Stanton Lecture 4: Transcendence without Participation

By John Milbank

So far, in these lectures, I have been giving a misleading impression. This is that modern thought tends exclusively to favour immanence over transcendence. However, while on balance it may favour immanence, there is a crucial 'minority report' which favours transcendence, and which keeps recurring, because it is linked to the underlying set of assumptions of modern philosophy itself. But the transcendence that is favoured is a 'transcendence without participation', in contrast to the transcendence spoken of by the *philosophia perennis* from Plato to Aquinas and sporadically beyond.

It will be recalled that I pointed out that modern thought hesitates between the modesty of insisting upon the finite limits of our understanding and the hubris of claiming to occupy the perspective of an immanent whole. Finitism or infinitism; Kant or Spinoza. However, a finitistic perspective is often divided between the insistence that the finite is all that we can know and an abyssal respect for an infinite that we do not know. This unknown infinite may even assume priority within the overall organisation of a theoretically finitistic philosophy. It tends to be construed as transcendent rather than immanent in part because it is projected as 'beyond' all understanding of phenomena by an epistemological perspective, and partly because it is seen as impinging, in excess of theoretical understanding, upon the inner core of our individual being from a 'height' that prevents any subordination of the individual to a pantheistic totality. Nevertheless, this mode of transcendence can often seem quite equivocal, and indistinguishable from an alternative mode of immanence, as we shall see.

It follows then that the modern idiom of transcendence involves an *unmediated* dualistic split between the finite and the infinite, rendering it at once finitistic *and* infinitistic. This duality traces back once more to Duns Scotus, though clearly we need to understand here that Scotus was only consummating certain tendencies that preceded him. Scotus's linked ideas of univocity of being and knowledge as representation tended to ensure that our theoretical knowledge is complete when it is merely of known finite things taken without reference to their infinite creative source. Hence in knowing finite existence or finite truth I fully know being and truth as such. On the other hand, univocity of being was also taken by Scotus to imply the priority of the infinite. It is infinite and not finite being which is self-sufficient and he deploys this conclusion to shape a proof for God's existence. Accordingly, infinity is for Scotus the primary property of the divine, whereas for Aquinas it was simplicity. In keeping with this primacy Aquinas, like Dionysius, regarded the attribute 'infinite' in a strictly apophatic fashion: it meant literally in-finite and has to be qualified by a certain positive affirmation of God as possessing 'form' or 'shape' in an eminent sense. But for Scotus 'infinity' is primary not just ontologically, but also logically and semantically, given that the thesis of the univocity of being is a 'transcendental' affirmation that hovers between the semantic and the ontological. Thus we first of all grasp being as infinite and this transforms 'infinity' for the first time in intellectual history into a positive concept in despite of its negative syntactical construction as a word. But ironically, infinity as formally positive permits in Scotus the idea that it is substantively empty, as it is not for Aquinas: thus for the subtle doctor unlike the angelic one, the divine attributes other than infinity are somewhat secondary moments in the divine reality. Here we have another, hitherto unmentioned episode in the history of the infinite.

Because Scotus, given his philosophical doctrine of univocity, reduces theological analogy to the barest formality, his attributions of meaning to the divine infinity tend to be highly equivocal. Strangely, perhaps, given the ground of univocity, his infinite God is more radically unknown than Aquinas's simple God. This chasm cannot be breached by an apophatic approach, since Scotus explicity rejects, along with analogy, the entire apparatus of the Dionysian discourse about the divine names to which both analogy and the *via negativa* belong. For Scotus one cannot approach by unknowing something ontologically distant: knowledge is rather always positive because always circumscribed by finite, epistemological boundaries. Hence inexorably, the chasm between human beings and God can only be breached by the divine will. Accordingly Scotus removed the second table of the Mosaic Law, comprising ethical commands, after the first table concerning acknowledgement of God and the ban on idols, from the *primary* remit of the natural law, making basic moral imperatives depend directly upon the divine command for their *primary* obligatoriness. Though the conformity with natural reasoning was not thereby denied, a sense that this reasoning derived itself from divine imposition and could therefore be overruled was nonetheless introduced. This had the consequence, as Andrew Davison has underlined, of *infinitising* our ethical understanding, in precise contrast to Scotus's *finitising* of our theoretical understanding. The direct commands of God tended to be construed as brooking no exceptions and hence the entire time-and-place sensitive Aristotelian ethics built round the notion of a flexible ethical artistry or *prudentia* (*phronesis*) began to be eroded. In addition, for a complex series of reasons, Scotus, in the wake of Bonaventure, tended to divorce both divine and human will both from the intellect and from the education of passion and desire, encouraging already a modern sense of absolute, isolated 'choice'. This meant that the realisation of the ethical no longer had primarily to do, as again for Aristotle,

with the *telos* of shaping of the virtues, nor with the pursuit of a higher happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*).

In different ways both Descartes and Kant inherited this unmediated Scotist duality. For Descartes our theoretical knowledge is, on the one hand, finitely confined to the *cogito* , or immediacy of self-awareness in all we feel and think and do, and we must doubt all else. On the other hand it also includes a certainty of the infinite as positively 'clear and distinct' and in the light of this uncertainty we are able to remove our doubts about the existence and nature of the world outside us. Meanwhile, the will, as a faculty of pure choice with no erotic bias towards the good is taken to be univocally and extensively identical in both God and humanity. It is simply the realised and actual infinity of the divine will which grants it the power to establish the the nature of the good and even the nature of the true – including, beyond even Ockham's voluntarist extravagances, the truth that 1 plus 1 = 2.

