

Embodied Religion

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Embodied Religion

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of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion*

edited by

PETER JONKERS & MARCEL SAROT

Tilburg University



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Introduction

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This collection of papers is derived from the nineteenth biannual conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion, held in the 'Kontakt der Kontinenten' in Soesterberg, the Netherlands, from 30 August to 2 September 2012, which was sponsored by the School of Catholic Theology of Tilburg University and the Department of Religious Studies and Theology of Utrecht University. The conference brought together some eighty philosophers of religion and researchers from related disciplines, most of them coming from one of the four founding regions of the ESPR, viz. the English speaking region, the North-European region, the German speaking and the Dutch speaking region. Because of the excellent reputation of these conferences over the years, scholars from Eastern and Southern Europe, and even from some non-European countries also participated, thereby enlivening and broadening the discussions about the conference theme. As usual at ESPR conferences, the 2012 conference theme was so chosen that it lent itself to both analytical and continental approaches and to the conversation between the two. Moreover, the study of 'embodied religion' – for this was the theme – cannot take place in isolation, but needs the input from various other disciplines. This is reflected in the current volume.

The study of religion is often marred by a mentalistic bias. Religion is then interpreted as primarily belonging to the sphere of the spiritual. While it is true that for most religious traditions (Christian as well as non-Christian) God is a spiritual and disembodied being, even the presence of God is always

a mediated presence, and it may well be argued that this mediation is always material in character.¹ It is one-sided to approach religion through the study of convictions, concepts, values and arguments only. Religions are also typically very down to earth, dealing with issues of sexuality, reproduction and family, with practices about food, offering and sacrifice, questions of birth and death etc. Hence the human body is always involved in the concepts and practices of religions. Furthermore religions also express themselves in various material ways, such as in icons and (other) works of art, in prayers, songs and the liturgy, which all have a strong physical component, in the inscription of the religious in the human body (e.g. the sacraments, the ritual of circumcision, and stigmata), and last but not least in a religiously inspired disciplining of the human body. Thus, even spirituality is often embodied.²

The idea that religion is something purely spiritual is challenged in a different way as well, namely by recent developments in neuroscience. The findings of neuroscience challenge philosophy of religion to rethink those characteristics of human nature that are vital for religion, such as free will, altruism, morality, and last but not least the human person as a 'self.' Some of the more extreme forms of neuroscience go as far as to suggest that a complete material explanation of human nature is in sight, thus annihilating, together with the spiritual dimension of the human person, the spiritual dimension of religion. In order to have a fruitful discussion between philosophy of religion and neuroscience it is imperative to avoid such a reductionism. But, at the same time, it is clear that neuroscientific research sheds an intriguing light on the question what it means when people call themselves religious.

This gives ample support for the two underlying theses of the contributions to this conference volume. First, that religion is always embodied in various ways: on the level of God's presence in humans, on that of the multitude of ways in which people express their religiosity, and on that of the neurological processes that accompany religious feelings and attitudes. Second, that major changes in the basic anthropological concepts regarding the human body inevitably have an impact upon religion, and thus also challenge philosophy of religion to rethink how religions are embodied in the human person.

¹ See, e.g., Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2012), 8–9.

² See, e.g., Willem Marie Speelman, *God aan den lijve ondervinden: Lichamelijke spiritualiteit volgens Franciscus en Clara* (Leeuwarden: Discovery Books, 2012).

The papers included in this volume highlight the complexity of the conference-theme as well as the variety of philosophical perspectives that are taken in order to understand the phenomenon of embodied religion. They differ in style, method and in their ways to relate to culture and science. To give an example, it was in the wake of the rise of phenomenology and its concept of the 'body as subject' that theological anthropology and (continental) philosophy of religion started to pay systematic attention to the impact of religion on the human body in general and to various shapes of religious embodiment in particular. Similarly, analytic philosophy has always been strong in examining the effects of scientific discoveries on the traditional idea of the human person as a free, morally responsible, spiritual being. One of the goals of the conference was to foster a dialogue between these approaches, resulting in a better view of the promising perspectives, concepts and arguments that philosophy of religion can use in order answer the questions raised by the new developments in our understanding of human nature.

This volume starts with the keynote address by Ola Sigurdson, in which he discusses different perspectives on (religious) embodiment, particularly stemming from (the history of) culture and modern medicine. Sigurdson explains that, because of the current hegemony of medicine (including neuroscience), the personal as well as the social dimension of religious embodiment is lost out of sight. Hence, he stresses the need of a non-reductive approach of religious embodiment, which is exactly what the contributions to this volume, taken together, try to achieve.

In order to structure the great variety of perspectives on embodied religion somewhat of the conference, we divided the general conference theme into four subthemes and asked the main speakers to comment on it. Their contributions to this volume are arranged accordingly. The first subtheme is *embodied religion: a philosophical reflection on mystical experiences and religious disciplining*. In all religious traditions there are numerous examples of how religion does not only change the human mind (e.g. through conversion), but also affects the human body directly (e.g. various mystical experiences, including the so-called stigmata as an extreme example) and indirectly (e.g. through the moral and doctrinal teachings of religions, physical disciplining etc.). Can philosophy of religion offer (new) anthropological concepts to understand the corporeal impact of religion? Moreover, do these insights enable philosophy of religion to criticise problematic aspects of religious embodiment? In their papers, Jonna Bornemark and Petruschka Schaafsma comment on these questions. Bornemark takes a Christian mystic text as her point of

departure in order to present a phenomenological analysis of sensibility as the meeting place between the soul and God. Schaafsma treats the same question as Bornemark by turning to the book of Hosea, investigating different motives of embodiment in the text. In particular, she explores the body-related notions of 'dependence' and 'discernment.'

The second subtheme deals with *rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God*, and asks if this takes us *beyond a purely symbolic religion*. In all religions rituals play a crucial role in making the presence of God or the Divine felt by humans. In the (Catholic) theology of the Eucharist the real presence of God is expressed through the doctrine of the transubstantiation. But other sacraments and rituals can also be considered as material expressions of a spiritual reality. Can philosophy of religion make sense of these embodiments of God and does it influence our view of magical practices? In his paper, Mark Wynn starts his answer to these questions by noting some of the ways in which human beings can be attuned in bodily terms to place-relative 'existential meanings.' He then extends this case to the religious domain, by examining the nature of sacred sites and the role of religious concepts in aesthetic experience. In his reply to Wynn, Roderich Barth reconstructs religious experience in the context of a symbol theory that incorporates insights of philosophical anthropology and the contemporary theory of emotion.

The third subtheme focuses on the issue of *neuroscience and free will*, and asks whether *we still can say that we are called to be free*. It is aimed at various ways to rethink free will in light of recent empirical research that seems to imply that decisions are made in the brain before we are aware of them. Do these scientific insights present an adequate understanding of the philosophical concept of the free will, and, if so, can we still say with Paul that we are called to be free (Gal. 5:13)? In his contribution to this subtheme, Marcel Sarot evaluates neuroscientific experiments on free will, especially Benjamin Libet's experiments. He argues that Libet's experiments do not decide the debate between compatibilist and incompatibilist conceptions of free will, nor do they count against the libertarian conception of free will. In his response paper, Aku Visala first argues that the nature of our freedom and what is required for are outside the sciences. He then shows that the positive function of neuroscience in this context is to highlight the fact that some of our actions are driven by causal factors which we have not previously recognised and which we have no control over.

The final subtheme deals with another aspect of the relation between a scientific outlook on the body and its implications for religion. Its title was:

Religion, Morality and Being Human: What about 'Thy will be done'? It is about psychobiological and etiological research, suggesting that certain degrees of moral consciousness and behaviour are found not only among human beings, but also among animals, especially primates. This seems to suggest that morality is not specifically human. If this insight is true, it obviously challenges the idea of human's unique dignity, which is supported by the religious conviction that humans are children of God par excellence. Furthermore, does the religious commandment that humans are called upon to do the will of God then still make sense? In his paper, Dalferth addresses these questions by focusing on the concept of human dignity, a controversial concept in contemporary philosophy and policy. From a Kantian and Christian perspective, 'dignity' is best understood as an orienting term which calls attention to the humane vs. inhumane way of life to which we commit ourselves when we ascribe dignity to others and ourselves. From a Christian point of view, this humane way of life is a consequence of acknowledging the basic passivity of human life with respect to what is made possible in and for us through the gift of the love of God. In his response, Cottingham argues that the inalienable dignity of all human beings is independent of circumstances, capacities, or qualifications. Kantian autonomy (construed as the rational will, or the ability to exercise it) cannot ground such a notion. The roots of universal human dignity are more plausibly traced to the Judaeo-Christian worldview in which God loves all his children equally, despite their vulnerability and weakness. To mature morally is to come to realize that we gain nothing by insisting on our status, or 'standing on our dignity'; we should recognize instead the dependency we share with all our neighbours.

The final part of this volume consists of a selected number of short-papers that were presented during the conference by junior as well as senior researchers. Besides quality, the main selection criterion was whether the papers connected to one of the four subthemes.

Religious Embodiment between Medicine and Modernity

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I discuss how religious embodiment has been and is conceived in relation to other perspectives on embodiment such as the role of medicine in modernity. My focus is on the cultural representation of embodiment, and the theoretical perspective is phenomenological and hermeneutical. I start out from an account of the dissection of the abbess Chiara of Montefalco's body in 1308 to show how even such a practice as the cutting open of bodies takes on meaning in relation to its context, from the religious search for indications of sanctity to medical autopsies. This is an example of a historical displacement of the meaning of embodiment, and to talk responsibly about embodiment in a philosophical context also means to take into account the historicity of embodiment. For a philosophy of religion, then, it is a challenge to talk about religious embodiment in a modern context where medicine has become hegemonic in the cultural representation of the body, turning the body into, in essence, a manipulable object. For religion, defined as the subjective, this means that the personal as well as the social embodiment of faith is lost sight of in a process of 'excarnation.' For the religious body to occur today in any meaningful sense, there is a need of a refiguration of the understanding of embodiment as such, which can be achieved through phenomenological accounts of embodiment. I end the article with some suggestions how this might look.

KEYWORDS

embodiment, the body and history, medicine and modernity, medicine and embodiment, religion and the body, excarnation

INTRODUCTION

In August 1308, the abbess Chiara of Montefalco died in her monastery. As she was considered to be both a renowned ascetic and a visionary, her fellow nuns decided to embalm her so as to preserve her body on account of her holiness. On the Italian peninsula at this time, embalmment by evisceration was coming into practice, and to perform this, Chiara's body was to be opened. She was consequently cut open by one of her sisters and both her viscera and her heart were taken out to be buried on separately. The following day, her fellow nuns continued their explorations of her innards, eventually finding a cross in her opened heart. A further examination of her heart showed even further symbols of the crucifixion, and in her gallbladder three small stones, referring to the trinity, were discovered. The miraculous workings of the heart were considered to be further proof of Chiara's holiness.

The reason we know anything about this death and consequent dissection is because of the testimony given by her fellow sister Francesca of Montefalco. In her account, Francesca gives two reasons for opening Chiara's body: preserving her body by embalming it but also hoping to find something 'wonderful' in her heart. Embalmment was seen as a short-term measure, stabilizing the corpse for a couple of days, so that it could be laid on display. The hope was, of course, that Chiara's body would prove to be a miracle-working relic, and this hope catered, to put it in modern terms, not only to religious but also to civic interests, since this could enhance the reputation of the city in question, attracting pilgrims. Further, the cutting open of Chiara's body took place in accordance with contemporary medicine; Sister Francesca was the daughter of a physician. There seem to be at least three contexts involved in the dissection of Chiara of Montefalco, then: religious, civic and medical. As Katharine Park amply has demonstrated, in an account from which I took this example, this period in the Middle Ages was no stranger to human dissection.¹ Through 'Holy Anatomy,' evidence for a person's sanctity could hopefully be produced. These dissections were, if not common, then at

¹ This example is from Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York 2010), 39–47.

least uncontroversial. Far from being some kind of religious taboo, dissection was practised for a number of purposes, some of them religious. That the church at that time was hostile towards dissection is a misconception, widespread despite the work of many medievalists.² Bodies, especially women's bodies, were cut open for several reasons: authenticating sanctity, establishing evidence in a criminal case, Caesarean section and, increasingly, to gain anatomical knowledge. These practices were often associated, conceptually as well as practically. Dissection of the body was, at that time, not primarily seen as a medical procedure. Except for the (rare) public dissection of bodies for medical research exclusively, which was performed on executed foreign criminals and was considered dishonouring, opening up the body was most commonly a practice for the cultural and social elite. Medical expertise was, however, called upon to establish evidence, not only in juridical processes but also, and perhaps foremost, in processes of canonization. From the case of Chiara of Montefalco and onwards, medical examinations, including autopsy, came to be a part of the systematic inquiry into the authenticity of someone's sanctity.

RELIGIOUS EMBODIMENT

The topic for this article is religious embodiment or, perhaps more precisely, how religious embodiment has been and is conceived in relation to other perspectives on embodiment, especially the changing role of medicine in modernity. My own theoretical perspective will be phenomenological and hermeneutical, in a broad sense, and will focus upon questions regarding the cultural representation of embodiment rather than, as is also traditional within the phenomenological movement, the subjective experience of embodiment, or, as is common to the natural sciences, the biological or physical body. I am convinced that the cultural representation of embodiment plays an essential role in any understanding of the body, including a biological understanding.³ From this follows, among other things, that the body has a history. It is not an unproblematic given, neither in the form of its representation nor as embodiment as such. This also means, presumably, that the ex-

² Except for the work of Park, see also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, transl.: A. M. Sheridan (London/New York 2010), 153 f.

³ For a more extensive discussion of these matters, see my *Himmelska kroppar: Inkarnation, blick, kroppslighet*. Logos/Pathos 6 (Göteborg 2006), esp. ch. 1 and 8; English translation forthcoming with Eerdmans as *Heavenly Bodies*.

perience of being embodied varies with time. However, one could object that any talk of cultural representations, subjective experiences and biological evidence is an abstract way of speaking about phenomena that perhaps are not so distinct from each other; that this introduces precisely those distinctions that this article wants to overcome. Nevertheless, I think it might be prudent, for reasons of exposition if nothing else, to go along with such categories for a while just to show in a preliminary way that there are many ways to talk about embodiment.

The reason that I began with Katharine Park's account of the dissection of Chiara of Montefalco here is somewhat different from Park's original intent; I think it shows quite clearly how both the dissection of bodies as well as the bodies themselves acquire meaning in a particular context. Even such a practice as the cutting open of bodies, for our part mostly associated with medical autopsies, does not have an established meaning but can take on different meanings depending upon the relevant context of interpretation. The interest that her fellow sisters took in her opened body had little to do with what we would call an autopsy, and even if a medical authority was called upon to establish the facts that would lead to her sanctification, such an authority was never independent of the framing religious interest in Chiara's embodiment. As I hinted at in the beginning, it might be that concepts such as 'religious,' 'civic' or 'medical,' even though they surely would have some kind of referent in the beginning of the fourteenth century, are slightly misleading if we take them to refer to some kind of easily distinguishable spheres of meaning. The differentiation between the 'religious,' 'civic' and 'scientific' spheres of meaning take on contemporary meaning only through modernity. From the account of the dissection of Chiara of Montefalco, it is quite clear that there was no way of distinguishing the religious and the civic spheres, as if they were independent of each other. Also, medicine was understood in a religious context. Park explicitly warns against the anachronistic supposition that just because the understanding of embodiment in our time is dominated by medical paradigms, the same was true in pre-modern times.⁴ And of course this does not only refer to the practice of dissection but to embodiment as such. It is not the case that the history of embodiment is the history of anatomy and physiology at the core, to which all other 'cultural meanings' is added: 'the inhabitants of northern Italian cities from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, understood their

⁴ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 21–22.

bodies primarily in terms of family and kinship, on the one hand, and religion, on the other,' says Park.⁵ Medicine comes third.

