

Reply to de Maeseneer

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I am indebted to Yves De Maeseneer in the care with which he has brought out the entirely negative intentions of *Postmodernity's Transcending*. I want to address two matters in my reply: first to comment on his raising of the question of the relation of *Postmodernity's Transcending* to his reading of Adorno; and second, to provide an answer to the question he poses to me at the very end of his paper.

Before any of these however, it is well to remind ourselves, what kind of *nihil*, nothing, negativity, lies at the basis of Western Metaphysics, beyond metaphysics, and in my own work. Are they all the same? Or does negation manifest itself in different ways? De Maeseneer notes two odd things about *Postmodernity's Transcending*: first, that I have paid insufficient attention to a *nothing* that he finds as a possibility in the work of Adorno; second, that a certain kind of negation fails to appear in the book.

What kind of nothing is the negation that Adorno describes? *Postmodernity's Transcending* traces Kant's understanding of transcendence, through Kant's understanding of upliftment (*das Erhabene*), which I claim is the sublime understood 'as that power and instrument to *negate* beings in favour of being in general, being as God. Upliftment, as the reading-off from beings to being as such *is* a negating' (p. 183, my emphasis). This is in Kant's thought the manifestation of the essential nihilism that Martin Heidegger traced as manifesting itself in the whole of metaphysics, and *as* the essence of metaphysics when he claimed that 'the metaphysics of Plato is not less nihilistic than the metaphysics of Nietzsche'.¹

Both in its discussion of Parmenides and of Protagoras, *Postmodernity's Transcending* attempts to trace another understanding of the *nothing*, the 'nothing' of being in presencing, a nothing in which God and the gods could appear, in the unsaid which persists in the said (p. 69), and the unessence that pertains to the gods. This unessence is 'the way the gods stand *before* they dispose themselves' (p. 219, my emphasis).

¹ Heidegger, M., *Nietzsche, in Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1997 (1961), vol. 6.2, p. 309. 'Die Metaphysik Platons ist nicht weniger nihilistisch als die Metaphysik Nietzsches.'

To which does Adorno's own description of negation apply? De Maeseneer notes that 'Adorno reinterprets Kant's account of the sublime and indicates how the Kantian sublime involves an experience in which the subject is initially overpowered, but that Kant subsequently turns this overpowerment of the subject into an affirmation of the subject'. The suspicion is that this is a different nothing to Kant's, because whereas for Kant 'the transcendental subject discovers itself as superior over nature, because it is gifted with reason' for Adorno 'the experience of the sublime confronts the subject with a negation of the subject, and this negation cannot be overcome by the subject' and so this leads to 'an annihilation of the self in front of art'. Is Adorno's *nothing* other than Kant's, and does it provide for a renewed discussion of subjectivity (as De Maeseneer claims)? Adorno's subjective self-negation is the essentially *interpellative* moment of a modernist (as opposed to postmodern) subjectivity (close in form to that described by Althusser) which leads, as De Maeseneer says, to 'the tears of pain, the crying of the subject, [which] bears witness to its bodiliness: the subject is a body'.

Here is exactly the contemporary theological attitude: we emphasise the *embodiments* of the believer. What De Maeseneer finds in Adorno is the devaluation of the uppermost values and revaluation of all values precisely as Kant's sublime is reinscribed by Nietzsche: instead of the sublime indicating the subjective relation to the supersensible, the sublime returns the subject to embodiment *because there is nothing else beyond*. The Kantian negation 'bounces back' in Adorno, and negates, not *beings* for the sake of being, but the *subject* which then becomes the subject's claim on *being as such over the particularity of his being*. This realises itself through the production of a 'self-image' (hence it is essentially metaphysical). The subject reads himself *against* and *from out of* what is depicted here, so that what is here depicted almost before we have realised it, more concerned with the sociological consequences of this self-image – the consequences arising from our embodiment – than with any indication of the supersensible or God. In this sense, we would have to conclude, Nietzsche's nihilism is ahead of and lays out the possibilities explored by Adorno, and not the other way around. Put another way, Adorno's *nothing* is *essentially* the nothing of Western metaphysics.

