

Stanton Lecture 5: Participated Transcendence Reconceived

By John Milbank

In the last lecture we examined modern transcendence without participation. The philosophical figure for this model is 'distance', rather than sharing or imitation. The infinite God is thought of as being at an infinite and unbridgeable range from our finitude. But the upshot, as we saw, is that some point of immediate contact with this infinity is sought within finitude, which may be the inner self or the other person, or the aesthetic sublime or else an unmediated positive revelation.

In every case this tends to lead to the ontological humiliation of other aspects of finite reality: the external world, one's own self-love, the merely beautiful, the processes of human reason. And if what is unknown is simply manifest as the sublimity of what is unknown, then, by a rebound that occurs all the way from Kant to Marion, all that can be asserted after all is one's own will on the brink of the abyss: a will to self-assertion, a will to posit the other who does not appear and whose specific otherness is thereby lost in the very piety of a desire not to presume upon or to characterise or idolize her alterity. A will also to posit a space for the possibility of the self-manifestation of a deity, whose revelation must then just be accepted as ineffable mystery, since were we to enjoy any degree of insight into the mystery, unilateral distance would be compromised by synergistic sharing, imitation and reciprocating return after all.

In contrast to the figure of distance, I set the figure of participation as suggested by the perennial philosophy from Plato to Aquinas. I explained how participation can

also be understood as gift and gift-exchange according to a paradox of unilateral reciprocity, whereby God gives all, but because all is gift, the ontological basis of reality is gratitude and return, even though this very gratitude and capacity for return is itself given by God. It was also shown how both participation and gift involve a strange situation in which one can only share by imitating and one can only imitate by sharing. Our possibility to imitate God is itself given by God as a share in himself, and yet this is not absorption into God, because we stand at an imitative distance from him. Indeed, as Catherine Pickstock pointed out last time, it is just this imitative distance which most respects God in his specific otherness as well as his unlimited outreach. In a sense then, the further we are away from God, the nearer we are to him and the more we are a part of him, since he himself, as omnipresent, goes also this distance. In our finite world, by contrast, imitation and sharing are distinguished from each other: nevertheless, in all finite processes of gift-exchange, between humans and humans and between humans and other creatures, they partially coincide, such that our sharing through receipt in the generosity of the giving of a gift requires an imitative response, whose non-identity of repetition must respect distance in order not to cancel out the first donation and to remain within the scope of its initiating gesture. Through such processes we, as human, participate in the natural world around us and are also 'members of each other'. Participation, therefore, has also a horizontal dimension, as once explored by Owen Barfield, and one can say that this participation itself participates in vertical participation, remembering that the latter, like God himself, is an ineffable mystery.

The figure of distance insists on an immediacy of access to the sublime and to the divine. The figure of participation does not cancel out immediacy, but rather insists

that immediacy is itself paradoxically mediated, just as it is the non-participable, the incommunicable God, which is paradoxically communicated and so shared-in. (Lucy Gardiner of St Stephen's House Oxford pointed out to me this parallel.) Each and every one of us is directly in the presence of God, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine understood. There is no hierarchy of mediators standing in this gap, as if God were at the top of a pyramid of creatures, rather than being in excess of that summit and so equally near every part of the pyramid, including its base. On the other hand, we are not close to God in our own solitary splendour; rather, in being close to God we remain connected, in degrees of proximity and remoteness, to all other creatures who are equally near to the divine. Some of these, on the ontic cosmic scale, stand alongside us; others, like the angels, are above us; others, like the lesser animals are below us. But all these creatures mediate God to us and our immediacy of presence to God accentuates and does not cancel their connectedness to us. It is the connected me who is close to God and so God speaks always through creatures to creatures, as Johann Georg Hamann put it, even in speaking to me with the uttermost intimacy.

The problem, by contrast, with the figure of distance, is that it seeks to present immediacy without mediation. So, to reiterate, as a result of stressing only the divine distance from the Creation, and not equally God as 'not otherwise' to the Creation a certain aspect of the Creation must ironically be privileged as the point of access to transcendence. The result is the downgrading of other aspects of the Created order, and in particular all the connectedness of the world, all that lies analogically 'between' things: all the horizontal aspect of participation, But if we take, instead, the figure of vertical participation, if we are less foolishly boastful of God's distance on

his behalf and allow that this distance is also an absolute proximity, a self-sharing of imitability, then, with a counter-irony, no immanent aspect of this world gets deified: not the self, not the other, not the sublime margin as such, nor the content of revelation accordingly reduced to the status of an idol.

But is a metaphysics of participation still believable and can it be revived? Is it compatible with the revelation of the Bible? In order to revive it, is it sufficient just to return to Aquinas? These are the questions which I now wish to address.

As Adrian Pabst has shown, in his forthcoming and magisterial *Metaphysics: the Creation of Hierarchy*, the question of participation is almost identical to the question of relationality. In Plato already, participation implies a one-way relationship of what participates to what is participated-in which sets that reality in formed existence. And yet that reality exists only insofar as it imitates and celebrates its origin, according to the model of unilateral reciprocity which I have already described. This model is later purified by the monotheistic doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, such that there is no longer any original chaotic matter outside the participating relationship to God. But besides this vertical asymmetry, Plato also spoke of a mutual and horizontal relationality of participation amongst the forms themselves in the transcendent realm -- in particular in terms of the complex blending of the supreme forms of the One and the Two, the same and the different. By participating dynamically in this blending, the finite realm also exhibits a horizontal participation, which shares both in vertical participation and in the transcendent horizontal participation amongst the forms. Later, the theurgic neoplatonist Proclus will speak of the endless sympathies and affinities that laterally

and as it were magically bind the emanated world together and in particular unite human knowing with corporeal reality.