For Kant, by contrast, our theoretical knowledge is wholly confined to appearances and yet one has an ethical access to the infinite that effectively cancels his metaphysical agnosticism, because the divine and the religious are so absolutely identified with the ethical imperative that we can comprehend. Moreover, in complex ways that were taken yet further by Fichte and some of the neo-Kantians, Kant effectively derives theoretical understanding and phenomenal reality from ethical understanding and noumenal reality. The analytic philosopher John Hare rightly recognises a Scotist substructure as present in all this and even claims, with daring counter-intuition, that Kant, apparently the inventor of an autonomous human morality, in fact perpetuates Scotist divine command theory in the ethical realm. One can argue this because, Kant stresses that, on account of

a lurking sensory schematisation which even moral reflection can never escape -- the aesthetic experience of the 'sublime' -- we need 'faith' that the categorical imperative is real in the infinite God, such that every pure and autonomous human ethical will is only a kind of aspiration to such a will which is only not in vain if we truly posit God's existence. Since all moral value, according to Kant, is deducible from the *factual* reality of unconstrained free will, and yet we cannot be sure of possessing any such thing, it follows that the very possibility of the ethical flows from the imposition of the divine will as proclaiming only itself, a proclamation that we have to know by faith – a faith which even requires the support of the example of Jesus Christ as really having put this will into pure practice.

In Kant then, we see a crucial and curious structure: the modern capture of the divine and the infinite for the ethical always flips back into a capture of the ethical by the religious. We shall such a structure repeated in later thinkers. This theoretical figure cannot be understood as one of participation, because it is not, for Kant, that the human will shares in the divine will in such a fashion that it asymptotically approaches it. For that would allow that the specific content of acts, as opposed to the inner sanctum of the willed intention, could approximate to the good. But instead, a gulf remains which can only be breached by a Lutheran faith through which we are justified, as Kant explicitly declares. In so far as a pietist affectivity is indeed involved here, then this does not truly mediate, because while, for Kant, we can only *feel* the good, this feeling is exactly what *may* contaminate the purity of our intention, which, in order to be properly ethical, must truly be disinterested and so feeling-neutral, never misled by the bias of mere sympathy.

In the rest of the lecture I want to show how the contemporary so-called 'theological turn in phenomenology' still lies within this modern structure of unmediated finite/infinite duality and so of transcendence without participation.

My reason for focussing on this strand rather than, say, the general run of analytic philosophical approaches to the transcendent, is partly a matter of good taste and partly a recognition that this current does not, at least in any obvious sense, idolatrously reduce God to the ontic, or regard him as if he were simply a very large 'single being' or properly comparable, in the case of Plantinga and Wolterstorff's bizarre 'Reformed Epistemology', to finite other minds of which we can be as uncertain or certain as of the divine mind, supposedly for similar reasons and in the same kind of way. Such idolisation tends to be the failing of the analytic philosophy of religion in general (though this is largely the work of the Second Division and not the First, still less the Premier League, of this School) and one can best account for its existence in terms of a kind of typology of those who affirm divine existence, in agreement with Kierkegaard's view that all systems of thought are really ungrounded expressions of bias of character, of human subjectivity and existential preference.

Some thinkers, like those I am about to discuss, seem drawn to God because they are drawn to *mystery*; others, like Richard Swinburne *et al,* seem drawn to God because they are so drawn to reason that they coldly lust after a tidy and total explanation of everything. But this is not attainable any more than it is possible to offer, as finite beings, any sort of proof of the existence of an infinite being, because of the unbridgeable disproportion involved. This is intuitively obvious to anyone and remained obvious for everyone up to at least Aquinas and probably beyond. Aquinas's

'demonstrations' of divine existence were but prudentially 'probable' dialectical showings and today the best equivalent of such showings is perhaps to try to demonstrate, as I have done in the last two lectures, what happens when one rejects transcendence yet still embraces speculation. For then it would seem that one cannot really abandon the question of the 'derivation' of being, and that the kind of accounts of the 'self-derivation' of being that we have seen, for example, with Deleuze and Badiou, cannot help but look quasi-theological, yet less satisfying in their 'saving of appearances' than the accounts given by genuine theology.

Some then, in seeking God, seek the consolation of mystery, while others seek the consolation of divine sufficient reason. But perhaps, to be captivated by absolutely ineffable mystery into which we have not a single glimmer of insight is to remain one sort of romantic adolescent, while to seek total understanding is to remain another sort of nerdy male teenager. Arguably we need instead an adult quest for a tempered mystery which would involve the recovered and reworked philosophical 'childhood' of *methexis*, of participation which offers always partial insight, forever overborne by the still-yet unknown.