Through relating religious embodiment to the interest that medicine has had and still has for human embodiment, I think we can get a notion of how religious embodiment has changed through history. Of course I will only give the barest of outlines of this history, but if I am successful in giving at least a preliminary account of this history and what this means today, I will have fulfilled my purposes. Thus, in the next section I will return to a historical account of the changing role of religion and medicine for embodiment, ending in a more principled discussion of how to understand embodiment from a philosophical perspective informed by this history. Then I will take a look upon how embodiment has been medicalized in modernity and where that leaves religious embodiment. Finally, I will present some thoughts on how embodiment can be conceived of differently with the help of a phenomenological perspective, and how also the role of religious embodiment can be re-conceived thereby.

EMBODIMENT AT THE DAWN OF MODERNITY

The human body, in pre- or (very) early modern times was seen as a nexus between the created and the divine spheres. As God was incarnated in Christ, meaning that God became palpable human flesh, the body took on a particular prominence as a conduit for divine grace. Caroline Walker Bynum is one of the foremost medievalists who have emphasized how very somatic the religious culture at this era was; the human body, and even the female body became a symbol for humanity as such.⁶ Since woman, in the Middle Ages, was associated in a particular way with embodiment, by analogy she performed the more perfect *imitatio Christi* through her very physicality. In this way, woman could be the representative also of the male embodiment. The gendered aspects aside, embodiment was seen as the human form of relationality, not only extending to the relations between human bodies but also between the immanent and the transcendent. Even the sense of vision was often understood as a reciprocal and mimetic relation rather than as a

⁵ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 23.

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley 1987), 263.

relation of domination and subordination, as later became the case.⁷ As such, human bodies were not only vulnerable to physical trauma, but also to spiritual possession by the Holy Spirit as well as the devil, both of whom could be presumed to leave bodily marks, a reason as good as any to examine the depths of human embodiment in extraordinary persons. The reason Park gives for the surprising fact that ‘Holy Anatomy’ was performed almost exclusively on women – the first known autopsy of a man (Ignatius of Loyola in 1556) took place two hundred and fifty years after the autopsy of Chiara of Montefalco – is both the association of women with corporeality and the (literal) inwardness of their devotion.⁸

In the last two decades of the fifteenth century, according to Park, a new enthusiasm for dissection in the direct service of medical knowledge began to establish itself. Partly inspired by Galen’s endorsement of dissection as essential to health care, physicians began to appreciate the practice as a way of gaining essential information about diseases and causes of death. This enthusiasm trickled down to their well-off clients, who required autopsies as a part of their family health care. Even if medical examination in the form of dissection was driven by particular interests founded in conceptions of human embodiment that went beyond medicine, it was also a part of a process of an increasing significance of medical learning as such, in cases of establishing lineage as well as canonicity. Medical authors began publishing anatomical works, with Andreas Vesalius’ *On the Fabric of the Human Body* from 1543 as a landmark. The formal dissections held by medical faculties began to attract more interest, both audience-wise and as a sign for the achievements of the city. Consequently, it became more frequent. Medicine also laid claim to a greater authority to read corporeal signs in a truthful way, as these signs were just too complex or ambiguous for anyone to interpret without the correct experience, erudition and judgement. With the growth of medical dissections follows a claim to greater expertise on human embodiment. The body became a stage for the performance of signs and symptoms that only could be made to produce evidence through interpretation by a particular competence. The physicist is the expert and the body the object of his expertise.

This growing prominence of medical anatomy did not mean, however, that anatomy now was somehow independent of theological or religious concerns. Vesalius’ book is a case in point, relying for its visual presentation of

⁷ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 73. Cf. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1993).

⁸ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 35.

the human body on available iconographic traditions such as Saint Anthony and the miser's heart and the extraction of Julius Caesar from his mother's womb. Anatomical illustrations could also be part of devotional images, so as to suggest that the border between the two were not entirely stable. At the same time, Vesalius' work was, as Park points out, a step in the direction of the 'desacralization' of anatomy; even when using iconographic traditions, more obviously religious elements have been left out. His book was informed by his strategy to obtain imperial patronage from the head of the Holy Roman Empire, but also of integrating *physica* (which corresponds with what we call internal medicine) and surgery through the medium of anatomy. This new conception of medicine was celebrated by Vesalius as a return to Greek medicine. In fact, he staged his own 'revival' as a 'Caesarean' birth, in a similar way to that of the emperor being seen as a new and from his immediate successors independent beginning of an imperial lineage: 'Vesalius has snatched anatomy from the jaws of death, just as Charles resuscitated the Roman Empire, just as the midwife saved the infant Caesar, and just as Apollo rescued Asclepius from Coronis' womb.'⁹ The bodies depicted in his exposition were often women, signalling a gendered figuration of the relationship between subject (physician) and object (woman). The physician was someone who investigated the 'secrets of women,' revealing them to the interested onlooker. The distance between subject and object has now increased, both in terms of epistemology and affection, compared to earlier centuries, and the element of reciprocity has been all but lost.

What can we learn from Park's book *Secrets of Women* that treats, in some detail, the praxis of dissection between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century in northern Italy? As she herself points out, this story 'is part of a larger story in which anatomical knowledge gained by exploring the dissected body became a way to think about the self.'¹⁰ As the body is never given as such but only through some particular configuration of interpretative power, there is a need if one wishes to speak about embodied religion to specify which body one is talking about. Park's analysis helps us with two things: first, the insight that to speak of embodied religion or the religious body always is an abstraction in a certain sense, namely that what is seen as the domain of the religious is always a part of a larger configuration of other domains such as the political, the cultural, the scientific (including medicine) et cetera. As we understand from Park's account, there is a vast difference

⁹ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 247.

¹⁰ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 261.

between a domain of the religious in pre-modern times, where it in a sense to a large extent overlapped (or perhaps better: never was distinct from) the scientific domain. But, secondly, Park's analysis also helps us to understand at least part of the story that has led to the configuration of these domains today, where I presume that it is not very controversial to suggest that medicine often defines what is taken to be the fundamental understanding of embodiment, namely (a version of) the physical or biological body. This perspective has, of course, been naturalized for us up to the point that we find it hard to understand how anyone can understand embodiment in another way; as Park points out, it is indeed difficult 'to think of this understanding of the body as having had a beginning' saturated as our culture is with such conceptualizations and visualizations of our embodiment.¹¹ But none of these conceptualizations or visualizations of the body that are part of our daily life are neutral or innocent. The body is never distinct as such from the cultural, political and social intersections that both produce it and uphold it, making it appear as given.

A PHILOSOPHY OF EMBODIMENT

Now let us turn briefly to the philosophical position on embodiment that I invoke here. It is inspired by, among others, Judith Butler, although she, of course, puts more emphasis on the gendered form of our understanding of embodiment.¹² Butler has, not surprisingly, been criticized for her perspective in *Gender Trouble* as advocating a remarkably weightless understanding of embodiment, as if the materiality of the body is dissolved in linguistic constructions.¹³ Thus, her philosophical perspective would contribute to the typically modern alienation from nature. This is a criticism that belongs to a more general class of critiques of social constructivism that disapproves of its claims in that they seem to champion the presumably nonsensical idea that the body is a social construct, therefore denying its materiality. However, I belong to those who think that this is a misinterpretation of Butler's position: far from the counterintuitive claim that there is nothing before

¹¹ Park, *Secrets of Women*, 262.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York/London 1999).

¹³ Carol Bigwood, "Renaturalizing the Body (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty)", Donn Welton (ed.), *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Malden, Mass./Oxford 1998), 99–114.

discourse, denying the materiality of the body, a more constructive understanding of Butler's argument would be that the 'pre-discursive' materiality of the body is never possible to conceptualize or visualize in any other way than through discourse.¹⁴ What it is that is 'matter' or 'body' is thus not an absolute fundament for philosophical or political arguments, but is itself a contested notion that is part of the argument. This does not mean, then, that the body is just a matter of linguistic convention, but that everything that is, is always already symbolically mediated, so that there is no object independent of the discourse. This, it seems to me, is a position beyond at least crude versions of both essentialism and social constructivism, suggesting instead that we need more nuanced (and historical) accounts of the intertwining of the linguistic and the material that do not construct these as binary oppositions.

Among those advocating such a perspective belongs the Polish medical doctor and biologist Ludwik Fleck whose reflections on the social conditions of a scientific fact are highly pertinent to the question of a cultural understanding of embodiment. Fleck wrote a small book, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, where he argued against the prevailing scientific opinion that facts are independent of cultural and social conditioning.¹⁵ In it, he is polemical against those who refuse to see how even present-day science is dependent upon a particular thought collective and style and by way of this refusal think that there is a complete discontinuity between present-day knowledge and past prejudice. To say that what we today believe is true 'is ipso facto true,' is making the same mistake as an Eighteenth-century French philologist who declared that '*pain, sitos, bread, Brot, panis* were arbitrary, different descriptions of the same thing.' The difference between the French language and all other languages is 'that what is called bread in French really was bread.'¹⁶ There is, in other words, no way of stepping out of one's own intellectual context, and the privileging of one's own context as the sole standard for truth-claims is just a case of *petitio principii* or begging the question, as this claim can only be validated by principles internal to the context. Against the supposedly customary view of a fact – and we might want to add of embodiment – as 'something definite, permanent, and independent of any

¹⁴ See her *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Second edition. (New York/London 1993).

¹⁵ Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton, transl. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago/London 1981). Annemarie Mol has in her *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham/London 2002) spelt out some of the implications for a philosophy of embodiment.

¹⁶ Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, 50.

subjective interpretation by the scientist,' Fleck suggests that facts (and also bodies) are theory-dependent and theories are in turn dependent upon cultural and social circumstances.¹⁷ In a simile, we could compare the linguistic dependence of the study of human embodiment with the dependence on optic lenses or radio telescopes for the study of heavenly bodies that are not visible to the naked eye. All human knowledge is in some way contextually mediated, including, as the example suggests, a reliance on various practices and technologies.

Along with the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this suggests an understanding of the function of language as primarily a way of orienting human beings in their life-world, not to create a correspondence between words and things.¹⁸ Language constitutes the world in which human beings understand their existence, and thus Merleau-Ponty can suggest that speech and gesture transfigures the human body, at the same time that it is the human body that talks and gestures.¹⁹ Physical reality is not left intact by language, and thus, in a sense, one could say that a human body is a linguistic body (even the cadaver, of course, exists in a discursive field, as the example of Chiara of Montefalco shows). Language creates all sorts of possibilities for bodily existence, even though language always exists through and between bodies. This, in turn, implies that the world is not primarily the object of human subjectivity, but something we live in and through; our subjectivity is not something that we can place outside of the body but instead it is through our bodies that we are subjects that also can reach out for something else. The body is always already a part of the world, and neither the body nor the world could be explored independent of how the subject of the exploration bodily experiences the world. This mode of embodiment is a presupposition of the possibility of experiencing the body as an object to our gaze and therefore a more fundamental dimension of our embodiment. That we still tend to think of the body as an object is in part dependent upon the fact that we become aware of our own body through our interaction with other bodies in the world – but also, I might add, because our contemporary culture teaches us to understand the body as an object. Merleau-Ponty insists, along with the phenomenological tradition, that the subjective experience of being embodied and the biological body belong together, or even are two abstract aspects of some more primordial embodiment.

¹⁷ Fleck, *Genesis and Development*, xxvii.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London 1992), 193.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 197.

What I wish to critically suggest to such a phenomenological perspective on embodiment is the emphatic need to supplement it with the importance of the cultural representation of embodiment for the understanding of both. In the example of the dissection of Chiara of Montefalco above, it has become clear, I hope, how our experience of being embodied is dependent upon the cultural framework within which our bodies are thematised and become meaningful. The cultural representation of embodiment is not static; it is historically given and therefore any talk of religious embodiment or embodied religion stands in need of a critical historical account. This brings me back from this more abstract elaboration of how I understand embodiment to the question of how the medical body and the religious body are conceived of today.

RE-IMAGINING RELIGIOUS EMBODIMENT

When I broke off my historical account above, I had just explained how medicine through Vesalius came to establish a more prominent place in the early modern hegemonic conceptions of embodiment. Today, it is quite clear, as Park also has pointed out, that an anatomical understanding of embodiment has become part of our understanding of our own embodiment. In his book *The Anticipatory Corpse* the American MD and philosopher Jeffrey P. Bishop tells us the story of the gradual medicalization of the understanding of human embodiment with the help of the Aristotelian four causes. Two of them are maybe not of prominent interest for our purposes: the material cause that tells us what a thing consists of or the formal cause that tells us how this matter is arranged. More important for Bishop's argument, however, are the two remaining causes: the efficient cause that is the primary source of an entity's movement and the final cause that is its aim or purpose. An important historical change took place in early modernity that could be interpreted by the changing role of the four causes: modern science including modern medicine repudiated or at least minimized formal and final causation at the same time as it elevated material and efficient causation. Bishop explains:

Medicine's metaphysical stance ... is a metaphysics of material and efficient causation, concerned with the empirical realm of matter, effects, and the ra-

tional working out of the causes for the purposes of finding ways to control the material of bodies.²⁰

This is part of the technological drift of modern science; the body loses its own integrity and turns into a material object, as there are no intrinsic aims or purposes that could be assigned to it. Bishop again:

Bodies have no purpose or meaning in themselves, except insofar as we direct those bodies according to our desires. ... The world – the body – stands before us as a manipulable object, and all thinking about the world or the body becomes instrumental doing.²¹

Of course, there is still the ‘I’ which has desires and wishes and aims and purposes, but this subjectivity is now both divorced from our embodiment and also outside the realm of medicine, and, consequently, beyond instrumental reasoning. Bishop notes that modern medicine or modern science in general sometimes denies having a metaphysics at all, but in the sense that a metaphysics is a particular view of the fundamental nature of being and the world, there is a metaphysics at work, at least implicitly, in its way of dividing the world between the meaningful and the manipulable or subject and object.

It needs to be pointed out that Bishop is not arguing against modern medicine; he is well aware of the ground-breaking achievements that have followed in its wake. He is also careful to point out that one of the most important motives for becoming a doctor is that one has been moved by the suffering of the other. At the same time, his often quite generalizing talk of modern medicine runs the risk both of reifying modern medicine and of presenting modern technology and the patient’s life-world as a dichotomy, thus presenting too stark a contrast between cure and care in the contemporary world. His main target, however, is the oblivion of all understanding of the body as something more than just a manipulable object. This presupposition is counterproductive as it obscures how we also experience ourselves as embodied beings with shared histories. Medicine is, of course, not the only (efficient) cause of this tendency, as this is rather a common view of the trajectory of a particular modern kind of dualism.

What space or place is left for religious embodiment in such a hegemonic understanding of embodiment? The history of the concept of religion

²⁰ Jeffrey P. Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying* (Notre Dame 2011), 20.