As we all know, Aristotle cited against the theory of participation the ‘third man’ argument: if the similarity of two men implies a ‘form’ of humanity, then does not the similarity of those three imply a yet further form and so on *ad infinitum*? But as we also know, Plato had himself already proffered that argument. A controversy has often raged as to whether Plato then abandoned the theory of forms, or merely used this objection to clarify it. Overwhelmingly the tradition, and especially neoplatonism, read him in the latter sense and the best recent modern scholarship mostly concurs. The point is that the generative source of, for example, all examples of humanity, is not itself a giant man, but is rather supra-human in the sense of being the unknown power that can give rise to human beings in all their community and yet variety. It is this very transcendence which neither lets the community degenerate into the variety, nor subordinates the variety to an immanent essence, whether spiritual or naturalistic. This is exactly why the theory of forms is in line with common-sense: it leaves the essence and bounds of humanity a mystery, without denying that there is such an essence and such a bound. This is not, of course, to deny Aristotle’s point that form is also present as constituting substantively each individual man, nor that the universal ‘humanity’ is abstractly present in the human mind in a way that is distinct from the concrete and generative universality of the transcendent form. Nor is it to suggest that the forms hover pluralistically in some sort of intermediate polytheistic ether between the world and God. Such positions were sometimes held in the Middle Ages, but they are pseudo-Platonic. More in line with Plato, though transfigurative of his doctrine, is the standard Christian view that the forms are the ideas in the mind of God, uttered in

his *Logos* as the full community of all types of creatures which yet contains also the eminent particularity of each and every one of them.

Nor is the thematic of *methexis* entirely absent from Aristotle himself. In the *De Anima* he says that the reproduction of creatures is their attempt to 'share in' the eternal life of the immortal gods. He also speaks of individuals as participating in species and species as participating in genera. Both these aspects were incorporated into neoplatonism and persist in Aquinas.

The neoplatonists also qualified Plato by accepting Aristotle's insistence upon the importance of immanent substance and so relative immanent stability. But at the same time, they qualified Aristotle with Plato, not at all because they were obtuse concerning the former's criticism of the latter, but rather because they noticed a lacuna in his writings – a lacuna which may only be there, and which may appear to distance Aristotle from Plato more than is really the case, because of the omissions of those students who recorded his lectures in their notebooks. This lacuna concerns the relationship of all things to the first mover in terms of origins rather than teleological pull. If things do not derive from the first mover by efficient and formal origination, then is their formality and even their impulse towards their final end somehow from matter after all, despite Aristotle's view that unformed matter is of itself nothing and contains only passive potential and no active impulse? The entire doctrine of emanations is supposed to repair this gap, and at the same time to give more account of the transmission of the forms than had been supplied by Plato.

It also involves a certain attempt at a resolution of the aporetic hesitation in Aristotle between substance as specific thing and substance as general essence. This is achieved by a dynamic generation of the series of Aristotle's categories one from each other: matter from form, accidental form from substantial form, individual substance from species, species from genus, all substances, species and genera from soul, soul from intellect, intellect from the One. But as we have seen, such a *schema* is half-implicit by Aristotle himself: it was only, ironically, *one* wing of neoplatonism, namely the Plotinian current, the non-theurgic version that played down corporeal mediation, which started, through Porphyry (and later through Gilbert of Porreta) to suggest that Aristotle's 'categories' were primarily logical rather than ontological, and so began to see them as *a priori* concepts in principle detachable from processes of the genesis of matter through psychic and formal embodiment.

It is for these reasons that it is wrong to regard neoplatonism as simply one and possibly an eccentric school of thought. It is rather the main carrier of the *philosophia perennis*, which incorporated also several Stoic insights. It is true, of course, that many of the earlier Church Fathers had access mainly to earlier Middle Platonic sources, but the moves they made in relation to these sources were often parallel to those of neoplatonism and permitted a later synthesis. At the same time, Philo's combining of Biblical with Platonic perspectives had an often untraceable but probably crucial effect even upon Pagan philosophy.

The question of the relationship of the legacy of the Bible to the metaphysics of participation is often misunderstood. It should not be thought that this metaphysics shapes a kind of ontological 'backdrop' for the contingent playing-out of the drama of

salvation. For one thing, as Robert Murray, Mary Douglas and Margaret Barker have now abundantly shown, the Bible offers its own version of this metaphysics in its own idiom: the entire theology of the temple as microcosm of the cosmos and of the cosmos as a temple can be read in no other way. This symbolic metaphysics was especially associated with the first temple and it is now impossible, as Barker has shown, to read the New Testament outside the context of a wish to restore in a new way the cult of the first temple and so to intensify a ‘theophanic’ sense of the natural world in general and of human existence in particular. Barker has even written in defence of the traditional perception that there is something in common between Plato’s *Timaeus* and the opening of *Genesis*.

It is against this background that one can ask about the relationship of the category of participation to the category of grace, keeping in mind the link between participation and gift, the fact that emanation is often described as ‘gift’ by the neoplatonists, and the fact that *charis* in the New Testament may have as many or even more Greek as it has Jewish resonances. To participate implies that an essence has been borrowed from above, indeed by a kind of grace. Thus participation, since it is mediated initially through intellect and souls, was always something of an offer and a lure, that could be perversely refused or distorted, even if it became far more emphatically so under the impact of Biblical influence. In the wake of Henri de Lubac, Eric Voegelin pointed out that, for Greek philosophy, wisdom is often seen as a matter of borrowing remotely from the wisdom that really belongs to the gods alone. Again then, something like ‘grace’ is not really alien to philosophy, and the theurgic neoplatonists, following Iamblichus, even thought that ascent to the divine through *theoria* can only be completed by the descent of divine in enacted rituals which allow

a synergy of the divine with the human. As David Bradshaw has argued, the outlook of St Paul would appear to be in some ways similar.