The wargaming and chess-puzzling brand of adolescents will either grow up or not, and probably not, so I shall now leave them alone. Autistic closure to emotion cannot evolve, whereas hyper-saturated emotion can. The exponents of the 'theological turn' are like romantic adolescents, albeit of a highly sophisticated and in many ways admirable kind, to the extent that they tend to hypostasise and celebrate the unknown as the unknown. In this respect they are the heirs at once of Scotus, of Descartes and of Kant. But they provide a phenomenological twist to the paradigm. Phenomenology, as

Paul Ricoeur put it, is unique insofar as it tries to study appearances simply as appearances, bracketing all other issues about anything objective or subjective behind the phenomena. But what is peculiar about the 'theological turn in phenomenology' and which arouses the ire of many secular phenomenologists like Dominique Janicaud, is that it seeks to have a phenomenology precisely of the invisible, of what does not appear, of the noumenal and the subjective after all. Moreover, it sees *this* phenomenon as the most certain, the most foundational one, the thing that it most of all *given.* For this reason the claim to objectivity is not abandoned, but the upshot is that it is the very emptiness of what does not appear that tends to be absolutised. Technically, then, the 'theological turn' falls short of the 21st switch to 'speculation' that I have already described. However, Janicaud may well be right that what we have here is in truth speculation by subterfuge, something in reality completely 'metaphysical', even if often enunciated in the name of the refusal of all ontology.

As we shall see, the apparent refusal of speculation and yet its insertion by surrogate means, combined with a hypostasisation of an unknown infinite, are deeply linked to the refusal of participation within this current of opinion. Let us ask then, whether this refusal is coherent, whether it can attain a genuine transcendence and whether it can save the appearances of the things of this world any better than the philosophies of immanence. I shall now briefly examine in turn the thought of arguably the three main exponents of the theological turn: Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion.

In the case of Lévinas, there is an odd comparison to be made with Badiou. Both thinkers return to Plato and both to a bifurcated insistence at once on the unity of the

ethical imperative and on the irreducible plurality of instances of this imperative. Both then, return to the most primordial question of the one and the many, and both face a consequent problem of mediation between the two.

Lévinas primarily embraces Plato in terms of the thesis that the Good lies beyond Being – which he confusingly identifies as the 'metaphysical', mainly in order to annoy Heidegger. To evoke the significance of this thesis, one can allude to Pedro Calderón de la Barca's famous Spanish Baroque drama, *La Vida es Sueno* (*Life is a Dream*). Here the protagonist, Segismund, Prince of Poland, has been imprisoned without any human contact, in order to forestall a prophecy that he will rule as a tyrant. His father Basil feels that, in justice, this prophecy should be tested and has Segismund released, but on the merciful condition that if he should indeed prove tyrannous he will later be told that he has only dreamt that he was for a day ruler. The prophecy is of course fulfilled, and Segismund proves in one horrendous bloodsoaked twenty-four hours of misgovernment to be both unruly and violent. However, he then himself concludes that whether he was dreaming or not is irrelevant, for, in dream or in reality, we always perform a role and the entire Creation itself is but a world-theatre. And he also realises that, dreaming or awake, he can opt to play another role and escape the chains of pagan fate. Thus he declares that 'To act with virtue/Is what matters, since if it proves true/That truth's sufficient in itself/If not, we win friends against the time/When we at last awake'. Segismund is released and proves after all a worthy ruler.

In this way the reality of doing good, of performing acts of justice and mercy, is accorded priority over questions of ontological status, just as for Plato we can be certain of things under the light of the Sun of the Good, but not of mere things in being that are

like shadows flitting across the walls of the cave. But the question still remains of the crucial mediation of *drama:* whether it is only within the enacted world-dream that we are able to receive the light of the good, as for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar's work implies. Does this receiving need to be some sort of *sharing* of that light, even a reciprocal bouncing back of that light, as opposed to simply responding to its imperative clarification, its inexorable donation? For Plato it does, but for Lévinas it does not. Thus he detaches (and more emphatically as his career advances) Plato's 'Good beyond Being' from Plato's other stresses on mediation by the drama of the *polis*, the role of *eros* in knowing, real relationality and participation itself.

Why should this matter? What does participation really mean? Nicholas of Cusa declared that it was indefinable, and could only be approached apophatically like God, since it was the site of our relationship to God. This is true, but if one attempts an inadequate approach, then this should be in terms of Aquinas's description of a participated part as a 'quasi-part'. What this implies is a part that is nonetheless an imitation at a certain distance. Normally, in finite reality, something that is a part of a whole is not a copy of that whole. Equally, something that imitates something else is not a part of that something else. But in order to express our relationship to the transcendent, and *especially* the Creation to the Creator, we require the unthinkable idea of the paradoxical coincidence of sharing with imitation. Thus a creature imitates God by being a trace or image of God, but as there is really no existential space outside God, who is all in all, the very self-standing ground of its imitation is given by God, and is thus a partaking in God. But if this is the case, then it is equally the case that the sharing can only happen *through* imitation, because God cannot really be shared out and it is, as Cusa again declares, the imparticipable that is impossibly participated. God can only be

shared in by something other to God that faintly copies God. Yet this something is also, in Cusa's phrase *non aliud*, not otherwise to God, because God is able to be shared-in universally by every degree of being, precisely because he is indivisible and everywhere and cannot really be divided at all. The further paradox then follows that, while the creature is not God, the heart of the creature, as for Cusa and Eckhart, following Augustine, nonetheless *is* God.

For Lévinas's 'flattened' Platonism however, the good is neither copied nor shared-in. This means that the good as God or the *Autrui*, the 'big other', can only announce himself immediately --- either at the core of my personal being, or in the face of alterity. Lévinas chooses the latter option; Henry, as we shall see, chooses the former; Marion seeks to combine both.