²¹ Bishop, *Anticipatory Corpse*, 21.

is, I would presume, quite well known, so I will not spend too much time elaborating on it here.²² Suffice it to say that religion has increasingly undergone a process of subjectivization, correlative to the objectivization of the body. Among other things, in the Protestant repudiation of the Roman Catholic liturgy, its customs and practices – its ‘legalism’ – the essence of religion came to be located to ‘the inner human being’ where all legitimacy in the eyes of God depends on an inner faith, not external achievements as such. Religion was privatized; its domain came to encompass feeling rather than thought or practice. Charles Taylor has, in his *A Secular Age*, described this process with the help of the term ‘ex-carnation’ (as a contrast to ‘incarnation,’ ‘becoming flesh’), which means that both the religious communities as well as society as a whole lose sight of the (inevitable) social embodiment of religion, as well as a forgetfulness of how even one’s personal faith is expressed through one’s body.²³ In some ways, medicine came to replace religion in that the understanding of health came to be understood in both a less holistic way, with the absence of disease as its main meaning rather than the more comprehensive well-being, and also in a more immanent manner, as having no final aim over and above the individual and social body. This means that the contemporary configuration of discursive power where both religion and medicine are parts actually turns the religious body into a sublime body; a sublime body that is impossible to represent, both in a spatial and a discursive sense. If one of the defining traits of any talk of the body is that it ‘takes place,’ in such a configuration of discursive power it is an open question whether religious embodiment actually ‘takes place’ today. Or if it does, maybe this is a challenge to the very modern configuration of power that wants to make a neat distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ or ‘private’ and ‘public’ but also between ‘care’ and ‘cure.’

The challenge to such a configuration of discursive power is hardly a literal revival of an Aristotelian metaphysics of the four causes, and as I read Bishop, this is not his aim. Rather, he argues that final causation could be understood through a contemporary phenomenology of embodiment as we find it in Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and this is to me a viable way forward. Working against the modern dichotomy between subject and object, both philosophers tried to regard embodiment more from the

²² For an extended account, see my article ‘The Return of Religious Embodiment: On Post-Secular Politics,’ Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson & Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (eds.), *The Body Unbound: Philosophical Perspectives on Politics, Embodiment and Religion* (Cambridge 2010), 19–36.

²³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2007), 554.

perspective of the life-world. Rather than trying to overcome dualisms, they try to show that they are not there from the beginning. There is of course a vast tradition of interpretation with regard to both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and how well they actually succeed in overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, but let me here just claim that one important strand in their philosophies is to regard the human body not as a manipulable object for our desires but rather as the way we exist in the world and through which we relate to other bodies. The body is not a tool, but we *are* our bodies. It is through our embodiment that we are a node in a network of relations and stories and it is so that we become what we are. Of course our body lets us do things, for instance drink a cup of coffee, and in this sense it is tool-like. As the act of drinking coffee is not just an extrinsic occurrence that happens to take place to and through my body, but is (hopefully) a pleasurable experience to me as a person, an experience that also could be a shared experience as a participation in a – however fleeting – human community, it would be misleading to characterize the arm that moves the cup to my lips as a mere tool. It is indeed I who am drinking the coffee.

More examples that encompass a broader horizon of human experience could obviously be produced here, but I hope this simple and perhaps pedestrian example will suffice to convince, for now, that our bodies are always already part of a context where our human existence is defined by our aspirations and desires, who or what we love and what we are hoping for. Thus, we are always already engaged in practical projects that intrinsically contain some form of *telei* or final causes. For Bishop, these causes can be of different natures, not necessarily belonging to some grand metaphysics as in Aristotle or Christian theology, but are an effect of an understanding of embodiment that refuses to reduce the human body to a manipulable object. Projects can be of such a grand scale, but can also concern matters of daily living, but common to both long-term projects and more mundane projects is that both take an embodied form. To quote Bishop on this: ‘Formal and final causes are embodied, even as that embodiment is shaped by meaning and significance outside the body and directed to purposes outside of the body.’²⁴ Our individual bodies are not only meaningful in and by themselves, but as members of a social body that defines meaning beyond the borders of the individual body. It is important to realize that such a meaningfulness is not something that is added *post hoc* but is a part of being embodied in itself. It begins with

²⁴ Bishop, *Anticipatory Corpse*, 289.

small, everyday projects that evolve into some form of community, whether big or small, with its own history and its own *telos*, but it can also be part of a living religion.

This means that the body is never neutral. Not even the medical body that Bishop equates with the corpse is neutral. Through modern medicine, the human body is reduced to a more or less well-functioning machine. The aim of medicine, then, is to, as far as possible, maintain this machine. But to turn the human body into a manipulable object, it needs to withdraw it from its communal context, making it acontextual and ahistorical. The corpse becomes the paradigmatic body because death stops, ideally at least, the flow of time, helpfully turning the body into a stable ground for a systematic knowledge. But to a living body according to the phenomenological perspective, death is not only about the termination of the functioning of the body-machine, but more about the cessation of capacities, projects, plans, hopes, desires and so on. This gives an entirely different perspective on life, health, disease and illness, and, I might add, on religion. Indeed, to the ill person, the body can become an object, as it suddenly or gradually turns from being an invisible background horizon for all intentional projects to a highly visible cause for concern in its own right. This can be experienced as an alienation from one's own body. But this is a different objectification from the one that is performed by the doctor in a medical examination, for whom our projects and purposes that we are keen to restore are more or less irrelevant. The doctor considers the function of the body, something that is distinct from the purpose and goods of the embodied life.

This points towards an understanding of embodiment that reaches beyond the manipulable object of instrumental rationality. Significant for such an understanding is that the body is not just a tool or an object but something that we in a more profound way *are*. We exist and relate bodily to other bodies in the world. The body can be described as a node in a network of relations and stories that we share with each other and through which we become those we are. This means that we share a life-world with each other where our existence is defined by our longings and desires. The life-world can be understood as a set of practical projects that all imply some kind of *telos*. Even if we cannot share or even wish to share the life-world of Chiara of Montefalco, where embodiment was understood within a religious, or more specifically a Christian, context, such contexts, be they of a more low key or of a more comprehensive nature, are still around in our daily projects with all their successes or misgivings. Different ways of imagining embodiment are

always already here, if one only knows where to look. It is perhaps one of the contributions of a philosophy of religion, a phenomenology or a theology today to be able to critically explore the hegemonical mode of embodiment in the service of suggesting a fuller, less reductive account. Heterotopias are already in existence alongside hegemonical places in society from where it is possible to challenge their account of embodiment.

What I have tried to suggest in this article, more by showing than by arguing perhaps, is that such a fuller account needs to be historically informed. The body has a history, not least in its cultural representations, and being aware of this history is, I would suggest, essential for the understanding of religious embodiment even today, to avoid being caught up in the objectification of time as well as the body. Essential to any discussion of religious embodiment or embodied religion is both some kind of historical genealogy of religion as well as of the body, and a philosophical or theological account that tries to lay bare how we always already exist bodily in ways that cannot reduce our embodiment to a manipulable object. For such an endeavour, the comparison between modern and pre-modern representations of embodiment could be helpful, not because earlier traditions would provide us with standards, but with critical perspectives on our own modes of understanding. The task of re-imagining religious embodiment in conversation with different modes of embodiment suggested by politics, science or art is an interpretative undertaking not served well by forgetting that the body exists historically.

Section I:

EMBODIED RELIGION

A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON MYSTICAL
EXPERIENCES AND RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINING

A Body Sensitive for Transcendence: *A Mystical Understanding of Sensibility*

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ABSTRACT

In phenomenology and existential philosophy the relation to the divine has been understood as closely connected to the human capacity for transcendence. This understanding can be nuanced through a reading of the beguine Mechthild von Magdeburg's *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, a Christian mystic text where the body, sensibility and erotic encounter with the divine is central. Sensibility is here understood as the meeting place between the soul and God. The article aims to contribute to a phenomenology of religious experience in which the human capacity for transcendence and human embodiment are thought as intertwined.

KEY WORDS

phenomenology, existential philosophy, female mystics, mysticism, Mechthild von Magdeburg, beguines, body, embodiment, senses, transcendence

INTRODUCTION

In monotheistic traditions religion has most often been understood as a spiritual issue and religiosity and spirituality are understood as closely related concepts. Even if any religion, as practice, by necessity has strong em-

bodied dimensions, the body in theory and in writings has not always had a very strong position. Christianity, for example, stands with one leg in a Neo-Platonic tradition where the body is understood as the prison of the divine spark of the soul, which hinders the soul from returning to its divine origin.

In modern philosophy the body has been understood as extension, a material object among others, and as what is present here and now. Such ideas have been profoundly questioned in much contemporary, late modern philosophy – that wants to reevaluate the body. At the same time, in phenomenological and existential philosophy of religion, it has been implicitly argued that there is a reason for the priority of the soul, since religion is born out of the human capacity for transcendence, the overflowing of the here and now. This situation begs the question: what position does the living body have in relation to the human capacity for transcendence?

In the Abrahamic religions the capacity for transcendence has been developed into a capacity to transgress the present world, an ability that is supposed to be exceptionally strong in so-called mystic traditions. In philosophy, mystic traditions are often accused of trying to find that harmonious, clean and peaceful oneness with the divine, where all the trouble and problems of the world and the body are once and for all left behind. Such an understanding of mystic traditions can be found throughout contemporary philosophy, explicitly for example in Karl Jaspers and Iris Murdoch.¹ And in what has become known as the turn to religion within phenomenology, the capacity of transcendence – here read as a positive and most human capacity – is at the center, and here too, the body tends to be forgotten. In phenomenological analysis, attention has primarily been given to Christian male mystics. But if we are interested in the relation between transcendence and the living body, maybe we should turn to a closely related, but slightly different tradition: the Christian female mystic tradition.

Historians such as Caroline Bynum and Amy Hollywood have pointed out that it is exactly the relation to the body that is different in the writings of these female mystics.² As women, female mystics were associated with the body in a more intimate way than male mystics. The figure of Christ as the God that becomes body was more important to female mystics, and the ques-

¹ See Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy* Vol. 1, (Chicago 1969) and Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London 1997).

² Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body* (New York 1991), 194 and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhardt* (Notre Dame/London 1995), 25.

tion of the body is more present in their texts. When female writers emphasize the positive relation between the living body and the divine, the body of Jesus becomes the gateway to an intimate relation to the divine, most apparent in the Holy Communion. His bleeding body feeds and gives life to humanity. During the medieval period the female is connected to blood both through menstrual blood, which was understood as the material of which the child was made, and the belief that blood could be transformed into breast-milk. The female body is the body that is perforated, gives life, and is open to others. The body of Christ with its bleeding stigmata is connected to these aspects of the female body: his pains were connected to the pain of giving birth, he was breast-feeding humanity with his stigmata, and he gave himself to the humans just as a mother gives herself to her baby. Holy capacities could therefore be connected to abilities of the female body. The breast-milk of holy women could cure the sick, female bodies opened up in stigmata to a larger extent than male, and some women, such as St Bridget of Sweden, received their calling to God as the movement of a fetus in the womb. But the gender difference is not a total watershed: male mystics such as Bernhard of Clairvaux also use similar female strategies, calls themselves God's bride and identify with Mary.

The living body is closely connected to the senses, as has been shown in the phenomenological tradition. The living body is even constituted through its sensibility and its capacity to be both sensed and sensing. The senses have of course always been sources of knowledge, but during the high middle ages it was considered to be an unreliable source when it came to the relation with the divine. What we call the mystical tradition had up until the twelfth century been a tradition of textual interpretation by purely intellectual means. It was especially the female mystics, within the strong female religious movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which gave the senses a different position. Mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) gained their knowledge of the divine through the senses, often in visions based on seeing, hearing, smelling etc. But this made them suspicious in the eyes of other mystics. For example, Master Eckhardt (1260–1328) and Johannes Tauler (1300–1361), who in many respects were greatly influenced by female mystics, were critical of their dependence on the senses.³ They preferred the *specula-*

³ This has been discussed by among others Friedrich-Wilhelm Wentzlaff-Eggebert in *Deutsche Mystik zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Einheit und Wandlung ihrer Erscheinungsformen* (Berlin 1969), see especially 113.

tio of the wise rather than the *visio* of the pious, since the senses could be treacherous: maybe the vision came from the devil rather than from the divine. Instead they considered reason to be the only trustworthy source of knowledge.

In the following my interest lies in how the living and sensing body is conceptualized in the female mystic tradition. I will start with a very short summary of the philosophical and phenomenological philosophy of religion where religion is understood as a consequence of the human capacity for transcendence, and of the priority of the soul at the cost of the body. Thereafter I will turn to *The Flowing Light of Godhead* (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*), a Christian and mystic text from the thirteenth century written by Mechthild von Magdeburg. In this text the senses as well as the human body are given crucial roles in relation to the divine. My main focus will be on the relation between the capacity for transcendence and the sensing body.

RELIGION AS THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR TRANSCENDENCE

In modern phenomenology as well as in existential philosophy, the ability to experience negativity is central to the human being.⁴ Such ability is of course paradoxical since its negativity is present, and its presence is an absence. But it is not an extraordinary experience, rather one that is present in everyday life. The world would not be a world if we only experienced pure presence and no negativity. In this case we would not accept that the house has a backside, since we do not experience it at the moment. Neither would we accept the other person as experiencing, since we never experience her experiences. The now includes thus not only what is present, but includes the past as well as expectations for the future. This capacity for negativity provides us in early childhood with the very first instance of play: peek-a-boo. Playing this game, the parent, for example, puts her hands in front of her face and then takes them away and reveals her face. The point of this play is that the baby does not alternately see the back of the hands and the face of the parent. Rather it sees the *presence* of the parent and the *absence* of the par-

⁴ In this chapter I build upon Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton 1981 [1844]); Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (Evanston 2009 [1928]); Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* [1893–1917] (Dordrecht, 1991); and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Secaucus, 1948) etc.

ent. The amusing part lies in the memory and the expectation of the parent, which are interrupted by the presence of the parent. As such it is a play on what is not present, but which nevertheless is shown *in* the present. The feeling of longing in a similar way is the strong and sometimes overwhelming presence of what is absent. The human being distinguishes herself in the use and development of this capacity, a capacity that makes it possible to make up plans and change both one's surroundings and one's own life. It also makes it possible for the human being to look at herself from the outside and reflect upon herself. In order to make up plans she needs the free space constituted through the insight that life might be different, and in order to reflect upon herself, she needs to negate the full presence in herself. Maybe this last capacity is the strangest. How is it possible for her to see herself at the same time as she is the one seeing? One phenomenological answer, Husserl's, would be that it is possible since the human being is a temporal and intentional being continually directed to the world and thereby constituting objects, meaning she does not create them, but constitutes them *as* objects). In turning to itself, the self is both constituted as an object and as the constituting subject, i.e. both as body and soul.