The difference made by Christian grace has less to do with something ‘in addition to’ participation, or as a contingent occurrence against the backdrop of participation, as rather an increased sense both of the personal and interpersonal character of the absolute, and of human microcosmic dignity as destined in both soul and body for a personal unification with this absolute. Hence as Henri de Lubac argued, for Origen and Augustine and even for Aquinas, the doctrine of grace is nothing *in addition to* the Biblically-derived doctrine that human beings are most characterised by ‘heart’ or ‘spirit’, by an inner depth of linkage to God that unifies soul and body together. In a sense, all that is created is ‘graced’, because all that is created borrows even in order to exist -- exists paradoxically in its own nature only by gift, and for this reason exists as excelling itself through return to the divine source from whence it came. It is simply that spiritual creatures, angels and humans, receive this gift spiritually (or ‘heartfully’) and make this return spiritually. All creatures return to unification with God, but spiritual creatures make this return as spiritual and can enter into the depths of the divine personal life.

This *schema* appears problematically to remove any additionality of grace to the creation. But all is really the other way round: it is deifying grace that is primary and creation that is a lesser instance of such grace. As Claude Bruaire argued, in a development of Lubac, if creation is first a gift then it requires a conscious, gracious recipient who can give herself to herself reflexively as a gift. (This development is based upon a sentence in Nicholas of Cusa’s *De Visione Dei*: ‘how will you give to

me yourself, if you do not also give myself to me?) Thus, as Aquinas affirms, but would later be contradicted by the nominalists, a creation *not* containing spirit is an impossibility. Yet human beings, as he also affirms, cannot be satisfied in their deepest natural spiritual drive except by the beatific vision, even though this can only be received as a superfluous donation. There can be no humanity without grace, and even the good ordering between natural reason and the body depends upon this grace, as Aquinas sometimes makes clear. It follows then, that, since there is no creation without spirit, that neither is there any creation without the grace of elevation to the beatific vision. Thus in the *Compendium Theologiae* Aquinas is specific: ‘the consummation of the whole of corporeal nature depends, to some extent, on man’s consummation’. On Man’s and not on angels’ one can add, because for Aquinas it is human beings who microcosmically combine the physical with the spiritual.

In the same *Compendium*, which is his own never-completed *précis* of the *Summa Theologiae*, and therefore can be taken as some sort of hermeneutic clue to the reading of the former, Aquinas presents an entirely holistic picture of the unity of the theology of grace with the metaphysics of participation, commencing the work, unlike the *Summa* itself, with the Trinity and, the Incarnation, and without any apparently merely philosophical prologue to theology. We will return to the significance of this presently.

In general, throughout all his work, participation in Aquinas’s version accentuates the paradox that the proper below is what is improperly borrowed from above. Thus he makes ‘being’ itself the pivot for *methexis*: our essences may be relatively native to us, but it is our very existence, that which is still more intimate than nature, which

accrues to us through sharing. Hence, to invert the paradox, what God shares out to creatures is the thing that most of all belongs to them. Thus being is even described by Thomas as an accident of essence: an *adveniens extra*.

Similarly, as Pabst and Phillip Rosemann have described, Aquinas insists, beyond Aristotle, that what completes the act of individuation of a creature is not matter alone but the entire act of being. Again in this instance, unique individuality, *aliquid* or somethingness is borrowed by participation and derived as a gift, just as only God has full insight into material particulars, since he resides above even the rank of universalising intellect. Likewise, in the steps of Aristotle, our intellectual power and even our animal sensible power -- since it is mediated in our case through the intellect -- is a proper accident of our animal soul, although it is what is most specifically unique to us. We *might* just be mere animals, since for us, unlike God who is what he does, our 'second act' of operation does not belong to our 'first act' of existence. Thus our operativity, which for human beings is intellectual and sensory, even though it horizontally proceeds from us, is necessarily also a vertically-descending superaddition. Through a contingent giftedness we are more than we are as animal, despite the fact that this 'more' suffuses our animality all through, and is not just tacked-on in a 'Cartesian' manner.

Once more then, what is most crucial and distinctive descends contingently from on high, even though these highest contingencies are that from which the lower and more essential things have to depend. The same principle does not merely frame the whole of being for Aquinas, but also applies to cosmic processes within being: thus

tides are only tides because they are lured by the alien moon and fire can be incited below, but always really descends from the fiery realms of light above.

In short, Aquinas's entire ontology and cosmology prepares for grace: his conception of participation already involves a kind of gratuity. Inversely, his doctrine of grace is a radicalised ontology of participation: we will finally see God face-to-face, not through any participated *species* of understanding, but only through the created divine light, the *very medium* of participation itself.