The genealogy that De Maeseneer suggests for Sam Taylor-Wood's *Brontosaurus* that arises from his reading of Adorno and that opens up the possibility of a further exploration of subjectivity is identical with Kafka's *Hungerkünstler*, the artist who takes control of his body *through* overcoming the rigours of *anorexia nervosa* and turns *himself* into an anorexic artwork. Immediately the connections between the claims of *Postmodernity's Transcending* and its analysis of Nietzsche become apparent (cf. pp. 202–204).² In fact, however, the genealogy of *Bronotsaurus* is closer to Bruce Nauman's 1967–68 cinemetic installation, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)*.³

This installation depicts the repetitive (and so machinic) movements of Nauman's figure (in fact the artist himself), counted by the dictatorial sound-beat of a metronome, so characteristic of the constructivism of high-modernism. Here

² Kafka, F., *Ein Hungerkünstler*, in Kittler, W., Koch, H. G. and Neumann, G., *Ein Hungerkünstler: Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1994.

³ One of a series of similar artworks performed by Nauman in the mid- to late 1960's. See: <http://www.eai.org/eai/tape.jsp?itemID=3793>.

the human figure is constrained by the ordered, geometrical regulation of space which is laid out by the beat of time and the frame itself.

The metaphysical relations of the anorexic, even the self-mastering anorexic of the *Hungerkünstler* are essentially those of intersubjectivity—of the structure of valuation which the anorexic sets up by placing the one spectating his *periculum mortis* in a constructive relation of control. The anorexic starves for the sake of the other.⁴

In *Brontosaurus* Taylor-Wood radicalises all of this, and parodies the anorexia of postmodernity's figurations of the body by – sharply – taunting the fat with the figure's emaciation as a private triumph of effortless willed control, not as a horizon of starvation which threatens not only the hunger-artist but also the viewer. This is an essentially postmodern claim to power, proclaiming the overcoming of the negations of subjectivity not through self-annihilation but through parody and the withdrawal into the non-accessible, all of which *Postmodernity's Transcending* itself attempts to trace and perform, not cinekinetically, but rhetorically. The figure of *Brontosaurus* represents the pure prior postulate of the *cogito* in its essential solipsism,⁵ which postulates the refusal of every particular relationship with the 'outer', with world as such, until the subject-postulate 'decides' to enter into world and alterity.

Both in his reference to Adorno and in the genealogy he suggests for *Brontosaurus*, De Maeseneer has perhaps underestimated how radical the critique of subjectivity in *Postmodernity's Transcending* is, to the point where there is no return to the subject possible from its conclusions. The human is simply never constituted by metaphysical negations, and this is the reason why De Maeseneer is unable to find negation just exactly where he looks for it ('Hemming does not mention the destructive side of today's sublime in explicit terms. It is even absent at places where one would expect it').

At the very end of his paper, De Maeseneer says 'In the end, the radicalism of Hemming's philosophical position seems to be counterpoised by a theological refuge into the liturgical sphere (p. 244). But *'what are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?'* How the altar can stay untouched by the tolling of Nietzsche's funeral bells, remains unelucidated. To put it differently: does Hemming see any relation left between reason and prayer?'⁶

The question is not one of refuge, but rather of what my own negation of ontotheology is concerned with. As De Maeseneer correctly notes, the purpose of *Postmodernity's Transcending* is to blunt and limit the speculative pretensions of speculative theologians. In this I understand much (if not nearly all) contem-

⁴ The complex of these relationships has been analysed in great detail in an unpublished PhD thesis by Knapp, F., *Dandyism as a Principle of Aesthetic Composition*, University of Cambridge, 2001.

⁵ This is the problem which disturbed the resolution of the *cogito* right down to Husserl's attempts to resolve them, from where the work of Buber, Levinas and others took off. *Brontosaurus* returns us to this unresolved problem. Cf. 'Die transzendentalen Probleme der objektiven Welt' ('The transcendental problem of the objective world') which Husserl resolves in appealing to 'transcendental intersubjectivity'. Husserl, E., *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Hamburg, Meiner Verlag, pp. 91–155, ref. pp. 91, 110.

⁶ De Maeseneer is quoting Nietzsche, F., *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, III, §125, in eds. Colli, G. and Montinari, M., *Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 3, Munich, de Gruyter, 1999 (1967–1977), p. 482. "'Was sind denn diese Kirchen noch, wenn sie nicht die Gräfte und Grabmäler Gottes sind?'"

porary theology, Catholic as much as Protestant, ever yet to be infected with the grandiosity of Hegel. John Milbank has on occasion charged me with a certain ‘nihilism’ precisely because, in detecting this negative thrust, he is yet to understand why it is there. The essential attitude of contemporary theology is, I would suggest, ‘constructive’, it continually rethinks, re-imagines, re-discovers, re-sources. Theology in the contemporary mode seems to me to be a discipline in permanent state of recovery, and as such has been essentially driven by the concerns of philosophy, as *Posmodernity’s Transcending* seeks to show, probably since the emergence of the *analogia entis* as a formal doctrine, but certainly since Descartes.