The body, thus, is part of the world and is subjected to all its laws. The soul, on the other hand, names the above discussed possibility of moving and transcending that which is given as present. It includes free will, creativity, and the ability to reflect. In existential philosophy, the human being is even identified with these capacities to exceed the present state and situation, i.e. with her transcendence. But if the body names the human being as part of the world, as here and now and as one object among many; where does the soul belong? Where does the soul stand when it looks at itself and thereby transforms itself into an object? It cannot be part of the world since as soon as it sees itself as one object among many it is no longer the experiencing soul. Thus, the soul cannot be part of the world – and the need to formulate another position, a non-worldly position, is born. Even so, the soul is still dependent on the body, and the world still limits its free movement. Such a lack in the power of human transcendence produces the idea of a pure transcendent power. And since the movement of the soul names the life of the human being and the constituting power, a pure transcendence would also be the source of all life, and as such a transcendental ground. But such a transcendental transcendence is exactly not part of the world and an object among others. It is an origin for all individual life, but itself not an individual creature. As such, it might be understood as given *with* the world, but never

given in itself. Therefore the divine is inexhaustible and unreachable (within the world), and thus impossible to fully understand or describe, since understanding as well as language is adapted to appearance in the world.

In this way phenomenological and existential philosophy tries to understand how ‘soul’ is separated from ‘body’ and ‘the divine’ from ‘the worldly.’ The phenomenological tradition also has important reflections on embodiment, above all in Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but none of them had any greater interest in philosophy of religion. In addition, from those thinkers that are known for their religious reflections, such as Edith Stein, Max Scheler, and Michel Henry, there are intriguing analyses of embodiment, but when they turn to religion, the theme of the body is pushed aside and transcendence becomes their only quest.⁵ To sum up: in phenomenology and existential philosophy the divine is closely connected to the human capacity for transcendence and its transcendental presuppositions. I do consider this to be an important contribution to the philosophical understanding of religion, but it is also insufficient in its tendency to further narrow the understanding of the body and the place of embodiment. In drawing on these phenomenological theories, and scrutinizing religious texts in which embodiment and sensibility are given a different role, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transcendence and embodiment. In the following I will develop this through a reading of Mechthild von Magdeburg and her text *The Flowing Light of Godhead*.

SENSIBLE INTERTWINEMENT

Mechthild belonged to the beguine movement, which was part of the quickly expanding female religiosity in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The beguines did not take life-long vows and they stayed in the city in their own dwellings. Except for the money that some of the beguines brought with them as they entered the house, they made a living from taking care of the dead, nursing, teaching, the weaving industries, etc. Their lives were less regulated than the lives of the nuns and worldlier in the sense that they had much more contact with lay people. Mechthild was probably

⁵ I develop this argument in ‘Ambiguities of the human body in phenomenology and Christian mysticism’ in Ola Sigurdson, Marius Timmann Mjaaland & Sigridur Torgeirsdottir (eds.), *The Body Unbound: Philosophical Perspectives on Religion, Embodiment, and Politics* (Cambridge 2010), 73–88.

leader for such a house in Magdeburg. She was born between 1207 and 1210 and died between 1282 and 1294.

The flowing Light of Godhead is a text that belongs to the mystic tradition to the extent that it is inspired by, for example, Hildegard of Bingen and St Augustine. Mechthild's God, though, is not connected only to the capacity for transcendence, and the living body is in her writings not something that must be discarded in search for God. On the contrary, as many scholars in different fields have pointed out, her work is permeated by a rich sensory language and a profound eroticism. The senses are not something to be rejected, but a gateway to God, and a set of capacities that must be refined.⁶ Her texts, which describe a personal relationship to the divine, contain stories, poems and, maybe most notable, dialogues between personifications of love and the senses etc. or, as in the following paragraph, between the soul and God:

Soul:

Lord, you are the sun for all eyes;
You are the delight of all ears;
You are the voice of all words;
You are the force of all piety;
You are the teaching of all wisdom;
You are the life of all that lives;
You are the ordering of all beings.

[...]

God: You are a light to my eyes;
You are a lyre to my ears;
You are a voice for my words;
You are a projection of my piety;
You are one glory in my wisdom,
you are one life in my liveliness,
you are a praise in my Being!
(III:2)⁷

⁶ See, for example, Marilyn Webster, 'Mechthild von Magdeburg's Vocabulary of the Senses,' dissertation, (Amherst 1996); Margot Schmidt, 'Versinnlichte Transzendenz bei Mechthild von Magdeburg,' in: Dietrich Schmidtke (ed.), *'Minnichlichiu gotes erkennusee': Studien zur frühen abendländischen Mystiktradition* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1990), 61–88; Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York 1994); Kurt Ruh, 'Beginnsmystik: Hadewijch, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete,' *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur* 106 (1977), 265–277.

⁷ 'Herre, du bist die sunne aller ogen, du bist der lust aller oren, du bist dú stimme aller worten, du bist dú kraft aller vromekeit, du bist dú lere aller wisheit, du bist das lip in allem lebende, du bist dú

This description could be understood as a dramatized and mythological version of a philosophical position. It can be said to describe the relation between the transcendental and transcendent presupposition (God), and the individual being (the soul). In this way it articulates the relation between the continuous and the discontinuous. Those two are however not separate instances, rather the text shows a close intertwinement between God and the soul, although it requires a close inspection to be fully discerned. Each line in God's speech to the soul corresponds thematically to a line in the soul's answer. In the following I will analyze some of these thematic couplets.

Lord, you are the sun *for* all eyes, you [the soul] are a light *to* my eyes.

The relation between God and the soul is addressed from two different perspectives: the divine and the human. In each line both these positions are addressed, resulting in a fourfold description of vision. At the outset, God, as the light of the sun, is described as the presupposition for seeing, and thus as the possibility for beings to see. The soul, on the other hand, is one visible being in front of God's eyes. The soul has a twofold nature, since it is visible and seeing: visible in front of God, and seeing thanks to God. One might be surprised that it is the soul that is visible, since it does not appear to match the idea of the soul as the transcending capacity presented above. But in fact, in Mechthild I would propose that the soul is that part of the human being that is in dialog (or resists the dialog) with God. The soul is, just as in the phenomenological analysis, the life of the human being, but this life can be seen, and as such it is called 'body.' It is characterized exactly by its possibility to be seen, but it is seen as a light, i.e. as a *seeing seen*.

The divine does not display this double character of vision, both seeing and seen, but it has a double nature in another way: it is both a seeing, and the presupposition for the seeing of the soul. As such, the divine is in need of the visibility of the soul, the visibility of beings, of which the divine is not one. The visible beings constitute the seeing of the divine, since seeing cannot exist without something seen. The soul is in need of the divine and the divine is in need of something to see. This means that the divine is not in need of a particular being, but nevertheless of beings as such. So, how should the divine seeing be understood, when the divine is not a being that is possi-

ordenunge alles wesendes! [...] Du bist ein lieht vor minen ogen, du bist ein lire vor minen oren, du bist ein stimme miner worten, du bist ein meinunge miner vromekeit, du bist ein ere miner wisheit, du bist ein lip in minem lebende, du bist ein lop in minem wesende!' [III:2] *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. Gisela Vollmann-Profe, (Frankfurt aM 2003). All English translations are taken from *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, translated by Frank Tobin (New York 1998).

ble to see at one place, and thus not a being with a specific perspective? It could be understood as a kind of anonymous seeing, since it comes from everywhere and not from somewhere. It includes the possibility of the seen to be seen, and as such it is an anonymous capacity to be seen that goes beyond the individual seeing. This intertwining between seeing and seen is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of sensibility since it includes the same components.⁸ God as presupposition, as well as God's seeing is, just as anonymity in Merleau-Ponty, the seeing that goes beyond the individual and an element within which the individual can see. The soul as 'a light' for God's eyes is as all sensing beings a seen seeing and a seeing seen. But does this mean that we should understand God's seeing only as this anonymous seeing, or does it have a privileged position and thus a perspective of its own? In another verse she alludes to John 8:12 (I'm the light of the world) saying:

My lover then spoke thus: 'I shall place the light onto the lantern, and for all those that whose eyes look upon the light a special beam shall shine from the light into the eye of their knowledge.'

The soul then asked with great submissiveness but without fear: 'Dearest, what is the lantern supposed to be?' Our Lord said: 'I am the light and your breast is the lantern.' (III:12)⁹

In this text it is clear that God is the light as such, and in order for there to be sight he needs to have a lantern that can be lit. Here seeing is constituted through the collaboration between God's light and the human lantern. God lights the human lantern, and everyone who sees this light, and contemplates it – one might add – receives a light on another level, a light in the eye of their knowledge. I would say that this verse does not only thematize a specific knowledge of the divine, and neither is the light only used metaphorically, but it rather connects the seeing of the eyes with the seeing of understanding. Seeing God as one being among many is impossible, just as the sun, this divine light is what blinds you. To see the presuppositions is like trying to see the sun, where the light becomes too bright and destroys all vision. But this does not mean that the senses can be left. Instead the relation between

⁸ See especially 'The Intertwining: The Chiasm' in: *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston 1968).

⁹ 'Ich wil das lieht uf den lúhter setzen und allú dú ogen, dú das lieht angesehent, den sol ein sunderlich strale schinen in das oge ir bekanntnisse von dem liehte.' Do vragete dú sele mit grosser undertenekeit ane vorhte: 'Vil lieber, wer sol der lúchter sin?' Do sprach únser herre: 'Ich bin das lieht und din brust ist der lúhter.' [III:12]

God and the soul could be understood as a mutual weaving through which they create the element of seeing.

In another verse Mechthild says about the soul: 'In the most beautiful light she is blind to herself. In the greatest blindness her vision is the clearest' (I:22).¹⁰ In order for her to relate to God, it could be argued, she needs to consider the light itself, not only what is visible. In such a meditation she becomes blind to herself (as a 'seen' worldly being) but also understands herself (as seeing) the clearest. Here 'vision' clearly plays on the relation between visibility and the more metaphorical use of 'understanding.' But in doing so, in the transmission of visibility, it starts out from the everyday seeing, from the senses, and in order to 'see' this capacity, seeing is transformed, an invisibility to ordinary seeing paves the way for another kind of seeing. So does this not include exactly the step from the world to another 'heavenly' region? I would say no, since this other vision is included in the everyday vision. It is not a move away from the senses, but a move *into* the senses. It is *within* her capacity to see that she meets her God. Without the senses there is no meeting-place for them.

The following sections include similar patterns, and the next two extracts include discussions on the senses, although here hearing and speaking are at the center.

You are the delight of all ears, you are a lyre to my ears,

This line points towards the enjoyment of the senses. The senses are not something negative that the soul should escape, but the means by which God and Mechthild are in contact with each other, although in radically different ways. *Through* the senses they enjoy each other. God is the joy, the pleasure of the possibility to hear and the individual being is the music in God's ear. They enjoy each other in their sharing of the senses. This shows a mutual dependence, but also an asymmetric relation. They are part of the same weave, they both are, or have, eyes/ears/words – and together they both constitute and enjoy these phenomena.

Each line in this verse follows the same pattern and merits analysis, but I will end the discussion of this verse with a few words from the very last line:

You are the ordering *of* all beings, you are a praise *in* my being!

¹⁰ 'in dem schonsten liechte ist si [die brut] blind an ir selber und in der groston blintheit sihet si allerklarost.' [I:22]

This line could be understood as articulating what Heidegger called the ontological difference, which in one of the versions that Heidegger proposes would be the difference between beings and the being of beings. Here God is understood as the order and structure of all beings, and the soul as one being that celebrates the Being of God. It is thus order and celebration that are related to each other in relation to being. It is interesting that she here connects a concept (order) that we understand as metaphysical, with one that belongs to a religious sphere (praise) and it heralds the next part of the same verse.

THE BODY AS MEETING-POINT

Above I have borrowed Merleau-Ponty's concept of anonymity, but Mechthild's God is not anonymous. It is, as we have seen, not a distant metaphysical order, but their relation is the enjoyment of life, which should be celebrated and investigated with all human means. God is not primarily a metaphysical order that needs rational explanation, but is connected to all layers of the human being. Neither is the divine a being that the human being could control or fully know, and in this way it is always overflowing. But this overflowing does not make it distant; its overflowing presence takes place in the body. This leads us to the second part of the above quoted verse where the soul says:

Lord you are constantly lovesick for me.
That you have clearly shown personally.
You have written me into your book of the Godhead;
You have painted me in your humanity;
You have buried me in your side, in your hands and feet.
Ah, allow me, dear One, to pour balsam upon you.
On one dear to my heart, where shall you find the balm?
O Lord, I was going to tear the heart of my soul in two and intended to put you in it.
You could never give me a more soothing balsam than to let me unceasingly lie weightlessly in your soul.
Lord, if you were to take me home with you, I would be your physician forever.

Yes, I want that. [...] (III:2)¹¹

The second part, as well as the structure of the whole dialogue, shows a somewhat different picture than the first part. Here ‘anonymity’ becomes an even less appropriate category since the metaphysical order is lovesick for the soul. The intertwining of the first part is further emphasized here, and is set out in the flesh. If the first half describes a positive and creative relation discussed in positive terms that celebrate the difference between them, the second half shows a tension and a longing to exceed the creative gap between them.

Here it is God who is the weaker part. Even though he is the presupposition, he is not complete in himself or a harmonious being – rather, in order for God to be God, he is in need of the individual being. As a presupposition he is an open wound, opening up for beings to come into existence. The soul is said to be buried in the holy wounds. Stigmata are given a central role as the place where the individual being takes place and is at once separated and connected to God. The gap created between them also constitutes the possibility of an encounter. If we stick to the idea that God and the soul together weave sensibility, they have to be separated in order to be what they are. Sensibility always includes a splitting up in sensed and sensing, but since each side also within itself and in different ways duplicates this split, they find another closeness and possibility to come close to each other.

The wound makes it possible for the soul to be other than God, to be experienced, and to experience on her own. But this means pain, since separation is pain. But just as in childbirth it is a fruitful pain, necessary for a world of experience to come into being. But it is also the beginning of a possible consolation that they might give each other. So God asks her where she will find the balsam. The love that exists through the wound of the flesh and creates separation as well as erotic tension draws them together as the only possibility of consolation. Mechthild finds this consoling balsam by tearing her own heart in two, creating a gap in *her* flesh as she is both experienced

¹¹ ‘- Herre, du bist ze allen ziten minnensiech na mir, das hast du wol bewiset an dir. Du hast mich geschriben an din buch der gotheit, du hast mich gemalet an diner *monscheit*, du hast mich gegraben an diner siten, an henden und an fussen. Eya, erlobe mir, vil liber, das ich dich salben musse.

- Ja, wa woltistu die salben nemmen, herzeliebe?

- Herre, ich wolte miner sele herze inzwoi rissen und wolte dich dar in legen.

- So mohtest du mir niemer so liebe salben gegeben, als das ich ane underlas in diner sele muste sweben.

- Herre woltest du mich mit dir ze huse nemen, so wolte ich iemer me din arcedinne wesen.

- Ja, ich wil’ [III:2]

and experiencing. As such she duplicates in herself the gap between the two. She duplicates the separation to be able to join and heal him. And he says that she could only be a balsam if she lets him in into her soul. She can take place in him only if he takes place in her. If the first part includes a discussion on the senses, the relation here takes place in a wounded flesh that makes the senses possible. The presupposition for seeing is a wound in its need for something seen. But as something seen, the soul doubles this wound in its capacity to see. The soul duplicates the divine wound in its ability to both be seen and to see. It repeats the wound in itself. Through this wound and distance within herself, the soul alleviates the divine, maybe because its wound makes it possible to turn to the divine. The wound of the divine makes the individual being possible, the soul repeats this wound, which makes it possible to turn beyond the seen and create a relation to the divine. In this way the soul's wound makes it possible to be open to the divine. It is this mutual seeing that functions as a balsam.