But does not this ontologisation of grace abandon the narrative dimension of Christianity? Not at all: the point is rather that Aquinas, in the wake of the Fathers, offers us an ontology of grace which thereby also allows for narrative and the excess of event over substance. I mentioned earlier Plato's idea of a horizontal participation amongst the forms themselves. This was scarcely taken up by neoplatonism, but is in effect accentuated by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as Ralph Cudworth suggested in 17th C Cambridge. In the case of Aquinas, we are wrong to imagine that his crucial ontology is simply one of the participation of *essentia* in *esse*. For in the *Compendium* he explicitly foregrounds what is suggested in scattered places elsewhere: namely that the ontology of *esse* is also a *Trinitarian* ontology. *Esse* is act, but act is always triple: what remains in itself as firstly existing also persists in the second place as operative action or self-manifestation, and in this self-manifestation as aiming in the third place towards a goal which is also kind of communication of an existence beyond itself. This structure holds for all beings because it holds for being as such. Creation is accordingly for Thomas (as best expressed in Book Four of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*) a hierarchy of horizontal self-generations in triple activity,

whereby, in the higher most self-moved creatures, emanation becomes ever more intrinsic and internal, reaching an apex in humans and angels for utter inside themselves an inner word of understanding, breathed out in love.

Reason can come to this conclusion and yet it concurs also with the deliverances of revelation, for all Aquinas's odd denial that anything of the Trinity can be known by reason – perhaps he only meant that reason unenlightened by grace is a fiction anyway. In any case, what we have here is a conception of God as *esse* as also narrative: a God who is a fully realised infinite process of self-becoming that was never really begun, never really self-caused and never involved any real transition. But a story for all that, and an account of God not just as fundamentally being but as fundamentally a fully-hypostasised personal 'art' which is his intellect, and as a process of such generation in turn a fully-hypostasised 'life' of infinite mutual love. Thus Aquinas's ontology is not simply a refinement of neoplatonism, it is also an exegesis of St. Paul's citation of the triple phrase which he ascribes to the Greek poets when expounding the unknown God to the Athenians: '[God] in whom we live, and move and have our being' (*Acts: 17:28*).

Because, for Aquinas, *esse* so transcends hierarchy that it is close to every level of the hierarchy, an accident can come to exceed in ontological dignity substance, and even though substantial stability is real, a mere event can come to have more ontological weight and indeed more stability than the ordinary regular course of things. Hence it is possible for one man, Christ, to exist in human as well as divine nature in time and beyond *solely* as the divine *esse*, without any merely human existence -- since no existence can be added as an accident to the divine existence --

according to Thomas's ultra-Cyrrilline Christology. (This is newly illumined in Aaron Riches' forthcoming book, *Christ the End of Humanism*.) The specific story of Christ is not a drama performed against the stage-backdrop of a finished ontology, nor is it decoratively redundant to ontology, nor is it the fated outcome of an ontology, as for Hegel. Rather, even though it is an unnecessary extra, it is for Aquinas the paradoxically required 'finishing touch' to the Creation, since it was 'fitting' that humanity, the last created thing, should be joined back to God to form a circle. A circle of the fitting, or of beauty. Beauty is not needed, yet it is the reason for everything since God is the entirely harmonious.

So is this all that is needed today: a return to the classical Christian variant of the perennial philosophy? Can we sit back on the verandah and simply ignore the 'Franciscan' mistakes of Scotism and then the *via moderna* upon which much of modernity itself rests? Can we simply return to the 'Dominican' path? But such mere nostalgia is hopeless, for a number of reasons.

First, we do not know what a 'Dominican' counter-modernity would have looked like; it would not have stood still. The later traditions of Thomism, despite a plenitude of good insights, do not offer this, because they compromised Aquinas with Scotism and nominalism, and then with their successor philosophies of empiricism, rationalism and transcendental idealism, whose collective heart they usually failed adequately to criticise.

Secondly, the 'Franciscan' criticisms were not entirely wrong in relation to the terms in which the *philosophia perennis* had so far been articulated. It is possible to

offer a metacritique of their critique, but this metacritique itself involves a partial acceptance of the earlier criticisms and so requires a return to the perennial philosophy in a somewhat revised way. This reconstrual, it can be argued, has been fragmentarily undertaken all the way from Eckhart to Christian Romantic philosophy such as one finds in Hamann, Jacobi, Novalis, Coleridge, Joseph Joubert, Franz von Baader and Johann Möhler, and one can indeed venture to describe the whole thing as a ‘romantic’ rather than ‘classical’ variant. (I am here using ‘classical’ -- more appropriately -- for the Fathers and Aquinas, not for neoscholasticism, as I recently did in my article ‘The New Divide: Romantic versus Classical Orthodoxy’ for *Modern Theology*.)

Thirdly, one has to ask why the ‘Franciscan’ critique was so successful? In part the answer is that it had the ruthless backing, at a crucial juncture, of both the Papacy and of leading archbishops and university authorities. But only, perhaps, in part. In part also the answer may be that a more relentless *rationalism* could not be adequately confronted by a tradition already over-biased towards a reason taken too much apart from feeling and imagination since the very earliest Christian times. Again this requires a ‘Romantic’ remedy, which I will revert to in the two final lectures.

What then, were the crucial points of criticism of the metaphysics of participation as made first by Duns Scotus, later by the *via moderna* and finally by modern culture in a much more general sense?

One can list them rapidly as follows:

First, the view that participation compromises the separate integrity of the divine creation, as taught by the Bible.

Secondly, the argument that participation, analogy, real relation and universal all violate the principle of non-contradiction. A thing that participates is and is not what it participates in. Analogy claims there is a third between identity and difference where this would seem to be an excluded middle. A thing which depends through constitutive relation entirely on something else would seem actually to be that something else even though it is not. Likewise, if a universal tree in my mind is indeed the real one and identical form of the tree, then the same tree in its inner essence is impossibly in two places at once. Such arguments were deployed by William of Ockham in his *Quodlibetal Questions*.