The well-trained theologian will immediately recognise the familiar tag of liturgical study *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Normally translated into English as something like ‘the law of prayer is the law of belief’, it asserts that what is prayed – and here liturgical, public, prayer is specified – defines and lays out the terms for what is taught, and so believed. Critics of much contemporary liturgical theology have pointed out, however, that the phrase taken like this is ambiguous. For it suggests a possible instrumentalisation of the Sacred Liturgy to the theological. If the law of prayer is tied to the law of belief in this way, then *when* theology revalues itself, the textual and ritual form of the Sacred liturgy must be altered together with it.

The critics who notice this ambiguity of *lex orandi, lex credendi* often point to the discussion of this very phrase in Pope Pius XII’s 1947 Encyclical Letter *Mediator Dei* which, arguably more than *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, inaugurated the processes of liturgical reform in the Catholic Church.⁷ Pius XII exploits this ambiguity when he absolutely reverses the order of prayer and matters concerning belief (by which, therefore, is meant theology) in the Encyclical. He says: ‘But inasmuch as we desire to differentiate and describe the relationship between faith and the sacred liturgy in absolute and general terms, it is perfectly correct to say, “Lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi” – let the rule of belief determine the rule of prayer’. As an aside one should note that this exemplifies Pius XII’s fundamental radicalism – this supposed ‘arch-conservative’ in fact is in perfect agreement with all those who argue that the Sacred Liturgy is subordinate and instrumentalised to the decisions and conclusions of theology. Did Pius XII initiate this attitude? Or did he not rather authenticate an inevitability that was already there and had already unfolded? And yet he did this *because* of his confidence in the certitude of Catholic theology, a certitude to which he witnessed in a papacy almost constructed from out of the possibilities of post-war philosophical (I hasten to add, *not* theological) aestheticism and high-modernism.

Now inasmuch as theology has been overcome by its subordination to philosophy, Pius XII, his critics argue, opened the flood-gates for an entirely rationalistic reconstruction of the Sacred Liturgy that Scipio dei Ricci and the disgraced council of Pistoia could only ever have dared hope for.⁸ In the wake of the political

⁷ Pius XII, Encyclical Letter of 20th November 1947 *Mediator Dei* in *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis* [AAS], Vatican, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1947, vol. 14, pp. 521–595; p. 541. ‘quodsi volumus eas, quæ inter fidem sacramque Liturgiam intercedunt, rationes absoluto generalique modo internoscere ac determinare, iure meriotque dici potest: “Lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi”.’

⁸ For an account of the Synod see Bolton, C. A., *Church Reform in 18th Century Italy*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, esp. pp. 55–114.

and philosophical transformations of the postwar period, the certitude in which he placed his hope collapsed.

My concern is this: in my work on Heidegger and Postmodernity I have precisely sought to show the limits of philosophy in its relation to theology. My argument has been that philosophy has *no place* in the practice of theology, but the informed and well-formed theologian must himself be *well-schooled in the practice of philosophy*. At the same time the theologian must *derive his theology as entirely a commentary on and adjunct to the Sacred Liturgy in its practice, mediation, and proclamation of Sacred Scripture*.

If we take De Maeseneer's second question first ('to put it differently: [do you see] any relation left between reason and prayer?'), the problem it addresses is this: Contemporary theology is driven by an *essential* rationalism: what worse kind, let us say, than by that celebrated by Denys Turner, when he argues that there *must be* a rational demonstration of the existence and being, but that despite 200 odd pages of irascible, scratchy theology *he is not particularly moved to discover it or tell us what it is*. We just have to take it on recommendation it does exist.⁹ When that rationalism is exposed in its vacuity, De Maeseneer's question emerges as a *cri de coeur*—if theology is no longer to be driven by reason, then by what exactly, and what indeed will drive prayer, if the motor force of theology (which has been made to govern prayer) itself is gone? I have shown, at least in very broad outline, how the altar has *already* thereby been touched by the tolling of Nietzsche's funeral bell. The devaluation of God means that the altar has at least the potential to be desacralised—to be nothing other than the occasion for a depotentiation or devaluation, or at worst a nostalgic site of the repetitious *absence* of God. And if theology drives prayer, and theology loses its ground, then what indeed of our prayers to God?