I would suggest, here, that the soul should not be understood in contrast to the body, the flesh is rather the place where the wound can take place. The wound would then be a name for the soul. The soul duplicates or mirrors God, both as seeing and as seen, but mostly she duplicates God as gap between these. Because of this interweaving there is no definite split between man and God, but always a mutual dependence, an interweaving relationship where they weave each other. There can never be a 'one element' in life and being, since this 'one' is always an immediate split. The element of sensing is from the beginning divided and therefore not only itself, but it is intertwining and longing for the other.

As a body, the human being is thus double-sided – soul, sensed and sensing. Most often it has been her dimension of sensing and the spiritualization of this sensing that has connected her to the divine. But in this text it is the full sensing body that gives her a privileged position:

When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy, far beyond what I am worth. But angels are to some degree formed according to the Holy Trinity, but they are pure spirits. The soul alone with its flesh is mistress of the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him. (IV:14)¹²

¹² 'Swenne ich das gedenke, das gotlich nature nu an ir hat bein und vleisch, lip und sele, so erhebe ich mich mit grosser vrede verre über min wirdekeit. Aber der engel ist etlicher masse gebildet na

Here it is obviously the embodiment of Jesus that makes the similarity to God complete. Jesus was body in the trinity from the very beginning, and his embodiment was not the consequence of the fall. In this text it is also clear that there is no opposition between ‘soul’ and ‘body’: ‘the soul with her flesh’ has the privileged position. The soul is thus not soul without her body, but just another angel. This is developed in another verse:

[...] the noblest angel, Jesus Christ,
 who soars above the Seraphim,
 who is undivided with his Father.
 Him shall I, the least of souls, take in my arms,
 eat him and drink him,
 and have my way with him.
 This can never happen to the angels.
 No matter how high he dwells above me,
 his Godhead shall never be so distant
 that I cannot constantly entwine my limbs with him;
 and so I shall never cool off.
 What, then, do I care what the angels experience? (II:22)¹³

The description of the communion here shows that the exteriority of the body, its capacity to act and to have power, is central to Mechthild. This capacity gives her a specific intimacy and relation to the divine. Once again it is the worldly body, a body that can be seen and that can act in the world, that can do what the highest angel cannot. This exteriority of the body is closely connected to its interiority, to the warmth, and thus the life of the body, which here becomes the intimate meeting with the divine. This intimate and interior connection with God within the body is also what constitutes the possibility for her to write:

I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit. (IV:13)¹⁴

der heligen drivaltekeit, doch ist er ein luter geist. Dú sele ist mit irem vleisch alleine husvro in dem himelriche und sitzet bi dem ewigen wirt, im selber allerglichest.’ [IV:14]

¹³ ‘Den werdesten engel Jhesum Christum, der da swebet oben Seraphin, der mit sinem vatter ein ungeteilet got mus sin, den nim ich minstú sele in den arm min und isse in und trinke in und tun mit im, swas ich wil. Das mag den engeln niemer geschehen. Wie hohe er wonet ob mir, *sin* gotheit wirt mir niemer so ture, ich musse ir ane unterlas allu mine gelide vol bevinden; so mag ich niemer mere erkulen. Was wirret mir denne, was die engel bevinden?’ [II:22]

In this text the eyes of the soul and the ears of the spirit have a spiritualized or metaphorical side to them, but when she comes to the limbs of her body, there is no room for metaphors. Feeling here stands out as the sensing closest to the body. If the eyes of the soul and the ears of the spirit make something present, the feeling of the limbs is the presence that they start out from. This is the present life that makes all transcendence, creativity, and memory of the human being possible. This is the place where the soul is born and receives itself.

THE WORLD BETWEEN US

The senses are referred to in Mechthild's writings as the maids and helpers of the soul. She also says that her kingdom is sight, thought, speech, hearing and touch (I:46). In contrast to the standard five senses, smell and taste are here replaced by thought and speech. I do not think this is a misunderstanding, rather it tells us exactly how Mechthild considers sensing, namely as a sensible intellect or an intellectual sensibility. Her search for the divine is not a spiritual striving beyond or away from sensibility; rather it is by means of the senses that she searches for the divine: 'The person who loves truth likes to pray thus: 'Ah, dear Lord, grant me and help me that I always seek you in a holy manner with all my five senses in all things [...]' (VII:15)¹⁵

By means of the senses she can find God *within* the things and beings of the world, but not *as* a thing or being. This means neither that the transcending power leaves the senses, nor that only what can be seen or heard is accepted, rather she claims that the eyes of the soul can move beyond what is sensibly present (II:2 and II:3). We could understand this vision of the soul as exactly the transcending power where we are no longer bound to the present vision, but have a freedom to move within memory, visions of other and of fantasy, etc. Through this capacity, the human being can also turn toward the structure of sensibility itself and reflect upon this ability. But in Mechthild,

¹⁴ 'Ich enkan noch mag nit schriben, ich sehe es mit den ogen miner sele und hore es mit den oren mines ewigen geistes und bevinde *in* allen liden mines lichamen die kraft des heiligen geistes.' [IV:13]

¹⁵ 'Der mensche, der die warheit minnet, der bittet gerne alsus: Eya lieber herre, gonne mir und hilf mir, das ich dich ane underlas suche mit allen minen fünf sinnen in allen dingen heleklich' [VII:15]

such reflection does not lead her to another world, rather she sees the world in a new way:

Then the senses say: 'Our lady, the soul, has slept since childhood.
Now she has awakened in the light of open love.'
In this light she looks around herself to discover
Who that is who reveals himself to her,
And what that is that one is saying to her.
Thus does she see truly and understand
How God is all things in all things. (II:19)¹⁶

The enlightened gaze upon the world thus sees the worldly beings not as self-sufficient and autonomous, but rather as connected to their groundless ground that also goes beyond them and ties them together, i.e. in relation to the transcendental and transcendent divine. We can also emphasize the fact that in the above extract, it is the senses that tell us what the soul sees. That the soul is awakened and sees God could be understood as an event beyond sensibility, but since God here is experienced within the things, sensibility is still active. Mechthild thus strives for the possibility to see this in all things, not only in some specific religious objects such as icons.

When it is said in one verse that her kingdom of intellectual sensibility is threatened by external dangers and must be guarded in order not to be victim of the devil, this devilish moment can be understood as the tendency to see the beings as independent and without a connection to other things and to a ground. In a similar way, Mechthild warns us for greed and lust, which can characterize earthly living. Although, in a text that is focused on such warnings of the earthly, she concludes with a warning against the opposite, i.e. to leave the world and love only God, as her God says:

Those who know and love the nobility of my liberty cannot bear to love me only for my own sake. They must also love me in creatures. Thus do I remain what is most close to them in their souls. (VI:4)¹⁷

A theme which is repeated throughout *The Flowing Light of Godhead* is thus the question of how one should love the worldly. This love is intimately

¹⁶ 'So sprechent die sinne: Unser vrowe, dú sele, hat geschlafen von kinde; nu ist si erwachet in dem liehte der offener minne. In disem liehte sihet si sich al umbe, wie der si, der sich iro wiset, und was das si, das man ir zu sprichet. So sieht si werlich und bekennet, wie got ist allú ding in allen dingen.' [II:19]

¹⁷ 'Swer die edelkeit miner vriheit bekennet und minnet, der mag des nit erliden, das er mich alleine minne dur mich; mere er mus mich minnen in den creaturen; so belibe ich der nehste in siner sele.' [VI:4]

connected to sensibility, but a sensibility that is not purely her own. It is not only a meeting between herself and the thing sensed, rather it is a meeting between herself, the divine and the created: 'Rather, in the nobility of creatures, in their beauty and usefulness, I shall love God and not myself.' (VI:5)¹⁸ The givenness of the world goes beyond herself to a larger givenness; what is given to a self is connected to a givenness beyond this individual, possible to access for others, and even when it is an experience that is not in any detail possible to access for other humans, she is not alone in this experience. Givenness always transcends her.

Mechthild's position means that she does not stand between the world and God in such a way that she either has to turn her back to the beings in her search for God, or turn her back to God in her experience of the world. Rather she is positioned in such a way that her senses can go through the things and beings that are present here and now, towards their presuppositions and interconnections, without objectifying these presuppositions. The senses do not have to be directed in one or other of the two opposing directions, but can embrace both at once. When she experiences the infinite she does not transform it into one object among many, but senses it as a central aspect of the finite. The change of direction that the awakening soul goes through does not include a move from the finite to the infinite, but she is directed to the created beings in their direction to God. Or with a more philosophical language: toward the thing in the world in direction to its transcendental, transcending ground through which the thing overflows how it is given to me.

In a similar way she says in a hymn of thanksgiving that such a seeing should permeate all our actions. This is pointed out in a text that describes how the human being is always united with God, a union that does not take place in some distant heaven, but through the receiving of worldly gifts that are given to the human beings:

Then we praise our Lord God with all the gifts that he ever gave us: our body and possessions, friends and relatives, and all the earthly joy that we could desire. In so doing we thank God for all his generous gifts that he ever gave us on earth for body and soul. Then we are united with God in the love of receiving and in humble gratitude. We should thereby press all God's gifts to our heart. Then our heart becomes full of love, our senses are opened, and our soul so

¹⁸ 'Mere der edelkeit der creaturen, ir schoni und ir nutz – da wil ich got inne meinen und nit mich selben.' [VI:5]

resplendent that we look into divine knowledge like someone who sees his own countenance in a bright mirror. (VII:7)¹⁹

God, in this instance, names a giving that we cannot control. By opening us up for the feeling of gratitude for having a human life, senses are once again transformed as they are opened up. The union with God is here a delightful enjoyment of the world. There are also some formulations in Mechthild's text that could be understood in a pantheistic way, as when God says: 'I am in myself in all places and in all things, As I always have been eternally.' (II:25)²⁰ God is in himself in the world, i.e. not in himself beyond the world. This is not a pantheism that means that God is exhausted in the world though, it is more like a panentheism in which God is present in the beings, but also exceeds them as their horizon of transcendence.

This understanding of God and of the presence of God is not just Mechthild's personal experience; it is connected to her choice of life as a beguine. Her philosophical position influences her practical life, or the other way around; her practical life is expressed in her writings. As a beguine she was most probably involved in different social and financial activities in the city, since the beguines did not turn their back up the world and isolate themselves in a convent. Their relation to the divine went through, or was experienced within, the rush of the city. Her work in the world was not only an act of compassion for the creatures that were stuck in the world, but rather an experience of the world as a place where a relation to the divine could be established, enjoyed and suffered.

SIMILARITY AND DISSIMILARITY

In a very different text (III:9) Mechthild gives us her version of the creation. She describes the creation as originating in an erotic desire for the soul,

¹⁹ 'so loben wir únsen herren got mit allen den gaben, die *er úns* ie gegab: unsern lip und gut, vrunde und mage und alle irdenische wollust, die wir begeren mohten. Hie mitte so danken wir gotte aller siner milten gaben, die er uns ie gegab in ertrich an libe oder an sele. Sus sin wir aber mit gotte vereinet in annemmelicher liebun und demutiger dankbarkeit. Da mitte sollen wir alle gotz gaben in únsen herze drucken. So wirt únsen herze minnenvoll, so werdent únsen sinne geoffenet und so wirt únsen sele also clar, das wir sehen in die gotlichen bekantnisse als ein mensche sin antlize besihet in eime claren spiegel.' [VII:7]

²⁰ 'Ich bin in mir selben an allen stetten und in allen dingen als ich ie was sunder beginnen.' [II:25]

connected to Eve and Mary. The angels are said to be created as one spirit with the Holy Spirit, whereas the human being is created in similarity and opposition, as the other to God and as his bride. The human being is, as we have seen before, not inferior to the angel, but God's beloved. The human is created in similarity to the humanity of the son, but in otherness to the father, as his loved one. In one text God says: 'I longed for you before the beginning of the world. I long for you and you long for me. Where two burning desires meet, there love is perfect.' (VII:16)²¹

From the very beginning he is desire. As in any desire, there is an urge to both draw the beloved into oneself, and to keep a distance to the beloved in order for her to be herself. Before the fall the soul is God's spouse and a Goddess, and the angels are her servants. Through the creation the human being passively receives her life, but it immediately leads to the fall. The fall only receives attention in passing when God complains about her action saying: 'She decided not to remain in my likeness.' (III:9)²² She was created in difference to him and in the fall she activates what she passively received, and acts out her otherness.

Even though the Father turns away from her, the Spirit and the Son never stop loving her, and they decide to save her. The love between the soul and the divine is not diminished, but the erotic tension grows through the increased distance. God is in this text desiring and as such demands his beloved to be other than himself. The human being takes on this otherness and activates it, which necessitates the fall. The distance between them is here created in two steps, one of passivity and one where the activity that is immanent in the passivity is activated. The intertwining of sensuality is here formulated in erotic terms. The gap within the net of sensibility is the presupposition for otherness and desire is thus organized through a simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity.

The full erotic meeting, where the worldly senses meet their limit is worked out in I:44, one of the most famous verses in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. This text is dramatized and mythological, and borrows its form from contemporary wedding songs and the poetry of courtly love. The senses play a central role in this verse also. The extract begins with the lover (God)

²¹ 'Ich habe din begert e der welte beginne. Ich gere din und du begerest min. Wa zwoi heisse begerungen zesamen koment, da ist die minne vollekomen.' [VII:16]

²² 'Do wolte si mir nit langer glich wesen.' [III:9]

who tries to make contact with his beloved (the soul) and calls for her. The first one to hear his calling is the senses. They say to the soul:

- Lady, you should dress yourself.
- Dear ones, where am I supposed to be going?
- We have definitely heard it whispered about that the prince intends to come to you in the dew and in the delightful song of the birds. Alas lady, do not tarry! (I:44)²³

The calling is not for the senses, but for the soul. But it is the senses that are attentive to the calling and they assist her as she gets dressed and puts on the shirt of humility, the dress of chastity and the coat of the holy calling. She goes to the meeting place where she meets the lover who asks her to dance with him. She answers that if he sings to her, her enjoyment will transcend all human senses. The meeting with the lover is in this text a journey beyond, or *über*. This has often been understood as a leaving of one place for another. But I would rather understand it in relation to the Greek *hyper*, meaning intensification or deepening. Once the soul has become aware of the divine she also realizes the limitation of the senses and their abilities. The divine is in the perception, but cannot be experienced in one perception. This amorous meeting is an attempt to approach the non-given sides of the divine.

After dancing, the soul is invited to dinner. She is tired and returns to the senses telling them that she needs to rest and cool down. The senses suggest different Christian virtues and strategies through which the soul can rest and in which they can take part, but the soul is only satisfied by the erotic meeting beyond strategies on chastity, suffering, or wisdom, or positions of the saints, the angels, or of the child. But the erotic meeting is also the only kind of meeting that would blind the senses. In this meeting the soul finds its nature and even though the senses are blinded in this union, one sensation is still involved: he burns and he refreshes and this is still felt as she explains to the senses:

- Don't you believe I feel him intensely?
He can both burn powerfully and cool consolingly.
Now don't be overly sad.
You shall yet instruct me.