Thirdly, the argument that if universals and real relations do not exist, then only individuals items exist. The world is a collection of assortedly singular number ones, grotesquely arraigned in a random order laid down by God for impenetrable reasons, an order which no longer speaks to us of his own inner nature. Creation has ceased to be a book, and language has now entirely migrated entirely within our minds, where it does the new artificial work of constructing universals as *signs*, for merely heuristic purposes.

Fourthly, the claim that a traditional metaphysics has imposed too much constraint of necessity upon God's absolute power. Could he not create an actually infinite world if he wanted to? Could he not cause human beings to be able, like God, to create if he wanted to, given that finite being is now fully in being, according to the

doctrine of univocity and therefore the causation of being would no longer seem to require an infinite power?

Fifthly, because the traditional horizontal mediation between matter and mind via identity of *eidos* was rejected, one had instead the view that truth is divided between necessary formal truths of logic and empirical truths derived through the senses, who are like the messengers which abstract reason must consult. These senses at best, can only tell us how it happens to go in a random universe, and at worse, God may cause them to lie to us. From Ockham through Hobbes and Descartes to Locke the continuity is clear.

In the sixth place, at a point where nominalism intersects with certain currents of humanism (though *not* with others) we have the idea that a new independence of immanent causality, including human causality -- abandoning the non zero-sum game neoplatonic *influentia* model for the 'concurrence' model, whereby God and nature are like two horses pulling a barge -- allows for a new beneficial autonomy of both nature and culture. Nature may be to a degree self-generative, either mechanically or vitalistically. In the human realm beauty becomes an autonomous reality that can at last be recognised for itself, the subject of aesthetics and no longer merely the midwife of the good or the handmaiden of the true. Likewise 'art' freed from the function of the iconic can come into its own, leaving religion to a more appropriate interiority.

How are these modern critiques subject to a Romantic metacritique which does not *exactly* return us to the original positions criticised?

First, Meister Eckhart responded to the univocity of being by arguing that *only* infinite being was univocal and self-identical. He then accentuated the paradoxicality of the idea of something ‘outside God’ when there can in reality be nothing outside the divine omnipresence. He insisted that all creatures are indeed identical with God in their univocal core which is infinite, and yet that the Trinitarian God is in himself the God who Goes out to establish finitude in its analogical degrees.

Secondly, both Eckhart and then Cusanus in his wake, defended analogy, participation universals and real relation by *allowing* that it is impossible to think of the relationship of the finite to the infinite without a violation of the principle of non-contradiction. For example, the indefinite is not the definite, but then, as Eckhart argued, it is definitely the indefinite and thus opposites coincide. At one level, they were pointing out, drawing in the long-term on Proclus, that non-contradiction can only apply in the realm where there *is* limit and exclusion: namely the finite. But at another level they were also pointing out that there is no real self-identity -- which would seem to be essential for relatively stable truth -- within this realm. Anticipating Whitehead’s ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’, Cusa points out that there are no stable points in finitude – just as there are no truly straight lines, perfect circles and so forth -- only congeries of intersecting and fluid forces which run out into the infinite. Along this unthinkable boundary, non-contradiction breaks down, and it is here that the thought of an individual thing’s universal and relational constitution exceeds all logical comprehension. But *beyond* this boundary, in the infinite itself, one can have the truly self-identical. Hence the infinite is not so much the coincidence of opposites as the coincidence of that coincidence with pure self-identity that cannot be negated,

and which alone guarantees truth. Partial truth within this world can only be a sharing in such simplicity, as for Aquinas.

In the third place, how can one respond to the view that reality is split between external isolated numbers in nature on the one hand and merely conventional cultural signs on the other? Indicating that sometimes neo-scholastics themselves carried through a genuine metacritique, one can here cite Juan Poinset, the 17th C Portuguese Thomist Master (whose devotion to Aquinas earned him the trade-name John of St Thomas) who pointed out against nominalism that linguistic signs are not just involved in generalisations from isolated sensory particulars, but in every original conception and perception of anything whatsoever. I need the sign 'stone' connected holistically to other signs in a sign-system in order to be able to see the stone, let alone grasp it. Since we cannot then conceive our connection to things outside language, we should take it that the relationship of sign to thing is every bit as much real as say the relation of a leg to a torso, even though it is real in an intellectual mode. It follows then that universals are also real, if we cannot perceive 'a stone' outside 'stone in general'. Even if it is actually already present in Aquinas if one reads him carefully (as Olivier-Thomas Venard OP has stressed), Poinset is greatly accentuating the point that universals are only there for us in language and that though they are 'discovered', they also have to be 'constructed' through the deployment of signs.

If, then, the sign which was the friend of nominalism now proves its enemy, how does it go with number? William of Ockham reduced the ontological categories of Aristotle to substance plus quality. To some of his successors this has just not seemed

extreme enough to be consistent. What is this strange ‘attachment’ of qualities to things like limpets to a rock? It seems suspiciously occult, and after all limpets are just separate items of potential sea-food who cling on very tight to a big solid piece of three-dimensional geometry. Accordingly David Hume later toyed – but ambiguously, as we shall see – with getting rid of substance and leaving only quality. Much later, Frege and Russell tried to do the opposite, with the help of that Cantorian set-theory which I described in lecture three. The redness of the apple can hopefully be accounted for if we realise that an apple qua apple belongs in the set of all single apples and qua red belongs in the set of all red items. The item apple and the item red just happen to be jammed together, without any mysterious ‘inherence’. But here, as Clare Ortiz Hill, the American analytic philosopher and Carmelite solitary has pointed out, we are in the same case as with signs. In this instance, Husserl got it right and Frege wrong, though later Wittgenstein as well as Heidegger seemed to follow Husserl: we only *know things at all* through ‘aspects’ – the apple through its redness, roundness and crunchiness and so forth. Thus we have to conclude that appearances really belong to things: that, as Plato thought, nothing exists without *dynamis* -- without showing itself, without affecting other things and being in turn open to being affected.

