nominalism are diminished Christian theologies.

The second consideration again alludes to Duns Scotus. Emmanuel Perrier OP is right to say that Scotus implicitly saw the question of the ‘why’ of creation as settled by dogmatic theology, and so focussed, philosophically, on the ‘how’ of the way things synchronically are, thereby providing the grounds for the emergence of modern philosophical autonomy.³⁹ But we have already seen how this loses Being understood as gift, and so the right of theology (dogmatic and rational, inseparably) as Queen of the sciences, fundamentally and finally to exhibit how things are. Moreover, the post-Scotist assumption (not quite so crudely fully-fledged in Scotus himself) that dogmatic theology has already answered the key questions, loses the sense that revelation only provides answers as further mysteries and conundra. It is not an accident that Scotus explicitly abandoned the *via negativa*. In doing so, and in equally abandoning the sense that dogmatic theology involves a raising of discursive reasoning towards a fuller reason that is more intuitive (so anticipating the ‘all at

³⁹ Perrier, ‘Duns Scotus Facing Reality’

once' of the beatific vision), he inaugurated the reign of fideism which, as I argued at the outset, opens the gateway to religious terror. Terror has a specific modality and it is always that of the priority of the possible, whether this be religious or naturalistic – both being facets of modernity.

If Christianity, because of its commitment to the priority of the image, appears to be most unambiguously committed to metaphysical realism, then certain currents within Sufism (Al Ghazali, Ibn el Arabi), mystical Judaism and even Hinduism and Buddhism should also be acknowledged as so committed. It is in this varied perennality, which traces the how of things to the eternal why, and yet acknowledges both the varieties and the mergings of our diverse cultural whys as shaping our metaphysical hows, that the main hope of the 21st C must lie.