²³ ‘– Vrowe, ir sollent úch kleiden. – Liebe, wa sol ich hin? – Wir han das runen wol vernomen, der fürste wil úch gegen komen in dem in dem towe und in dem schonen vogelsange. Eya vrowe, nu sument nút lange!’ [I:44]

When I return, I shall certainly need your advice;
For the earth is full of snares. (I:44)²⁴

And with this promise to come back it is time for the most intimate encounter:

- Stay, Lady Soul.
- What do you bid me, Lord?
- Take off your clothes.
- Lord, what will happen to me then?
- Lady Soul, you are so utterly formed to my nature that not the slightest thing can be between you and me. Never was an angel so glorious that to him was granted for one hour what is given to you for eternity. And so you must cast off from you both fear and shame and all external virtues. Rather, those alone that you carry within yourself shall you foster forever. These are your noble longing and your boundless desire. These I shall fulfill forever with my limitless lavishness.
- Lord, now I am a naked soul and you in yourself are a well-adorned God. Our shared lot is eternal life without death

Then a blessed stillness that both desire comes over them. He surrenders himself to her, and she surrenders herself to him. What happens to her then – she knows – and that is fine with me. But this cannot last long. When two lovers meet secretly, they must often part from one another inseparably. (I:44)²⁵

In this intimate amorous meeting the soul is turned away from all things as particular beings and she lays aside all cultural virtues as she removes her clothes. She leaves all particularity in order to open up for the one overwhelming desire and sensation that is the sensation of sensing, and thus above (*über*) the ordinary sense experience to an experience of their presupposition. This intensification erases all distinctions and makes the multiple

²⁴ ‘Went ir, das ich nit enpfinde son wol? Er kan beide krefteklichen brennen und trostlichen kullen. Nu betrubent úch nit ze sere! Ir sollent mich noch leren. Swenne ich widerkere, so bedarf ich úwer lere wol, wan dis ertrich ist maniger strikke vol.’ [I:44]

²⁵ “Stant, vrowe sele!” “Was gebútest du, herre?” “Ir sont *úch* usziehen!” “Herre, wie sol mir denne geschehen?” “Frow sele, ir sint so sere genatúrt in mich, das zwúschent úch und mir nihtes nit mag sin. Es enwart nie engel so her, dem das ein stunde wurde gelúhen, das *úch* eweklich ist gegeben. Darumbe sont ir von *úch* legen beide vorhte und schame und alle uswendig tugent; mer alleine die ir binnen *úch* tragent von nature, der sont ir eweklich *vulen*. Das ist úwer edele begerunge und úwer grundlose girheit; die wil ich eweklich erfüllen mit miner endelosen miltekeit.” “Herre, nu bin ich ein nakent sele und du in dir selben ein wolgezietet got. Ûnser zweiger gemeinschaft ist das ewige lip ane tot.” So geschihet da ein selig stilli nach ir beider willen. Er gibet sich ir und si git sich ime. Was ir nu geschehe, das weis si, und des getroste ich mich. Nu dis mag nit lange stan; wa zwoi geliebe verholen zesamen koment, si mussent dike ungescheiden von einander gan.’

perceptions impossible. Only one sensation is still there, the sensation of the desire between the two, i.e. the gap between them: a sensation of the sensual as such. This also includes a move beyond language and a narrator needs to come into the story. But the union between God and the soul is like all other erotic unions – temporary. Following this meeting, she will at all times carry the sensation of sensibility with her in her body, maybe simply because she has become conscious of it.

CONCLUSION

The body is in many Christian practices what should be disciplined into silence and the senses something that should be transcended. In Mechthild's text also the body is sometimes described as a prison. Her solution is not to abandon it, but to be more attentive to it, i.e. not to follow its desire toward a world of disconnected things and beings, but to go into this desiring structure of enjoyment and suffering. Such attentiveness means not only to live the activity of the sensing body, but also to be attentive to its passivity – how its sensitivity is given. Disciplining includes a holding back of the apprehensions in order to find another sensing, a sensing of the sensitivity. One should not turn away from the world, nor should one lose oneself in the world. The experience of the world should rather be deepened and intensified, experiencing the interconnectedness and presuppositions of the world.

The soul that loves the divine and lives in proximity to its own presuppositions has a body sensitive for transcendence. It is attentive to divine dimensions, the non-seen *in* sensing, eating, suffering, etc. The sensing body as the presence of the here and now includes the presence of absence, of desire for what is not present, and the possibility to have another future as well as to sense differently, noticing new things in the present.

Sensibility turns out to be the path between the body as an object, as static and sensed, and the transcending soul that includes what is not given in the present. The soul that speaks in Mechthild's text should not be understood in opposition to a body. It is rather a sensing and embodied soul, just as her sensing is an intellectual sensing. In this way the lived body is present and activated, and its experiences are intensified in the soul's journey to God. Finally in the erotic encounter, the tension field, gap and desire between the soul as sensed sensing and her God as (anonymous) sensing beyond sensing, is the only sensation left. This is the intensification of sensibility.

The Embodied Character of ‘Acknowledging God’ *A Contribution to Understanding the Relationship between Transcendence and Embodiment on the Basis of Hosea*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I follow Bornemark’s approach to clarify the embodied character of religion ‘via the text’ by turning to the book of Hosea. Hosea is especially suitable for studying the controversy over the body in religion because it has traditionally been interpreted as rejecting a religious cult of bodily fertility as opposed to the true ethical religion of Israel. I investigate different motives of embodiment in the text. Subsequently I deal with the critical question of whether the project of revaluating the bodily guarantees better understanding of Hosea and (biblical) religion. I explore the body-related notions of ‘dependence’ and ‘discernment’ as a more specific alternative, which also sheds light on current difficulties in understanding religion.

KEYWORDS

embodied religion, Hosea, dependence, discernment, Kearney

1. TRANSCENDENCE AND THE BODY

By analysing a primary 13th-century religious text by the Christian mystic Mechtild von Magdeburg, Jonna Bornemark wants to arrive at a different view of the relation between transcendence and the body from the current one. Usually, the body and the self – insofar as it is associated with the body – are seen as things that should be left behind in the transcending relation to God (26). Bornemark wants to combine the good of the phenomenological tradition that is characterized by its thorough attention for the body with the insights from Mechtild's text in which embodiment and sensibility are given a different role with respect to transcending. Thus, she also aims to compensate for the notable lack of positive attention for the body in phenomenological accounts of religion. Her general goal is to arrive at 'a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transcendence and embodiment' (30).

The issue at stake in this session is thus the question: How can paying attention to the embodied character of religion contribute to a better, or 'more nuanced,' understanding of religion? The flipside of embodied religion, i.e. that it may give rise to a critical rethinking of religious notions of freedom and responsibility, and the unique position of the human being based on it will be taken up in later sessions. According to Bornemark, the better understanding of religion that results from analysing an embodied religious perspective consists primarily in the fact that transcendence and the body are not played off against each other. The senses give access to the divine. But it takes effort to comprehend how this is possible. The mainstream understanding of religion has not incorporated this idea of transcendence, not even when it was as attentive to embodiment as phenomenology and existential philosophy are. In spite of the importance of their 'connecting the divine closely to the human capacity for transcendence and its transcendental presuppositions,' these approaches finally led to the 'further narrowing down [of] the understanding of the body and the place of embodiment' (30). Therefore, it is necessary to tap other, non-mainstream, sources of religious reflection outside the philosophical canon, in particular those of female mystics like Mechtild von Magdeburg. They are not part of the official religious canon either. Because of their positive evaluation of the senses in relating to God, they aroused suspicion in the eyes of other mystics (27–28). Bornemark deals with a 'suspicious' text of this kind.

This investigation of embodied religion 'via the text' is not self-evident among current critics of the mainstream spiritual understanding of religion. In the words of Manuel Vásquez, who recently launched a 'materialist theory

of religion' that has met with appreciation, modern hermeneutics has 'despite giving us indispensable insights into the situatedness of the process of interpretation and the materiality of texts, tended to reduce all human activity to the production and transmission of meaning. The result has been a suffocating textualism that approaches religions as essentially systems of symbols, beliefs, narratives, and cosmologies, ignoring other important material dimensions of religious life.'¹ The idealist appropriation of phenomenology and modern hermeneutics are identified as the culprits of this focus. This criticism on the one hand and Bornemark's approach – to which I am very sympathetic – of turning quite self-evidently to a primary religious text on the other induced me to try out another approach in this paper 'via the text.' I will also turn to a primary religious text that is not considered to be a philosophical text as such. My use of this text is occasioned not so much through my dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the phenomenological tradition, but through the fact that I am a theologian shaped by a hermeneutical recognition of the vital role of such texts in understanding religion. In particular, my starting point is the wager found in Paul Ricoeur's early work to nourish reflection on religion by turning to primary religious texts. He suggests that these are closer to religious experience than the speculative ones of philosophy and theology.² In a Western context, the symbols and myths of the ancient Near East and Greece and, in particular the Bible, are primary texts of this kind because they are formative sources of Western reflection.

When looking for a biblical text in which embodiment is somehow prominent, I decided to turn to a text that may also shed light on the question why it has apparently always (Bornemark refers to the Neo-Platonic Tradition) been difficult to think religion and the body together. Bornemark points to the tension between transcendence and the body to understand this difficulty. Religion is concerned with transcendence, the spirit or the soul, and the possibility of going beyond the givenness of the bodily. Especially in

¹ Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford 2011), 12, cf. 15 and chapter 8.

² 'Speculation / speculative' is used by Ricoeur as a technical term that refers to reflection as found in philosophy or theology, as distinct from more literary forms of reflection as found in symbols and myths of evil (*L'homme faillible*, 10–11; *La symbolique du mal*, 168–169 (Paris 1988², first edition 1960)). The philosophical value of pre-philosophical expressions, in the form of the 'pathétique of misery', is something that Ricoeur already recognised in *L'homme faillible* (21–34): philosophical reflection cannot equal it in depth. Nevertheless, reflection is necessary for bringing clarification and coherence to the darkness and complexity of the pre-philosophical expressions. Cf. my chapter on Ricoeur in: Petruschka Schaafsma, *Reconsidering Evil: Confronting Reflections with Confessions* (Leuven 2006).

phenomenology and existential philosophy, this tendency to associate religion entirely with the capacity for bodiless transcendence is massive (26, 29–30). But is this simply to be understood as a one-sidedness, which can be explained at least to a certain extent by the male character of this philosophy (26–27)? I am in complete agreement with the project to investigate marginalised voices like those of female mystics who reveal a different kind of reflection and may thus open up new ways of understanding. But I am also interested in the light these marginalised voices may shed on why the body would cause religion trouble. Does the problem lie in not knowing if we can trust our senses, as emphasised in the criticism of dependence ‘on the senses’ articulated by Meister Eckhardt and Johannes Tauler that Bornemark cites, i.e., their question of how we know if the mystical vision comes ‘from the devil rather than from the divine’ (28)? I want to incorporate this issue of the difficulty with the body in religion³ by turning to the book of Hosea. In this text, the embodied character of religion seems obvious: Hosea has to live the relationship between God and Israel by marrying a prostitute. This book has traditionally been interpreted as dealing with the problematic character of the body for religion in the concrete form of a religious cult of bodily fertility as opposed to the true ethical religion of the Israelite God of the Covenant. Therefore, the text seems to fit the polemical character of the discussion on embodied religion.

2. MOTIVES OF EMBODIED RELIGION IN HOSEA

In what sense do we encounter elements of an embodied religion in Hosea? Obviously, in a quite unusual sense that may immediately confuse the reader: God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute or adulterous wife and have children with her. This divine command has been a stumbling block for exegetes of all ages. How can God ask such an obviously immoral or nonsensical

³ Bornemark hints at this issue when pointing out that, in Mechtild’s text, the love of the worldly is connected to sensibility but sensibility ‘that is not purely her own.’ The way one should love the worldly is not just in ‘a meeting between herself and the thing sensed, rather it is a meeting between herself, the divine and the created’ (41). Also, Mechtild’s thoughts on the ‘prison character’ of the body relate to this topic. Mechtild does not deny this problematic character of the body but she does not seek the solution in transcendence as abandonment of ‘the presuppositions of the sensing body.’ Rather, she seeks it in being more attentive to them (44–45). This means a disciplined holding back of the direct sensing, the ‘apprehensions,’ to arrive at ‘another sensing.’ It does not ‘turn away from the world’ but neither does it ‘lose itself in the world.’ Rather it deepens and intensifies the experience of the world by ‘experiencing the interconnectedness and presuppositions of the world’ (46).

thing from his prophet? As self-evident as this question may be – in our context of discussing embodied religion as well – I do not want to start with it. The supposedly immoral or nonsensical character of the divine command should not outweigh the basic fact that the relationship between God and the people of Israel is presented as bodily: one between husband and wife, an erotic relationship of faithfulness to a partner. This general sense of embodiment is of course immediately accentuated by the issue of adultery, which implies a more specific embodiment related to sexuality and procreation. But the meaning of this unfaithfulness can be interpreted only in relation to the meaning of the embodied relationship as such. I will thus start with the latter.

2.1 THE MARRIAGE

The relationship is introduced immediately at the beginning. The first verse introduces Hosea as the one to whom the 'word of the Lord' came. In the second verse God⁴ tells him to take for himself an 'ēšet z^enûmîm (znh/זנה), a 'woman of fornications' and yaldê z^enûmîm, 'children of fornications' (znh / זנה).⁵ The reason is revealed in the same verse: 'for fornicating the land fornicates, away from behind the Lord.' The Hebrew root znh / זנה is used four times in this verse. Znh / זנה means to commit adultery or fornication in the sense of being unfaithful in a marriage, but also in the sense of prostitution or being a harlot. It is often used in the Bible, especially in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, to indicate Israel's apostasy and unfaithfulness.⁶ The

⁴ I will refer to the Tetragrammaton by the word 'God' and not, e.g. by the term LORD or Yahweh because it fits the style of a reflection on embodied religion within the context of philosophy of religion where the focus is on biblical religion.

⁵ I take this translation woman and children of 'fornications' from Alice Keefe's study on Hosea; Koehler/ Baumgartner's *Lexicon* translates 'fornication.' Keefe argues that fornication should be distinguished from prostitution. Prostitution was a 'legal and tolerated activity in ancient Israel.' The fornication of a woman in the sense of a wife, however, implied a rupture of the social order. Although there are also references to 'professional prostitution' in Hosea, the term's translation by 'fornication' emphasises its unique character in the Bible, which indicates that it does not simply refer to a prostitute (Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (Sheffield 2001), especially 19–21, where she refers to Phyllis Bird for this translation). Cf. my remarks the text above.