It would seem then, that every isolated substantial number is always already aspectually diverse. What is more, as we saw in lecture three, the attempt to think the pure unity of items by extracting them from the linear and fractal diversity of series by placing their cardinality within sets collapses into the paradoxes of recursion. It turns out that one is just not one and all alone, and ever more cannot be so because it

keeps diagonalising out of itself as an unexpected plurality -- rather as for Aquinas the existential event escapes the clasp of substance.

It follows, therefore, that sets cannot complete nominalism by substituting for essences. Since, as Husserl taught, we have to intend a consistent 'horizon' for the diverse appearing of the apple, even though this horizon will never be entirely filled and we will never get to then of apple-grafting, depicting apples in still lives, schoolboy apple-scrumping, apple-games of desire and sinfulness, varieties of cider-pressing, cider-storing and so forth....it would seem that there is a mysterious apple-generality which withholds itself.

So can we simply reinstate Thomistic essence as Ortiz Hill recommends? Yes and No. Not exactly, because we now have more of a sense of perspectival and cultural mediation, as has grown ever since the Renaissance: for us more than for Aquinas we realise that the essence is only present, and is dynamically and variously present, through the mediation of both sign and aspect. The *eidōs* of a thing that is the thing itself forever withholds itself as if from a hidden depth, while our sense of the universality of this form in our mind is accordingly never quite complete. This newly intensified *suspension* between the substantial materialised form on the one hand, and the known form in our mind underlines the insufficiency of a *merely* Aristotelian account of knowing. For the conjointly withheld specificity and generality of *eidōs* would seem to defer to a transcendently excessive source of all completion which is the Platonic form or idea in the mind of God.

And has number been quite left behind with the nominalists in all this? Not entirely. For the excess of the set over the principle of non-contradiction is no more than the excess of the universal essence also over that principle, as pointed out by William of Ockham. Perhaps then, an essence is a set and a set is an essence, recalling that, for Aristotle, in lingering Pythagorean fashion, the paradigm for all *eidōs*, as for all *ousia*, was still number. And a number needs to be taken cardinally as well as ordinally, else the ordinal series would be a mere single fuzzy flux. In fact, we could say that the process of the interpretative *semiosis* of signs expresses the ordinal and temporal dimension of the unfolding of essence, and that the ‘setting’ of aspects under a general horizon expresses their cardinal and spatial numerical aspect, which reminds us that all language is a mode of *mathesis* that must measure and itemize. Series and set, sign and number oscillate because, as Jacques Lacan pointed out, any relay from sign to sign, although infinite, is still within a particular aspectual set, however hard to define this may be, else there would be no way of judging when we had proffered an irrelevant sign as interpretant of another sign.

Number therefore hovers in the background as the constraint, not of nominalist singular items, but of substantial essence. And human thinking is an interplay between number, sign and aspect. There is no pure phenomenology because aspects are multiple and are themselves signs which have to be interpreted. But this interpretation cannot be coherent unless it is lured forward by an invisible substantial number which somehow shows itself in its very invisibility in the visible things that are manifest to us. In this way we return to the speculative metaphysics of participation and yet we return with a new incorporation of a modern sense of the role of number in physics and by extension ontology, of ordinary language in interpretation (as insisted upon by

much analytic philosophy) and of always restricted and partial perspective in phenomenology. In this way by no means *all* of modern and 20th C philosophy has been left behind.

Answers to the fourth, fifth and sixth critiques can be derived from the replies so far given. We can extend, in partial agreement with the voluntarists, Aquinas's crucial insight that it affords God no honour to deny him the power to communicate his own power to creatures. Thomas already saw that the world could be eternal and still created, so why may it not be actually infinite? Such a conception after all stops us from idolising our notion of a limit as the site of the boundary between creatures and their Creator. Equally, while humans have no power to create being as such, since it is never, as finite, purely univocal, we should allow, with Nicholas of Cusa, and in keeping with at least one passage already in Aquinas, that human beings in uttering words, just like the instant radiating of light, establish an absolute immediate, created novelty. Not by assisting divine creation, which allows of no intermediaries, but as a peculiar eventful intensity of the unfolding of creation *ex nihilo* as *creatio continua*.

Human beings who create new realities, who make both mathematics and history and only thereby understand them, according to Cusa, Vico and Marx, are not then emancipated from God, but are rather participants in the Triune utterance of the word in love. As Cusa says, inverting traditional assumptions, it is not just that our making is informed by divine ideas, but also that our thinking is a participation in divine 'makeability' to a certain degree, because one only knows things by contriving them, since 'makeability' alone has the full scope of comprehension. For humans to make or to imagine things therefore, if this process is not to be arbitrary, is always to

discover something ahead of oneself in the future -- to be 'sur-prise'd' by the arrival of one's own product, since this is indeed the partial arrival of the divine art in time.

And for this reason, emancipated 'art' that is no longer an icon is reduced to triviality. For *either* it merely illustrates a general principle or copies a pretty scene, *or*, like so much contemporary art, it 'discloses' a purely singular vision which can only be the vision of the artist or of those few who partially identify with his singularity. But we still want true art to *reveal* – yet it cannot do so if there is nothing objectively transcendent to disclose and if the making of this art does not participate in the divine triune art which is communicated in his creation. What is more, the secular science of aesthetics in the 18thC proved unable to assign beauty either to the senses or to reason, causing a reversion to the idea that somehow beauty mediates between them, accompanied in Kant by the realisation that this mediation was *required* for the isolation of any even theoretically knowable knowable object. This then pointed to the thought that, if such isolation is not merely arbitrary (as it seems to remain in Kant) that somehow the beauty of the world must be *meant to be*.