In choosing the sacrality of the face to face as the site of the disclosure of the good, Lévinas explicitly resolves against participation. He regards this as a pagan and impersonal swallowing up of individuals in a totality. But he makes no attempt to elucidate *methexis* in traditional metaphysics in the way that I have just done, and indeed he openly associates vertical participation with the horizontal participation of 'primitive mentality' as controversially described by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. According to that thesis, so-called primitive peoples do indeed inhabit a life that is a dream: a state of hazy indistinction between themselves and the people, animals and objects around them.

For Lévinas, this is the very essence of the 'pagan totality' which he seeks to refuse in the name of modern French reason against the Teutonic atavism which had

slaughtered so many of his own Jewish race. But the curious thing about Lévinas's intellectual development is that at one stage he *half espoused* the truth of this 'paganism'. The reason for that was that he saw it as an alternative to the modern technocratic objectification of everything and so also of people. So the difficult point to note in the exegesis of this philosopher is that there are not one but *two* totalities. And because both are the enemy, sometimes one is less the enemy than the other and is called upon to be an ally against the really villainous foe. At first the most serious enemy was modern and not pagan totality, but later this verdict was reversed, as we shall shortly see.

Nevertheless, equally against *both* totalities, and in the wake of the horrors of the 20th C, Lévinas wishes to oppose Biblical *monotheism* as the one real source of the primacy of the personal. In this verdict he was surely right, but its speicific outworking gives rise to difficulties. Lévinas reads the Biblical legacy in an entirely Cartesian and neo-Kantian way that is arguably not particularly Jewish at all. For this reading, as for Kant, the religious is the ethical, and yet in such a way that the ethical seems to collapse back into the religious. Or to put this more precisely, the *Autrui* is only present for us in the face of the human other, and yet this *autre* is only truly other when he (and I'm afraid that it really is more a he than a she, at least in the early to middle Lévinas) is more or less identical to the *Autrui*, to the divine. For so long as the other truly appears before me and does not 'call' me in the very heart of myself before myself to respond to his distress, his otherness is lost in the structures of a shared totality, whether pagan or modern. This totality is for Lévinas the entire realm of the visible which he thinks cannot but succumb to the domineering gaze of intentional reason. Equally, it is the realm of reciprocal give-and-take, which he thinks cannot but succumb to the law of

market or bureaucratic equivalence which is nothing more than a mutual satisfaction of essentially isolated egoisms.

It follows that, so long as human beings are really related to each other, so long as they *share something in common* and so long as they desire each other, then for Lévinas, as for Kant, they are not really awakened to the disinterestedness of the ethical. Yet if the real ethical subject cannot *appear*, if the literal human face is *not at all* what Lévinas means by transcendent *visage,* then it would appear that the ethical imperative disappears yet more completely up the tunnel of religious faith than it does for Kant, because, in the case of Lévinas, the development of his ideas runs increasingly against any mediation by feeling and sensation whatsoever and a mere *devotion* to the other therefore appears to be without any practical ethical issue after all. It follows that, having once initially banished all mediation and sharing, Lévinas cannot really have an ethics, much less a philosophy that makes the ethical do the usual work of an ontology, unless he finds various ruses to smuggle back mediation after all.

These ruses can be listed as the following:

1.The need for the 'third person'. Supposedly beyond Kant, Lévinas insists that the site of the ethical imperative is not an abstract command but the dyadic face-to-face encounter with the singularity of the other. Yet, as we have seen, this other cannot really appear in the public domain of objectifying gaze and reciprocal exchange without tending to lapse from the status of an ethical other to whose one's response must be disinterested and 'objective' – with an objectivity exceeding (as Lévinas makes clear) our treatment of mere objects themselves, or a reprehensible 'objectifying' of

subjects as mere parts of a totality. Therefore our response requires, in order that it may be a 'just' response, the verifying gaze of a third party. Yet this move threatens to render the imperative but a Kantian one to respect the abstract freedom of any old person after all and not rather to receive the imperative itself from the specific presence of the unique person before us.

At times, in Lévinas, it can sound as if this 'third' perspective is ideally that of God, but at other times God has to be invoked to secure the more basic truth that our relationship to the third must in turn be a dyadic one in order to be authentic and to cancel out in turn the 'Kantian' threat of a distancing moral abstraction. In reality, the place of 'God' in Lévinas's philosophy turns out to be as the marker of the dyad or triad *aporia*, which it does nothing to resolve, because it merely sustains in being an irresolvable shuttle between the two perspectives.

For 'the divine' to provide resolution here would be for it to undergird a perspective of truly distributive Aristotelian justice (including the ordered distribution of love, following Augustine) as more fundamental than the dyadic perspective. Yet it is precisely in *this* context that the dyadic experience of friendship is able to 'feed back' into the general axiological store particular ethical insights from its own experience, because this general perspective is an open-ended historical attempt to gain insight into justice, and not simply a set of formal protocols for the respect of the other in general, which is all that Lévinasian thirdness can possibly involve. In consequence, the shared insight of the dyad becomes utterly incommunicable and falls always under the just suspicion of being an amoral *folie à deux,* while the public perspective of the triad is unable to make intimate equitable adjustments.