⁶ On the specific designation in Hos.1:2 of the 'land,' in distinction to Israel, as fornicating, cf. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea, Ägypten und Altes Testament* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1999) 145–146. Nwaoru regards it as 'prolegomena to the husband-wife metaphor in Hosea 2,' where Israel is presented as a 'harlotrous wife and mother.' He distinguishes between the unfaithfulness of Israel as land, wife/mother, and children without indicating the possible distinction in meaning. This corresponds to Kathrin Keita's remark that the wife, children and land in Hos. 1–2 are related in a 'semantischen Beziehungsgeflecht, das kaum zu entwirren ist.' The meaning of the one cannot be de-

combination ‘woman of fornications’ and that of ‘children of fornications’ is found only in Hosea, however. Placed in immediate succession, they form an even more remarkable expression and are not simply the usual designations of prostitution. The terms are not elucidated in the text, however. The text continues by narrating how Hosea obeyed the divine command: he marries Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. Then God gives further instructions on the naming of the ‘children of fornications’ to which Gomer gives birth. The first is called Jezreel because God will punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel (1:4). The second is called Lo-Ruhamah, which means: God ‘will no longer show love to Israel’ (1:6). The third is called Lo-Ammi, ‘for you are not my people’ (1:9). The names thus reveal God’s reaction to the fornications of Israel: punishment, no compassion, deeming them no longer God’s people. The relationship between God and Israel is declared to be terminated. But the text suddenly continues by painting a different time of salvation that will come in which the situation indicated by the children’s names will be inverted (2:1–3).⁷

While the first chapter of the book indicates the unfaithful behaviour of ‘the land’, God’s reaction of turning away from his people, and the promise of a reversal of this punishment in a general sense, the second chapter specifies these elements and may thus provide more material for understanding the embodied character of the relation between God and Israel. The theme of fornication returns in the later chapters, but it is not directly related to Hosea’s marriage to Gomer and the children born of that union. Therefore, I will concentrate on the second chapter (the passage from verse 4 onwards) and relate it to similar passages in the rest of the book.⁸ The passage starts with a

terminated without referring to the meaning of the other (Katrin Keita, *Gottes Land: Exegetische Studien zur Land-Thematik im Hoseabuch in kanonischer Perspektive* (Hildesheim 2007), 55–56).

⁷ The numbering of the verses of Hos. 2 varies among the translations. I am using the the New International Version but refer to the numbering of the verses used in the Hebrew Bible (Stuttgartensia). In the Hebrew Bible, chapter 2 starts two verses earlier than in the NIV. Chapter 14 starts in the NIV in the last verse of chapter 13 in the Hebrew version.

⁸ Hos. 1–3 are usually distinguished from chapters 4–14, although opinions vary on the question of whether it is a textual unity. For example, according to Jörg Jeremias Hos. 1–3 is a thematic collection, whereas 4–14 is a unity. As a result, the obscure chapters of Hos. 1–3 should be interpreted on the basis of the much more unequivocal chapters 4–14 (Jörg Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea* (Göttingen 1983), 7). Gerald Morris investigates verbal repetition in Hosea and concludes that many verbs and combinations found in Hos. 1–3 recur in the rest of the chapters. He argues therefore that Hos. 1–3 ‘act as an introduction to the book. Pattern after pattern is introduced in these chapters, sometimes even temporarily resolved, fore-shadowing the pattern that the word or words will take in the remaining chapters’ (Gerald Morris, *Prophecy, Poetry and Hosea* (Sheffield 1996), 114–115). Hos. 14 serves as a conclusion in which many words from the introduction recur.

divine address opening with the call: 'Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband' (2:4). The mother is summoned to do away with her fornications under threat of harsh reprisals: being stripped naked and dying of thirst like a desert, or a parched land (2:5). The following verses elaborate further on what the fornication consists in. Three main motives can be distinguished that elucidate the relationship between God and Israel.

1. In one of the rare passages in which Gomer, Hosea's wife, is presented as speaking – albeit in the account of God – her unfaithfulness is made specific: 'She said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink"' (Hos. 2:7). God will therefore block her path and wall her in, so that she cannot reach her lovers anymore. Then, the unfaithfulness is stated explicitly once more in the same terms, when God says: 'She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold – which they used for Baal' (Hos. 2:10). The punishment corresponds to the betrayal. God says: 'Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her naked body' (Hos. 2:9). 'I will ruin her vines and her fig trees, which she said were her pay from her lovers; I will make them a thicket, and wild animals will devour them' (Hos. 2:13). It reminds one of the earlier announcement of God's judgement to make Gomer 'like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst' (2:5). The unfaithfulness is thus specified as a denial of the true source of the wealth and sustenance a woman experiences in her marriage, especially in the basic, daily form of food, drink, and clothing, which includes a good harvest and agricultural thriving.

In the depiction of the restoration of the marriage one also finds references to this wealth and sustenance bestowed on her. As a result of her being unable to reach her lovers anymore, Gomer will say 'I will go back to my husband as at first, *for then I was better off than now*' (2:9; italics mine). The renewal of the marriage is subsequently painted as resulting from an act of allurements by God who will lead the woman into the desert (2:16), not to punish her (cf. 2:5) but to give her back her vineyards (2:17)⁹ – another act in the

⁹ In Hos. 9,10 and 13,5 the word 'desert' or 'wilderness' (*midbar*/ מִדְבָּר) also occurs, now as the place where Israel is 'found' and 'known/ cared for' by God. According to Keita, 'desert' functions in Hosea as a counterpart to the fertility of the cultivated land. In the days of its living in the desert, Israel

same area of being nourished by God. This continues a few verses later: “In that day I will respond,” declares the LORD – “I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land” (2:23–25a; cf. 2:10). In the rest of the book of Hosea, the situation of the people of Israel at the start of its being called from Egypt, the announcement of God’s punishment for their unfaithfulness, and the renewed relationship are often depicted in terms of agricultural thriving or withering, and Israel being like fruit, or no longer yielding fruit, or flourishing again like the grain and the vine, the blossoming lilies and the cedars with their roots and young shoots (14:5–7).¹⁰ Moreover, even God is seen as part of this natural prosperity: ‘I am like a flourishing juniper; your fruitfulness comes from me’ (14:9b).¹¹

This motif in the depiction of the relationship between God and his people in Hosea reminds some exegetes of the creation stories of Genesis 1–3.¹² I will not go into the different theories here on the age of and dependency relations between Hosea and Genesis 1–3, but it is argued that a common creation tradition underlies both. This tradition brings together many of the elements just mentioned. In the second chapter of Hosea, elements reminiscent of this tradition are the participation of the animals and plants in God’s punishment of Israel and in the renewal of the relationship. Animals can constitute a danger, and vegetation can be sparse in Israel if God decrees that it shall be so. But God also announces the time in which ‘I will make a covenant for them [Israel] with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground’ (2:20), which is also the time of the flourishing of agriculture and nature in general that was just mentioned.¹³ Simi-

had to rely entirely on the care of God. Similarly, Israel will be led back to the desert (Hos. 2:16; 12:10) to break in on its current craving for the fertile land. Thus, God will also start a new begin in the land (Keita, *Gottes Land*, 242–243).

¹⁰ Other passages in which Israel is depicted as (bearing) fruit are Hos 9:10,16; 10:1,12–13; 14:6–9.

¹¹ For the depiction of the situation of the restored or renewed relationship, the phrase of God as ‘responding’ (nh/ נָשָׁבַח) as used in 2:23–24 returns in 14:9a.

¹² Cf. Keita, *Gottes Land*, 306, who refers to many other exegetes. Stefan Paas (*Creation and Judgement: Creation Texts in Some Eighth Century Prophets* (Leiden 2003)) also goes into the ‘creation texts’ and ‘motifs’ in Hosea but does not focus on the parallels with Gen. 1–3. Rather, he aims at a broader definition of creation, starting from ‘recognised creation texts such as Genesis 1 and 2.’ In relation to Hosea, he goes into the ‘creation texts’ on Israel as ‘forgetting their Maker’ (8:14), and a LXX insertion in 13:4 on ‘God as creator of heavens and earth’ and the ‘creation motifs’ in Hos. 6:2 (revival and restoration) and 11:1 (calling out of Egypt, cf. my main text below).

¹³ M. DeRoche (referring to J.L. Mays) points out that this is ‘a reversal of the oracle of punishment in Hos. 2,14’ (M. Deroche, ‘The Reversal of Creation in Hosea,’ *Vetus Testamentum* 31/4 (1981),

larly, in the garden of Eden, the animals are placed under the dominion of human beings (Gen. 1:28), and all vegetation of the earth is given to them as food (1:29). Moreover, as DeRoche (406) points out, like Hos. 2:14 and 20, Gen. 1:29–30 'deals with the relationship between the food supply of man, and that of the beasts.' In the passage in Genesis, this relationship is harmonious, while in Hos 2:14 animals constitute a danger. The covenant in Hos. 2:20 puts an end to this danger and thus depicts a 'return to the state of harmony that existed between man and the beasts at the time of creation (cf. Isa. 11,6–9)' (DeRoche, 407). After the expulsion from Eden, this harmony is at least partly disturbed: the earth would 'produce thorns and thistles' for them and they would 'eat the plants of the field' (3:18). The combination 'thorns and thistles' is found in the Bible only in the Gen. 3 passage and in Hos. 10:8: 'The high places of wickedness will be destroyed – it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars. Then they will say to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!"'.¹⁴ The theme of nakedness and being clothed as expressions of God's taking care of and punishing Adam and Eve and Israel is also found in Gen 2–3 and Hosea.¹⁵ A general correspondence, finally, is that the betrayal of and conflict with God is put in the setting of a husband-wife relationship.¹⁶ One could even perhaps compare Gomer to Eve as the one who bears the most guilt for the betrayal.¹⁷

400–409, 406). Hos. 4:3 contains a counterview to the thriving of the land and the animals, with partly the same phrases as in Hos. 2:20: because there is no acknowledgment of God but only sins – that remind of the Decalogue, i.e., cursing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery – 'the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away.' DeRoche (403) argues that Hos. 4:3 is the announcement of the reversal of creation: the order of the words 'the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea' is precisely the reversal of the order in which they are mentioned at creation (Gen 1:20, 24) and being placed under the dominion of human beings (Gen 1:26, 28). They represent the three spheres of the 'animal kingdom' and the prophet thus announces 'a total destruction' (just like the parallel text in Zeph. 1:2–3 where the same verb *jsp* / *יָסַף* is used).

¹⁴ Cf. Hos. 9:6 in which the plants also are a danger: 'Their treasures of silver will be taken over by briars [brier roses], and thorns will overrun their tents.' The unique occurrence of 'thorns and thistles' in Genesis and Hosea seems to me the only real textual 'proof' of any relation to the creation stories in Genesis, but Keita does not indicate this.

¹⁵ Hos. 2:5, 11–12. Cf. Keita, *Gottes Land*, 319.

¹⁶ Keita regards the relations between Hos. 1–2 and Gen. 3 as the most substantial and striking ones. Apart from the aspects mentioned so far, Keita lists other points that are, in my view, less obvious (319–320): – punishment in the form of spatial removal from God in Hos. 2:8 and Gen. 3:23–24 as well as the idea of an enclosed garden that cannot be entered; – the use of the verb *grsh* / *גָּרַשׁ*, expel in Hos. 9:15 and Gen 3:24 which also has a parallel meaning: expulsion because of betrayal of God, a meaning that, according to Keita, is not found elsewhere in the Bible (it is only used for the expulsion of Canaanite people in favour of Israel; cf. also p. 328); the 'you will call me "my husband"; you will no longer call

This first interpretive motif, or thematic group of motifs, thus relates the unfaithfulness of the wife to the refusal to acknowledge who it is who provides her with food, drink, and clothing: the Lord, who is like the rains that water the earth, and like dew.¹⁸ Israel turns to other providers, and God therefore punishes them by taking the harvest back, and ‘my wool and linen.’ But Hosea also announces the restoration of the marriage that consists in acknowledging God. This situation is painted as a thriving of the land and a flourishing of nature in which the people of Israel take part. The reminiscence of Gen. 1–3 confirms the idea that the relationship between God and human beings is not unrelated to the flourishing of nature and the produce of the land, and the danger posed by animals. This motif is the most elaborate interpretation of Israel’s fornications, at least in Hos. 1–3, with parallels in the other chapters.

2. Other interpretive motifs of Israel’s unfaithfulness are far less substantial. One finds a few references in the first three chapters to something like a ‘wrong cult.’ We just referred to ‘the silver and gold – which they used for Baal’ (Hos. 2:10), which seems to refer to the making of idols.¹⁹ Another verse specifies the punishment of the wife/mother as stopping her celebrations, festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days (Hos. 2:13). This reference to the religious cult is related in the following verse again to the ruining of the ‘vine and fig tree.’ Subsequently, the wife/mother is accused of burning incense to

me “my master” (Hos 2:18) seems to be a revocation of the ruling of the husband over the wife in Gen. 3:16, and a parallel to Gen. 2:23 (The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.’ Keita, 305–306 quoting Frey and Hauret). Parallels with Gen. 2 that Keita mentions are: Hos. 2:17, which deals, just like Gen. 2:8,15 with the human beings as being placed by God in a garden/land; Hos. 2:25 as parallel to Gen. 2:7–8 (3:19): the human being as created by God from dust/ground corresponds to God as the sower who sows Israel in the land (Keita, *Gottes Land*, 318). Cf. also Keita, *Gottes Land*, 330–331 on the dating of Gen. 2 before the return from the exile in 525 BCE.

¹⁷ This may seem a very tentative conclusion that is based on the (Christian) reception history of the Genesis story as viewing the woman as the source of evil. However, as Yvonne Sherwood points out, a possible underpinning for this connection may be seen in a 13th century Bible manuscript in which Hosea and Gomer are depicted holding each other’s arms. Gomer is decorated with a garland ending in a snake’s head (Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea’s Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (Sheffield 1996), 67–69).

¹⁸ Cf. Hos. 6:3: ‘Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.’ and Hos. 14,5: ‘I will be like the dew to Israel’; cf. also Hos. 10:12b: ‘for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.’

¹⁹ Cf. Hos. 8:4: ‘With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.’ and Hos. 13: 2: ‘Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen.’

the Baals, decking herself with rings and jewellery, pursuing her lovers, and forgetting her God (2:15). Another verse announces that God 'will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked' (2:19). I will come back to the meaning of these Baals and a possible Baal cult below.

3. A third motif in the specification of Israel's infidelity contains references to war, justice, and 'international politics.' In the depiction of the restored marriage the making of a covenant with the animals is followed by the announcement: 'Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in/with righteousness and justice, in/with love and compassion. I will betroth you in/with faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD' (2:20b-22). More explicit references to war and politics are found in the later chapters.²⁰ Israel, or Ephraim, is accused of seeking an alliance with Assyria and Egypt (5:13; 7:8-9, 11; 12:2; less prominent in 8:9; 9:3), which will lead to its fall.²¹ It is obvious that this turning to the superpowers implies infidelity toward God who led Israel out of Egypt. Israel is reminded explicitly of its exodus tradition (2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4) and is warned about a 'return to Egypt' (8:13; 9:3, (6); 11:5).

Thus, we may identify at least three lines or motifs of interpretation of Israel's fornications. The first one is most extensive and therefore difficult to indicate via a single term. It has to do with the fault of failing to acknowledge God as the true source of everyday sustenance, and agricultural thriving and flourishing of nature. The second relates Israel's unfaithfulness to cultic practices, and the third to Israel's defeat in wars and its seeking alliances with the foreign superpowers Assyria and Egypt. The link with Gen 1-3 adds to the idea that the setting in which the conflict between the believers and God is placed is meaningful, i.e., the setting of a relationship between man and woman marked by infidelity.

²⁰ The second and third motif may go together, as in Hos. 14:3, where Israel is urged to say to God: 'Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount warhorses. We will never again say "Our gods" to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.'

²¹ Keefe (*Woman's Body*, 16-17, 21) notes that many of the atrocities of war that will befall Israel are depicted in terms of maternal bereavement, loss of female fertility, and death of mothers and children (4:5; 9:11-12, 14; 10:14; 14:1). She concludes: 'Clearly there is some resonance between these images of bereaved maternity, sterility and illegitimate children on one hand, and the metaphoric complex of the wayward mother and her rejected children of Hos. 1-2 on the other' (17).