As for the new autonomy of nature, we already saw in the second lecture how nature is more plausibly vital than mechanical, but that living creatures themselves are abolished if we do not see this life as ever-newly descending from on high. It is natural to suppose, and still more so after Darwin, that human beings are in continuity with organic life, such that we must interpret ourselves in terms of this life and yet, as both Bergson and Whitehead taught, regard our own inner and immediate access to human life as the best available clue to life in general and to what it is capable of. Yet nominalism, from Ockham to Locke and beyond, instead encouraged the view that we

are detached spectators of life, shooting videos of planet earth as if we were aliens from a mysterious elsewhere. In consequence, they thought of the exterior world as impinging on us in terms of a series of discrete sensory messengers which the rational mind then processes. But as Hume and Whitehead variously pointed out, *before* we reflectively know that we have sensed things, we feel them emotionally with a certain emotional totality, and so to sense something is from the outset to have the experience of being affected or moved by something else, not just to receive information as though on a computer screen that does not really affect us. Indeed our first registering of *aspects* is emotive and imaginative: to adapt Heidegger, when we enter out local wood, we do not first hear inchoate sounds, we hear the woodpecker tapping, and the cuckoo calling out ‘Spring’ as our *very first response* when we enter out local wood.

Taken together, these metacritiques suggest that we can only return to the vision of Aquinas with a new sense that the participation in *esse* is also a dynamic participation in the Trinity as art and life and in God whose making of beauty is the precondition for the manifestation of truth. This participation can newly be said to be at least as much emotive and imaginative as it is rational in character.

But I already tried to show how the germ of such a conception is already present in Aquinas. In Nicholas of Cusa’s counter-critique of nominalism, which owes a great deal to German Dominican tradition, he takes this conception further in a way that anticipates all the themes of Christian Romanticism which I have already tried to indicate. However, in his elaborated ontology in *De Coniecturis*, he brings them together in three crucial ways.

First, he explains that thought as speculation, which for him oscillates around number, sign and perspective, and which participates in God, is itself participation. For all participation is a kind of approximation, and therefore a conjecturing: an at least unconscious mode of cognitive imaging of the primal source. The conscious human attempt to know is therefore, inversely, an intensified participation. Moreover, we must conjecture not only about God but about each and every creature. Only if I was identical with a specific creature would I fully know it and the only way fully to identify with a creature is to be able to make it, as God alone has the power to do, such that it would come entirely to share in our own capacity. In the absence of such creative identification, I must instead come partially to share in the creature's life through an endlessly asymptotic and abstractive approach.

In this way Nicholas underlines the dimension of horizontal participation that is especially involved in knowing things through partial identification with them by the lateral migration of *eidos*, as taught by both Aristotle and Aquinas. To know something is to share in it by imitation and to imitate it by sharing, always partially and inadequately. However, Nicholas has rethought horizontal participation in terms of a proto-modern sort of 'experimentality' (*conjectura*) – while inversely, and for us perhaps astonishingly, envisioning this experimentality entirely, and entirely successfully (in my view) within perennial terms. Thus for Cusa to know something now means not simply the passive reception of *species* by migration of form from a material thing, nor even just the inner and active generation of a mental word, accompanied by a breathed-out external sign (as for Aquinas). It involves also a projecting outwards imaginatively or physically of a series of diagrams and models of each thing that we seek to know, and so of all things taken together, given that all

things are interconnected and therefore each thing has to map (or ‘conjecture’) in its own idiom this entirety.

To begin with, of course, God’s fabrication, the created world, is given to human sight, but its always specific passive perspective is also a limited active construction of that which it sees. Inversely, every human artefact is completed as a limited conjectural ‘coming to see’ of that which we are striving to make. So for Nicholas theory is in part a making, but making remains in part a looking. Thus while in its perspectival regard of the divine Creation human construction is trying hopelessly to catch up with the divine construction that it intuitively glimpses, in the case of human construction of mathematical and other artefacts, making and intuition coincide, because making as it were searches for the ‘vision’ of its own process as a participation in the all-seeing divine vision (as much emphasised by Nicholas in the *De Visione Dei*) that will yield a completed – or rather sufficiently completed -- product of that process. It follows in consequence that human knowing as making (of ‘what is not yet there’ = art) and human knowing as aspiring perspectival vision (of ‘what is already there’ = nature) are always intertwined with each other.

One can further conclude that in the case of both divine and human knowledge, while there is present in Cusanus, as already mentioned, a new ‘pragmatist’ element which allows that ‘makeability’ is the criterion for truth, that this is nevertheless no real ‘pragmatism’, because the theoretical vision of the truth remains equally the criterion for a definable ‘essence’ of the made product. Implicitly Cusa anticipates Vico’s later elevation of *factum* to the status of a ‘medieval’ transcendental, which

does not imply any superiority over the true and good but rather equality: as Vico will say: *verum et factum et bonum convertuntur*.

Secondly, Cusa takes to a new extreme the Proclean theurgic materialism whereby matter, as negatively unified and simple, is in one sense *more like* the One than intellect which is always reflexive. Cusa elaborates on this by indicating, in a way that relates to Catherine Pickstock's point mentioned today at the outset, that matter as most remote from, is also thereby the nearest to God by virtue of its most owning up to its deficiency -- since, according to the protocols of the *via negativa*, an unknowing of the deity is always truer than a claim to know him. This paradox is compounded for Cusa by the fact that intellect is bound kenotically to descend, to reach down below itself, whereas matter as the spring of recoil or return is equally bound to ascend back to God. In a sense then, matter is more reliable than mind, and this is why perhaps, sacramentality is essential for religious devotion.