2. The second site of mediation in Lévinas's middle period is 'the household'. To understand the role that the *domus* plays it is important to see that that, besides the ethical priority of the other, Lévinas initially stressed *also* the equal priority of the *cogito.* Against Heidegger's idea that personal isolation is full of profundity, Lévinas insisted that it is sunk in a totally self-sufficient and hedonistic enjoyment. This situation he describes as 'atheistic' and one can take this, following clear indications in his the text of *Totality and Infinity,* as a new transcription of the Scotist notion of cognitively sufficient enclosure, as regards meaning, within finitude. Equally neo-Scotist is Lévinas's idea that this utterly non-participatory 'atheism' is a kind of necessary 'backdrop' for the arrival of the infinite as the sheerly equivocal.

By the time of this work, however, Lévinas no longer saw 'enjoyment' as quite so isolated, but more as a swimming in the sea of pagan participatory totality. But the latter is now the sinister sphere of the *il y a,* of natural indifference where the rain perpetually falls on the unjust and the just equally, as in the latter stages of *King Lear.* He therefore realised that, if the other as the ethical subject is to appear before us at all, it must be within this godforsaken *milieu.*

It is here that Lévinas blatantly, at this stage of his writing, saw 'woman' as the mediating other – half sunk in the *il y a,* half emerging into real subjectivity. She stands at the heart of the household that is therefore supposed to form a kind of lintel between nature and the ethical. This occurs with the welcoming of the of course male stranger into its midst. However, because common feasting with the stranger as a visible and reciprocal activity in every way contaminates the ethical, it cannot truly serve to

introduce us to the stranger as an authentic 'saying' and unilaterally commanding or 'teaching' subject (one is curiously reminded of Wittgenstein's more Alpine schoolmasterly moments here) who cannot be reduced to the objectivity of what he merely *says.* Such a stranger needs to be met in the *forum*, but the *oikos* cannot ever lead us there, so how are to arrive?

3. The third mediator is the child. Lévinas in fact concludes that every subjective saying is lost in the currency of the said, so that it would seem that no ethically calling person can ever appear within the midst of human society at all. In *Totality and Infinity* he seeks to escape this problem and the dead-end of the hospitality trope through the new figure of the child who is, naturally, a son. The woman's more useful mediation turns out to be in giving birth, and the resulting *fils,* as hoped-for, permits a communication of the 'saying' because one's son in some sense *is* oneself, even though he is other. (Marion later reverts to this thematic.) This supposed triumph of supra-longevity is for Lévinas also a victory of life over death, which for him, like the *il y a,* always holds an ontological primacy, rendering his ethics merely reactive in consequence – always about healing injuries, never about promoting positive good ends. However, it is an equivocal victory because the son is, after all, also the child of the mother, and thereby continues equally the death-haunted pagan totality and therefore equally the realm of the said along with the transcendence of the saying. This sounds more like Zoroastrianism than the purged Platonism that Lévinas aims at.

4.The next mediator is the modern market. Precisely because the household proved problematic in the manner described, Lévinas later downgraded it. Indeed, he later came to substitute the modern, 'representational' totality for the pagan one as the new site of

mediation. He now explicitly saw modern capitalism and bureaucracy as dissolving overly 'natural' given personal relationships and as creating a new sort of reciprocity of abstract equivalence and social distance. *This* he now saw as the necessary backdrop for the real arrival of the 'saying' *visage* of the ethical other. Indeed he goes so far as to say that the modern liberal subject of abstract Scotistic and Cartesian choice is the real undeniable 'object' of theoretical understanding. It is this which forms the threshold for this subject to make a real, unique moral demand. But if Zoroastrianism has been abandoned here, one still has a depressingly social democratic Manicheanism in which the admittedly evil egoism of capitalist market and totalising state can only ever be somewhat held at bay, as if the idea that they could be overcome would be the illusion of King Canute trying to make the river Trent *Aegir* (as its tidal bore was traditionally known from old Norse), run backwards. Indeed it is worse than this: for Lévinas the evil of representational totality is a necessary *precondition* for the emergence of the ethical.

5. The final mediator is the 'archihistorical'. Given this conclusion about the role of the modern liberal state and the market, how can Lévinas still claim the metaphysical priority of the call to be ethical? He does so, in *Otherwise than Being,* through looking not now to the endless future, but to the transcendental past. Now it becomes clear that we are first situated as a subject only through an ethical calling that is always prior to us, which we have inherited. But all the problems do not thereby go away. Just why is the call to be ethical more fundamentally 'given' than the impulse to be unpleasant? Is not a questionable assertion concealed behind a judgement at this point? And just when am I to be the ethical giving subject and the subject of mere enjoyment, without any theory of just distribution? Lévinas faces oddly the same *aporia* here as does ethical consequentialism.

But most crucially of all, because of the ontological primacy of evil and death, my debt to the call of the past will prove an endless one that can never fully be repaid. It therefore turns out that, by refusing the qualified paganism of Platonic participation, Lévinas sustains after all the most unpleasant and the most sanguinary aspect of the pagan past: the cosmic need for perpetual sacrifice. Alongside this he sustains the perfectly pagan anxiety of when to feast and when to sacrifice, lacking the liturgical rhythm of Plato's *Laws,* whose cruciality for Platonic participation has been accurately argued by Catherine Pickstock. Finally, he sustains the pagan incapacity to find a satisfactory mediation between the 'polytheism' of the many and the 'unity' of divine law because, as we have seen, he cannot resolve the *aporia* of the dyad and the triad.