If we follow De Maeseneer's questions concerning Adorno, it is only a short step from De Maeseneer and Adorno to the sociological move attained through Berger's critique of Adorno: theology *rearranges* the subject through the reconstruction of the liturgical event. At every stage the subject reads himself *over-against* what he is present to in the Sacred Actions. Hence the drive for a busied *actuosa participatio* (the watch-word of contemporary Catholic liturgy) because there is never a level at which the subject is sufficiently participative in what (Adorno's theory demonstrates) *essentially annihilates him*. The only recourse is the *constant rearrangement of the Sacred Liturgy, of Theology, and of ecclesial structures to re-accommodate the negated subject*. Here, at the altar, Nietzsche's bell rings out.

How else is the Sacred Liturgy and its relation to theology to be understood?

⁹ Turner, D., *Faith, Reason, and the Existence of God*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. Cf. esp. pp. 4–5 for the groundwork of his case. He concludes (p. 262) 'I do not imagine that in this essay I have done more than offered some case for a greater theological trust in reason than is customary today, and to have cleared the way . . . for a more theologically positive understanding of reason'. The problem is that this is a reason that never actually delivers the argument it promises. St. Thomas believed that salvation for the human being would mean the deification of the human intellect, but he also argued that prior to the four last things, and to the actual event of the deification, the intellect was forced to take what it would later know *de intellectu* on faith. There was, in other words, content to his deferral of the conclusion of the triumph of the *intellectus humanus*, which would be its actual identity with the *intellectus Dei*. It is frankly unclear what Turner's deferral of the question is *for*.

For the proper Christian reading of Liturgy is surely *iconic*. When I attend the Sacred Liturgy I am recalled to the steps of Calvary, to the Sacrifice and the Sacred Banquet which atones for my sins and the sins of the entire world, and which unites me to the *Ecclesia* both extant and celestial through the sacrifice of Christ which ends my enmity with God. In that sense am I embodied truly, in the body of Christ. I am included in this body (of Christ, of the Church) by virtue of its being the central act of my redemption (the Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ) in its iconic and ritual form. Through baptism (and my thereby having been sealed with the Spirit), catechesis, prayer, and penance I am (made) fit to be present, and through the merits of Christ alone, to take my part in participating in and offering the divine sacrifice of the Son to the Father, *through which* I share in the eternal conversation between the Father and the Son. I become the subject and site of divine revelation.

To conclude. The form *lex orandi, lex credendi* is an abbreviation, a tag of the School-room. It originates from Prosper of Aquitaine, where its proper order is unambiguously stated: *ut lex supplicandi legem statuat credendi*: let the law of prayer determine the law of belief.¹⁰ You will note this is the opposite of Pius XII's formulation, and had Pius XII quoted Prosper, and not his abbreviation, all that followed might yet have been different. The question of the altar is one of *my relation and relating to it*. If I relate to it as a 'negated subject' in the way Adorno describes, I will adopt the contemporary Catholic attitude that the Sacred liturgy is inherently hierarchical, performed by one distinct and not typical in the ranks of men (a priest), exclusive, elitist, hieratic, clerical, (you'll recognise this contemporary litany) and so must constantly be depotentiated to become democratic, inclusive (to the point of sentimentality: where is the female in this liturgy, the poor, the person of colour, where the 'ordinary person', where the innocent [suffering] child?), so that almost before we have realised it, we are more concerned with the sociological consequences of the Sacred Actions than with their indication of God.

If, on the other hand, I relate to the altar through an understanding in which the theology that formed me has itself been determined out of the Church's tradition and practise of liturgical prayer, the altar and its meaning will come alive for me, and will open up as an icon.

¹⁰ Prosper of Aquitaine, *Capitula Cælestini*, 8 in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 51, 209–210. 'Præter beatissimæ et apostolicæ sedis inviolabiles sanctiones, quibus non piissimi patres, pestiferæ novitatis elatione dejecta, et bonæ voluntatis exordia, et incrementa probabiliū studiorum, et in eis usque in finem perseverantium ad Christi gratiam referre docuerunt, obsecrationem quoque sacerdotalium sacramenta respiciamus, quæ ab apostolis tradita, in toto mundo atque in omni catholica Ecclesia uniformiter clebrantur, ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi.' ['In addition to these inviolable decisions of the blessed Apostolic See, by which our most holy fathers, rejecting the arrogance of this harmful novelty, have taught (us) to attribute to the grace of Christ both the first steps of a right will and the necessary progress to a praiseworthy ardour and even the perseverance in these efforts until the end, let us consider equally the rites of the priestly supplications which, transmitted by the apostles, are celebrated in the same manner in the entire world and in the whole catholic Church, in such a way that the order of supplication determines the rule of faith.' Translation by Winger, T. M., *Studia Liturgica* vol. 24, 1994, p. 181.]