What is more, matter's negative imaging of divine unity means that, for Nicolas, there is an inverse, uprising participation of nature in matter which constantly ascends to particular formed entities by sharing in the general and generative power of ontological 'elements' (or 'points') which are like Augustine's 'seminal reasons' or Maximus's *logoi*, to the realisation of natural things. In this way, Cusa espouses a specific vitalism and reads physics biologically as well as biology humanistically and psychically. Elements are like seeds which rise to fully formed creatures where they meet the descent of the divine towards such creatures -- which are represented for Cusa by the number 'four' which is the number of sides of a pyramid, the smallest possible three-dimensional body. This point of meeting is the intersection of the two

cones – one descending from God, the other rising from matter – in the diagram *Paradeigmata* of which I spoke at the end of the third lecture. (But of course for Nicolas *both* cones emanate from God, according to a more fundamental metaphysical perspective.)

This intersecting also causes a constant circulation – for example in the organic realm from tree to seed (the biological ‘element’) and from tree to seed. It is as if Cusa manages to think Creation and Dawkinsism both at once, because of his generosity towards matter and creative potentiality. However, this constant circulation shapes a third plane, a horizontal along which both life and artifice ever-struggle to approximate to God who is, says Cusa, the coincidence of nature and art -- combining, one might interject, life’s solidity yet absence of full meaning with art’s saturation of meaning yet absence of self-generating solidity. God is both nature and culture at once and creative participation in God avoids their complete sundering within finitude, since nature is created by art and our art remains a part of the natural creation.

Both life and art together participate by conjecturing forward through time and in this way *our* horizontal processes of immanent participation and co-inherence share remotely in the divine horizontal that is the Trinity, imaged by Cusa, rather like Aquinas, as respectively Being, the equality of judgment or art and the life that ceaselessly sustains this infinite generation. It is for this reason that the road to God, for Cusa, is, in a new way, never an *abandonment* of the cosmos or of the human future. The culmination of everything is for him not just in eternity, but also with the Incarnation, when God combines with a human nature to form a uniquely precise

finite thing, in which all other finite things also participate. Without this sharing in the life of the incarnation, and its eucharistic perpetuation as the Church, no finite thing would be even relatively stable, because God can only be all in all when he is also, in Christ, that which is 'not God', yet without abolishing the chasm that separates him from his creation.

In this respect Cusa removes himself entirely, beyond Catholic tradition hitherto, from a lingering zero-sum game pitting God and this world against each other, that is involved in some Western interiorising conceptions of *ascesis* which surely helped to foment idolatry and then unbelief and in its wake secularisation. In the instance of true asceticism we must pass through time in a tempered manner, as the Anglican prayer book recommends, by a constant letting go and appropriate usage of things in order to reach the eternal; yet God should never be seen as an *alternative* to things in this world. We cannot really renounce the world for God without also renouncing God the creator and turning instead to an idol. It is as if Cusa eschews both fanatical Catholic asceticism and, in advance a Protestant this-worldly asceticism in favour of a kind of pan-sacramental 'hyper-mediation' -- a theophany of God in everything that can never be altogether left behind, however quirky or marginal those things may be, like a spoon, a mirror, a globe, a game or a map, to take five Cusan examples.

By reading a Trinitarian and Christological ontology into any almost any randomly taken and especially artificial object; into the collapse of even mathematical unities into paradox and also into the different perspectives of different religions, Cusa, as Johannes Hoff has argued, puts into drastic reverse the nominalist draining from even sacred and natural realities of any theophanic power. He also, as Hoff says, implicitly

points up the fact that the supreme sacred and participating image in which all else shares is simply one other random man in history, dying a random death under the vagaries of human judgement.

It is just this 'hyper-mediation' which is thereby a kind of hyper-catholicity and radical incarnationalism which later arguably characterises the only traceable distinctness of Anglicanism as a specifically 'Renaissance' mode of Christianity, as exemplified in many writers, including Shakespeare, Hooker and Donne. But this is most especially evident in Thomas Traherne who sees (as Jean-Louis Chrétien has pointed out) that the dilation of the heart towards God *remains*, without any pantheism, a going out towards the cosmos and towards its hidden paradisaic core of persisting created innocence. For this tradition, it can never be a question of God *or* nature, God *or* art, God *or* learning, God *or* marriage, God *or* the political future and so forth, however much specific renunciations might be appropriate here and there. In this way, a reconceived participation is guarded against any downgrading of the specific value and real integral existence of finite reality, while avoiding the ontotheological Scotist delusion that posits something literally outside God. If, as I have tried to show in this lecture, participation, for Christian theology, is just as much, as Aquinas already saw, but Cusa expressed more emphatically, participation in art and life – in other words the capacity for auto-generation -- as it is participation in being, then the opening of the heart to fullness of being cannot mean the abandonment of that history which we make and the life of nature which we perpetuate. It is just for this reason that a Biblically-derived perspective sees a participatory ascent to the heavens as coinciding with the eschatological fulfilment of the cosmos and of human time.

And to invoke this Renaissance and Romantic current is also, one might say, in concluding jest, to turn from the *modernity* of Oxford's Middle Ages to the radical and creative *traditionalism* of Cambridge's modernity evidenced in its often more Platonic spirit – all the way from Benjamin Whichcote to Radical Orthodoxy.