Yet none of the above quite arrives at the very nub of this whole issue. What is most crucial here is to realise that 'participation', as I have described it, is also the best model of the *gift.* For the gift also has to involve both sharing and distance. A real gift must express something of the giver and yet leave the recipient a certain mimetic freedom. In the paradigmatic divine instance, reciprocity is not a cancellation of unilateral freedom, but rather its consequence, in the sense that a creature is only given to be a creature in terms of its unconscious or conscious expression of gratitude. By virtue of the participation of human horizontal processes in the seemingly contradictory 'unilateral reciprocity' of cosmic liturgy, a fundamental *asymmetry* of all response is opened to view: when I express my gratitude, when I make a return gift, it is the initial unilateral generosity which enables my response and which I therefore return differently, *without* any equivalent cancellation, because I am at a mimetic distance as as well as within a shared intimacy. Hence what Lévinas fails to see is that there can be a combination of

the asymmetry of the ethical demand with the reciprocity of circulation. The latter is an unending spiral and *not* a closed circle: consequently there can be a constitutive *gift-exchange* which keeps the good in circulation and which ensures that the visible and objective itself participates in the good and expresses it in an indispensable manner. This monism of the social good can then replace Lévinas's vicious dualism of impotent value and malign market equivalence. Ironically enough, sensible French Huguenots sometimes have to rebuke the Jansenism of their non-Protestant French contemporaries, and Paul Ricoeur often tried to amend Lévinas in this direction, though without the real requisite break with a Kantian ethical format.

In the case of Lévinas, his God could perfectly well be merely regulative and not truly real. This is not so in the case of Michel Henry, because he chooses the other possibility for a non-participated divine immediacy, namely direct presence to each human interiority. For Henry, therefore, what is primary is the *cogito* alone*,* but this is the *cogito* correctly re-read in fidelity to Descartes' intentions, not as something 'representable', but as the non-reflexive and ineffable immediacy of self experience. Moreover this is a *cogito* rendered bodily, affective and more immediately linked to the infinite than with Descartes himself.

Following the great French Romantic philosopher Maine de Biran's transmutation of Malebranche's occasionalist reading of the fact that we are not in control of our most human actions – for example we simply don't know, and in principle cannot know, how we lift our arms in terms of conscious willing – Henry realises that the body itself is the primary site of subjectivity, just as much as it is a site of objectivity. Because he gives priority to the body he arrives at a kind of 'materialist' *cogito,* for which all thinking is

in reality a kind of feeling and feeling is an 'auto-affection' in which we 'feel ourselves' in a generative and not self-doubling manner. (Henry attributes false self-doubling to Kant's division between the apperceived and empirical self and considers that Descartes was free of it.)

This auto-affection is for Henry 'life itself' or being taken as self-generative. There is much in common here with Bergson's vitalism, yet Henry refuses the idea that life is fundamentally temporal, and indeed regards it as radically atemporal. Life is not for him something passed down the generations, but rather something that is given within the course of a very Cartesian and semi-occasionalist *creatio continua,* again and again by God, the infinite living one, to each living creature and to humans in a fashion that allows them to achieve awareness of the life within them. (The exact status of non-human things and animals in Henry is, however, somewhat unclear.)

In his books on the New Testament (which contain, incidentally, devastatingly unanswerable assaults on liberal Biblical criticism's denial that the gospels endlessly and unambiguously assert Christ's divinity on almost every page, and that these affirmations almost without doubt trace back to Jesus's own words) Henry very crucially identifies this auto-affection with the category of 'heart' throughout the Bible. This is an identification which I would broadly wish to uphold and which will prove important later in this lecture series.

However Henry argues, with far too great a lack of discrimination, that whereas the Greek *logos* of reason concerned outward appearances, the Jewish *logos* of feeling concerns inward reality. Jesus's teaching is all based upon an extreme distinction of

inward from outward, and Jesus himself must be regarded, in accordance with Christian orthodoxy, as the very incarnation of the 'Word of life' itself, as is demonstrated by the miraculous life-giving power of his human utterances. (This is affirmed by Henry with absolute literalness.) Following both St John's gospel and Meister Eckhart, Henry sees the closest possible link between the generation of the second person of the Trinity and the 'filiation' of all human beings, but again like Eckhart he still sustains the difference of Christ's unique dignity. His equally orthodox understanding of the Trinity is that it concerns the infinite auto-generation of God as life and gift.

In this instance also Henry points to something crucial which should be affirmed. Surely the Biblical and Trinitarian God requires the elaboration of a metaphysics of life, of auto-generation – or better, entirely original unfounded 'generation', to avoid any connotations of the onto-theological reflexivity of the Cartesian *causa sui,* as rightly denounced by Marion. This should be seen as yet more fundamental than Aquinas's metaphysics of *esse,* though not incompatible with it, as indeed is apparent when one sustains 'being' in the Latin infinitive, and indeed it can be argued that Aquinas *did* also imply a Trinitarian metaphysics of participation in the generated 'second act' of carried-through understanding and the processual 'third act' of achieved willing or arrival at an external goal. This combined and integral 'desiring intellect' in which all spirits share and all creatures in lesser degrees of more external emanations and achievements, was for him, following Aristotle, 'the highest kind of life'. In any case, a 'Biblical metaphysics', yet more transfigurative of the true insights of Hellenic reason, which would be a 'transcendent vitalism' is a crucial aspect what this series of lectures is seeking to recommend.

However, a certain qualified Marcionism appears to hover over Henry's philosophy. His attitude to the doctrines of Creation and Providence is unclear, and with even more extremity than Lévinas he regards the public realm of the visible and the reciprocal as almost outright evil. And once again this seems to imply a heroic but Manichean politics whose despair may look today realistic but is yet without radical hope. Although Henry does, indeed, speak of a positive spiritual reciprocity modelled on the Trinity, this would appear to reduce to a Kantian formality of mutual respect between interiorities locked within their own ineffability.

And one can indeed plausibly claim, in contrast to Henry, that the problem today is agoraphobia and not claustrophobia. Modernity artificially *reinforces* this 'Kantian' interiority through increasingly allowing us to retreat into the sham security of speeding along runnels inside cubicles and communicating with everyone all round the globe from the shelter of discrete hutches along invisible internal routes whose speed of immediacy cancels all sense of 'outness'. This artificial space of infinite speed, shared omnipresence and indiscriminate proximity surely mimics our own mental interiority and leaves us in a sterile isolation that is insulated against external encounter, precisely because solipsism now parades as universal intimacy, permitting us to insult as well as to embrace every stranger at random, yet with no more committed sincerity in either instance than is the case of our passing dream-like annoyances or chance regards.

Still up to circa 2000, the exterior space of salons, streets and fields was the basic public realm and we retreated to the privacy of bedrooms, books, epistles and phone-calls. Today, in a rapid reversal, it is the electronic book, the electronic highway and the 'nowhere' space of artificially-assisted travel (even to the shops) and its sterile

antechambers that is the public, and so it is the claustrophobic that is shared. Inversely, external vastness and vistas, rural or urban, have become the place of private retreat, as if every individual were now purloined in their very intimacy, like Poe's letter, and only able to hide themselves in the absolutely open and most obviously manifest. But equally, it is only in this slow and protracted sphere that we can hope to meet others in th their proper public caution that is the necessary prelude to a gradual disclosure of their real consistent hiddenness.

Hence contemporary experience of the spatial inversions of late capitalism gives the lie to Henry's identification of pure Marxist 'use value' with the exterior alienation of 'exchange value'. Today, instead, it is clear that authentic human usage would be as much external and ecological, internal and integral, and so bound up (beyond Marx) with processes of just exchange and true fetishisation of the sacred (persons, sites, symbolic qualities) as defining good usage in terms of a common good that circulates through both indoors and outdoors.

The problem with Henry's 'interiorism' is that this is but a one-sided reading of Maine de Biran's understanding of the body. Far superior and more accurate is surely Maurice Merleau-Ponty's variant, according to which the subjectivity and the objectivity of the body are totally intertangled. This means then that the interiority of my body flows out into the world, while reciprocally there is no limit, as Spinoza rightly saw, to how far I may gather the world into myself in extension of my own capacities.

This circular folding of the interior and the exterior into each other along the spatial surface of the world which Merleau-Ponty called 'flesh', takes the shape of an asymmetrical spiral in the case of temporal development. Therefore we do not need to choose, as with Henry, between birth form God and natural birth, as indeed a relfection on the Virgin conception should remind us. Since birth, like every true occurrence in time is not adequately 'caused' by the occasions which precede it, but is a miraculous 'event' in saturated excess of all causation – as Marion very well describes – the constant divine creative will can still be horizontally mediated by the immanent gifts of temporal duration.

Following Wittgenstein's insights, we can also question Henry's view that the experience of pain and pleasure is entirely unaffected by external expression of its character nor entirely incommunicable. Indeed, how would be ever know that what I feel is not pretty close to what you feel? If the forms of things themselves naturally bear feelings why should we not rather assume that this is, indeed the case? Similarly, if the transcendent auto-affection that is the Trinity is a substantive relation and not a mere reflexivity, which would compromise the divine simplicity, then surely it is just as much 'exterior' as it is 'interior' and so the ground equally of external created relations as of universal human 'sonship'.

Because the exterior for Henry in no sense shares in the interior, he lacks a real sense of a transcendence in which the intertangled inside and outside can both participate. Instead, his account of the Augustinian God who more interior to us than we are to ourselves threatens to reduce after all to the sheer immanence of the vital. Indeed, to affirm real transcendence we require more acknowledgement of the crucial

knowability and ethical import of that which 'transcends' our minds in the natural world, beyond Henry's enclosure within immanence, behind the screen of phenomenology's bracketing of the ontologically real.

In comparison with Henry, Jean-Luc Marion is more obviously an orthodox Catholic. His often synthetic thought embraces both Henry's auto-affection and Lévinas's idea notion of the call of the other as a unilateral gift. Both are seen as examples of what Marion describes as 'the saturated phenomenon' along with the event, the idol and the icon. The event I have already described; in the case of the idol we are 'stopped' by the blinding presence of the object and in the case of the icon we are taken past it. In either case we are dazzled by an *anamorphosis* that situates *us* within a picture, thereby reversing our gaze upon a depiction. Yet in the case of the idol the 'stoppage' by the whole image results in a mirroring of our gaze backs to us, thereby neutralising the anamorphic effect and permitting our visual manipulation of the image after all. But in the case of the icon, where we are captivated by the gaze of its eyes, we are carried beyond to the invisible and ineffable source of this gaze. (If one allows, as Marion appears increasingly to do, that the idol/icon duality is not absolute, and that more than the eyes of an icon matter, then this would seem to pen the way to a greater mediation of the visible with the invisible than Marion still truly entertains.)

By 'saturated', Marion means a phenomenon which, in a reversal of both Kant and Husserl, does not first appear as something vaguely intended to be later fulfilled by a complete intuition, but first as a blinding intuition like sunlight, or indeed like Plato's sun, an *éblouissement,* with which our weak intending can never catch up.

Basically, this is another figure of the Kantian sublime: it concerns how we 'feel' the absolute boundary of those phenomena which we can intentionally comprehend. We cannot enjoy any increasing insight into this invisibility, nor do the merely visible things participate in it. Accordingly Marion favours aesthetically the starker products of New York abstract impressionism and probably would not allow that the more figurative British modifications of this style, as with Peter Lanyon of the St Ives school, allow us to think of a more fluid and progressive passage from the visible into the invisible.

Yet how can one claim that this absolute sublime boundary, without transgressive crossing, is ineluctably given to an objective phenomenology? Of that which we cannot speak in a merely objective fashion, how is it possible to speak so dogmatically? The entire idea of 'the saturated phenomenon' relies upon a dubious duality of the intentional and the intuitive. In reality, while they may somewhat oscillate in different moments, they more or less keep pace with each other. A surveyable geometric figure which I can precisely intend and discourse about is precisely one into which I have a full sufficient intuition, a kind of divine perspective, even though it is only upon the thinnest, most abstract aspect of the real. And to intend something that I do not yet fully understand is to have an obscure and affective intuition concerning it, a desire for it, as Plato surmised in his 'Meno problematic' – for without desire, how could one reach intellectually to the unknown? Inversely, to be overwhelmed by a blinding presence is, in a sense, *only* to be able to see it abstractly, or to have a vague concept of it, as well as a vague 'sight' of what it might be. What is 'rich' in intuition in Marion's sense is also something that I must grasp only through the most ecstatically far-reaching and so 'objective' of intentions.

For these reasons, that which I grasp ahead of its arrival is something that comes towards me in a way that cannot be delimited or bounded. Hence Marion's attempt tidily to restrict philosophy to a propaedeutic to theology shatters: we simply cannot delineate the transcendental margin of the most radically given without accepting the possibility that grace and revelation may already be at work in us.

Nor can this grace that is perhaps always already at work in us operate merely in terms of Marion's transcendental conditions for the arrival of the divine gift. These are so austere, in order to avoid any contamination by reciprocal exchange, that there can be no identifiable giver, nor recipient, nor content to the gift. Marion claims that this circumstance renders the gift logically 'impossible', but that the gift nevertheless arrives from the good beyond being and thus from outside the law of non-contradiction which demands, within being, always a mathematical equity of exchange. Once again then, an ontological and political Manicheanism hovers, but the reasoning that secures it is questionable. For gift as anonymous unilateral passage is *not* logically unthinkable; it is indeed a pure self-identity. The problem is rather that this cannot be any recognisably interpersonal gift, nor constitute any real human habitat.

Instead, the situation is quite the reverse. It is not that the unilateral gift exceeds all logic but is real beyond being. It is rather the case that the reciprocal gift exceeds all logic and yet is real *in* being, indeed in the everyday and as the most fundamental 'social fact', as Marcel Mauss explained. This is because gift-exchange involves the apparent logical contradiction of a free gift that you *must* give, and an obligation that is not fulfilled unless you fulfil it in an entirely free way. It involves also, as Alain Caillé

has argued, a situation of seemingly impossible simultaneous indebtedness (ie in relation to the same thing and in the same respect) such that every return of an invitation to dinner, for example -- if this really takes place between friends who desire a *relationship* -- by cancelling an existing obligation only gives rise to a new one. It all sounds impossible, and yet that it just what we do: we fulfil our social obligations to reciprocate through good timings, non-identical repetitions, subtle asymmetries and ability to judge every gift as a surprise that is yet appropriate – gambling on extending the existential range of the other, yet in an authentic and natural way.

This is gift as participation: gift as the paradoxical interplay of sharing and *mimesis*, where we share the capacity to imitate and imitate the capacity to share. And such is the ethical horizon foreclosed by the entire Scotist and unilateralist trajectory of 'disinterested' refusal of the erotic and the mutual – leaving our modernity sundered between the sordidness of the capitalist market on the one hand and the shared egotism of the private *domus* on the other.

I submit that the 'theological turn in phenomenology' colludes with all that. But if it is culpable ethically, then this is more fundamentally because it is culpable theoretically. The mistake is to claim to think only within an illusory *epoché* and thereby to imagine that there is any ascertainable boundary that is inexorably 'given' to us. Abandoning entirely also *this* variant of 'the myth of the given', we should rather say that the identification of the margin is always a matter of 'speculation', or of 'conjecture' to use the Cusan term. Any claimed vision, especially of the indefinite, is a *sign* that must be hermeneutically read. This reading is indeed a conjecture. But not a blind one if, and only if, we experience a faith that the infinite which we conjecture

about also *envisages us.* For then to 'speculate' does not mean idly to make stuff up, but precisely, as the probable etymology of the word suggests (from *specula=* a watchtower), to see further than we can apparently see: to see the invisible in the visible, by partaking of the unbounded divine gaze.