2.2 THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The husband-wife relationship, however, is not the only setting for describing Israel's disloyalty. The well-known passage of Hos. 11 depicts the relationship between God and Israel as a parent-child relationship.²² When reading it after our analysis starting from chapter 2, however, this setting seems to show many similarities to the husband-wife (and children) setting. Yet the tone of the opening passage, which is resumed at the end of the chapter, differs: it reflects a warm, personal relationship of love.²³ God says: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' (11:1).²⁴ Many exegetes point to the central role of 'love' (*ḥb* / אהב) in this chapter. It is presented first of all as lying at the foundation of the relationship between God and the people, and thus also of their identity as a people 'called out of Egypt.' In the following verses, the 'upbringing' of Israel is depicted in phrases of affectionate, bodily love of a parent for its child.²⁵ God teaches Israel to walk 'taking him by the arms' (11:3) and leads him with 'cords of human kindness,' with 'ties of love' (11:4a). 'To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek' (11:4b). The love also meant that God 'bent down to

²² This does not mean that the 'parental model' is the only one present in this chapter, as Eidevall argues, against the 'consensus view' (Göran Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea 4–14* (Stockholm 1996). On the other hand, Eidevall's conclusion (183) that the complementarity of the different models present in Hos. 11 underscores the view that the central theological significance of this passage consists in relativising all models for the divine and the deity-people relationship lacks foundations in this text, in which the parental relationship is obviously most important.

²³ This love for Israel is also mentioned in Hos. 3:1, but then in the context of the husband-wife relationship: 'The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."'

²⁴ Hos. 2:1 announces that the Israelites (*b^ene-jisrael*) will be called children of the living God/El (*b^ene el-chi*), which is contrasted to 'not my people,' *Lo-Ammi*, the name of Gomer's third child. The fact that the children are already mentioned together with the mother in chapter 1 as embodying Israel indicates that the marriage relation is more often than only in Hosea 11 linked to the parental relation, which is why it seems better to speak not just of a 'marriage' image but of a family image. Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, e.g., 12, 15.

²⁵ Several exegetes point out the human character of the depiction of the parental love: it is not some kind of divine family that is presented here (cf. Brigitte Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden von Gott im Hoseabuch* (Göttingen 1996), 212–213; Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea*, 108–109.) It is disputed among exegetes if the self-evident interpretation of the parent in Hos. 11 as a father is correct, as the expression may seem quite maternal (cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 17, n.16; Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 198–201; Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert*, 167). This discussion seems to be inspired more by current conceptions of father and mother roles than by the Hosea text, and the conclusion seems correct that this was not Hosea's problem (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 201). At most, one may note that Hosea's depiction of the parental love is not gendered, while this could easily have been done (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 200).

feed them' (11:4b), which recalls the depiction of God as the provider of daily needs in the second chapter. This reminiscence is also found in the account of Israel's rejective response to God's love. This response shows a threefold distinction similar to the three motifs indicated above: (1) not acknowledging (*jd'* / ידע) who 'healed them' (11:3); (2) cultic betrayal (sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to images, 11:2); (3) political adultery ('Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?' 11:5).²⁶ In what follows God first announces his wrath, but then resists expressing it because of compassion, repentance, or self-control (11:8b),²⁷ 'For I am God, and not a man – the Holy One among you' (11:9). Then Israel's return from Egypt and Assyria – 'trembling like sparrows' – is foretold; God 'will settle them in their homes' (11:11). Thus, the emphasis in this passage is on God's love for Israel in spite of Israel's going away. It is expressed in a very personal, loving relationship that is unbreakable ('How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel?' 11:8a). Again, Israel's fault is that it does not acknowledge their God – who has called them out of Egypt, gave them loving support, healed and fed them – but turns to other gods (Baals) and other powers (Assyria and Egypt).

2.3 ACKNOWLEDGING GOD

In the whole of Hosea the element of not 'acknowledging' God returns as a kind of summary of Israel's fornication.²⁸ The Hebrew root *jd'* / ידע indi-

²⁶ Seifert (*Metaphorisches Reden*, 212) also arrives at this threefold characterisation of Israel's reaction in Hos. 11, which she, moreover, relates to other chapters of Hosea. She summarises the central problem of Israel's behaviour as presented here as 'Liebe die ins Leere geht,' which recalls the tenor of Hos. 2:4ff and 3:1, although anger prevails in these verses, while grief is dominant in Hos. 11 (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 215).

²⁷ According to Jeremias (*Der Prophet Hosea*, 145) the verb *hpk* / הפך 'overthrow' should not be interpreted as 'Reue,' and in particular not as 'Mitleid' because this conceals that what is at stake here is a 'Willenswandel ... die Rücknahme einer zuvor gehegten Absicht,' i.e. of God's justified wrath. The verse is about 'Selbstbeherrschung,' which is grounded only in God, not in Israel's behaviour. Note the contrast between the human depiction of the love (cf. note 26 above) and this emphasis on 'being God, not a man.'

²⁸ Several exegetes note the central role of this term in Hosea. Jeremias regards it as 'eines der zentrale Stichworte der Theologie Hoseas, das besonders in Kap. 4 eine tragende Rolle spielt' (*Der Prophet Hosea*, 44). The object of this knowledge is, according to Jeremias, 'wesenhaft die Geschichte Gottes mit Israel und der Wille Gottes.' According to W. Schottroff, it is a 'Schlüsselbegriff der prophetischen Verkündigung' in Hosea and Jeremiah (lemma *jd'* / erkennen, in: Jenni and Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (Munich/Zurich 1984), 682–701, in particular 695–697). Schottroff suggests, primarily on the basis of Hos. 4:6 (and parallel texts in Jer. 2:8; 28:9 and others), that it may refer to 'das priesterliche Berufswissen ... dass ... als gegenwärtiges Wissen jah-

cates knowing, understanding, acknowledging, realizing, noticing, and here mostly has as its object God (2:6.18; 4:1; 5:4; 6:3.6; 8:2; 11:3; 13:4). The first line of interpretation indicated above, in which the word also appears for the first time in Hosea, is illuminating as to the meaning of this ‘acknowledging’ of God. It specifies it as acknowledging God as the giver of grain, new wine and oil, silver and gold (2:6), as the one who comes like the winter and spring rains (6:3), and who heals his child Israel (11:3). The other uses of the word are less specific. Knowing God is placed in parallel with faithfulness and love (4:1) and contrasted with ‘burnt offerings’ (6:6). Not knowing God is placed alongside ‘prostitution in the heart’ (5:4) and ‘rejecting what is good’ (8:3). It is related two times to reminding Israel of its being led out of Egypt (11:3; 13:4). Finally, knowledge is also mentioned without an object, as something that is lacking to Israel (4:6), and as something to which they are summoned (14:9, the final verse). Thus, the recurrence of the root *jd* / ידע as a summary of the right relationship with God, confirms the importance of the first line or motif of interpretation.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

What has our examination of the embodied relationship of Hosea and Gomer yielded regarding the bodily character of the relationship between God and Israel? One may distinguish between 1) the relationship in its ideal form, i.e. as it should be, and as it is announced it will be when God restores the marriage, 2) Israel’s view of the relation to the divine, which is attacked by Hosea, and 3) God’s punishment as consequence of Israel’s unfaithfulness in their relationship.

- The bodily character of the ideal relationship, which revolves around acknowledging God as the provider of daily sustenance, may be specified in three ways. They overlap or merge into one another in becoming more and more specific:
 - a. The relationship between God and Israel is first of all one in which God should be acknowledged as the one who provides Israel’s necessities: food, drink, and clothing. This includes God’s taking care of the thriving of the land and the harvest: ‘Your fruitfulness comes from me’ (14:9). These aspects can be regarded as ‘embodied’ in the sense that basic bodily needs are taken utterly seriously.

wegemässes Verhalten überhaupt erst ermöglicht.’ On the possible sexual connotation of ‘knowing’ as associated with God in Hos. 2:20 cf. Keefe, *Woman’s Body*, 47, n. 11.

These are the first and foremost things in which the relationship with God is found. God's maintenance is directed at this basic level first of all. This language is prominent also in the imagery used to depict Israel's situation and even God.

- b. God's maintenance should also be acknowledged in a more specifically human sense. God heals Israel, raises them from childhood onwards. These elements also clearly have a bodily character, as was clear from the warm expressions of human, bodily love in Hos. 11.
- c. In line with this remembrance of their being taken care of in their 'childhood,' Israel should acknowledge God as the one who called and led them out of Egypt, took care of them, and fed them in the 'land of burning heat' (13:5). This aspect has to do with Israel's relationship with God as a people. The foundation of this relationship is depicted in bodily terms, in the sense that God put an end to their physical presence in Egypt and warns against their returning to it, and provided for their physical needs during their exodus.
- Such is the relationship with God in which Israel finds itself. But they do not acknowledge it. They turn to other gods for their daily sustenance which is imagined as a bodily act of fornication. This fornication implies bringing sacrifices to the gods, building altars and adorning sacred stones, holding festivals, and making idols. The cult expands when the land prospers (10:1). Moreover, Israel turns to the superpower from which God had liberated them: Egypt. Israel asks Egypt and Assyria for help. In sum, they have 'depended on their own strength' (10:13b).²⁹ Israel does not want the 'embodied relationship' with God to which God has called them. They prefer a different kind of religion and politics and view of the source of their daily sustenance.
- The punishment that is announced is also put in bodily terms: it is portrayed as a reversal of the relationship as it should be: no more fruitfulness, no personal love, no longer being God's people etc. The

²⁹ The NIV translates the noun *Derek* / דֶּרֶךְ by 'strength.' The basic meaning of the word is 'way' or 'road'; Koehler-Baumgartner's *Lexicon* translates the word in this verse as 'way' in the sense of 'condition' and parallels it to 'determining one's own destiny.' In combination with the verb *bth* / בָּטַח, 'trust,' the translation 'way' seems possible as well, which the NIV apparently rephrases as 'depending on one's own strength.'

bodily character is obvious in a penetrating sense, especially in the foretelling of the atrocities of the war that Israel has called down on itself.

Thus, the ideal relationship with God, Israel's different idea of the relationship to the divine, and the announcement of God's punishment may all be called bodily. Reading the book of Hosea with an eye to embodiment certainly yields something. The positive relationship between the living body and the divine, for which Bornemark is searching, is found in particular in the elaboration of the acknowledgement of God as the giver of daily, bodily sustenance. But the depiction in itself of the personal, loving relationship with God as a husband-wife or parent-child relationship also contradicts any easy narrowing down of religion to a purely spiritual understanding.

3. A LITERAL KIND OF EMBODIED RELIGION IN HOSEA

Our search for embodied religion in Hosea started quite broadly or open with an investigation into the bodily way the relationship between God and the people of Israel is presented: as that between husband and wife. But at the outset of this broad analysis, I already indicated that the immoral or non-sensical character of the divine command to take a woman and children of fornications may attract much more attention than this bodily character of the relationship as such, especially when searching for embodied religion. In line with this peculiarity of embodiment in Hosea, many interpreters have focused on a quite literal sense of embodiment in Hosea: the reality of practices of fornication in a sacred setting, i.e. some kind of temple prostitution as part of a fertility cult. This illustrates the fact that a 'search for embodiment' may still be a rather unspecific search, which may yield quite divergent results. A brief outline of these interpretations may illustrate the rather unspecific character of the category of 'embodiment.' I will do this from the perspective of a recent study of Hosea by the Old Testament scholar Alice Keefe.³⁰ She is sympathetic to Bornemark's project of revaluing the body in our reflection on religion with special attention to the female perspective. But she also points out that the revaluation of the bodily as such may not yet lead to getting beyond the dualistic opposition of spirit and matter or soul and body in relation to religion, i.e. to a more embodied understanding of (the capacity for) transcendence.

³⁰ Cf. note 5 above.

Keefe starts her analysis of Hosea by pointing out the 'long-standing scholarly consensus' (5) that regards Hosea as prophesying against Israel's participation in a Canaanite or syncretistic 'fertility religion.' As we have seen, there are references in Hosea to apostate cultic practices: mention is made of Baal worship (2:15, 17; 11:2, 13:1), calf idols (8:5–6; 10:5; 13:2), feasts and festivals (2:13; 5:7), sinning priests (4:7–9; 6:9; 10:5), altars and sacred stones (8:11,13; 10:2; 12:12). This idea of a Baal cult is further specified by combining it with the references in Hosea to prostitution and adultery.³¹ The 'fertility religion' is outlined as worshipping the rain god Baal, perhaps together with goddesses of sex and fecundity. Natural procreation and regeneration are sanctified in these gods.³² It is suggested that participation in this fertility religion includes practising sexual rituals of temple prostitution or even participating in wild orgies. If this fertility cult is actually what Hosea's prophesies against, then the reason why Hosea needs to *live* the relation of the people to God via the scandal of marrying a woman of fornications is clear: the adultery 'represents the apostasy of Israel both figuratively and literally. The marriage metaphor is more moving than a mere allegory, because "Gomer's misconduct is not just *like* the sin of Israel that infuriates God and breaks his heart; it is that sin."³³ Hosea embodies religion to attack 'embodied religion.'

The tenor of this traditional interpretation is explained by Keefe as the product of a dualistic way of opposing spirit and body. The dominance of this dualistic view has been denounced by feminist exegetes in particular, who revealed its relationship with patriarchy, and the evaluation of the feminine – and the female body and sexuality in particular – as the other and as sinful. Hosea is indicted as one of the earliest sources that advanced this view. Some of these exegetes argue that Hosea's polemics against the fertility religion implies that such a religion actually existed and that Gomer was a woman who practised it or represents those women.³⁴ This cult granted them the opportunity to explore their own feminine sexuality and fertility, by conceiving a partner of their choice. Investigating this cult may therefore contribute

³¹ Especially Hos. 4:13b–14: 'Therefore your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes – a people without understanding will come to ruin!'

³² Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 43 n.8 for a list of mainstream commentaries with such a version of Canaanite religion, including 'great names' like Von Rad and Ringgren.

³³ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 47, quoting Francis I. Andersen & David Noel Freedman.

³⁴ Keefe, *Woman's Body* (62–64, 148–150) refers to Helgard Balz-Cochois, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, and T. Drorah Setel.

to reconstructing and reappropriating a kind of embodied religion that has remained out of sight in the dominant views of religion as purely spiritual. After analysing this criticism of traditional Hosea interpretation and the plea for a revaluation of the body in religion, Keefe asks if they really go beyond the opposition of spirit and body. She concludes that the traditional and the feminist interpretations are each other's counterparts: whereas the one focuses on the problematic character of the bodily in relation to religion, the other regards the body as a primary source of religious experience and relating to the divine. But they remain heirs to the same dualist separation of spirit and body. This exegetical debate may thus illustrate the drawbacks of the plea to pay more attention to the embodied character of religion: the spirit-body opposition remains intact, and the focus is on quite extreme kinds of embodiment (prostitution, orgies etc.).

In order to undermine the dominance and authority of the dualistic interpretation, Keefe tries a different interpretation, without claiming to arrive at the only 'correct' reading of Hosea.³⁵ She aims to examine Hosea in its own context by taking into account historical and archaeological findings and by means of an intertextual reading of similar texts in the Bible. Such a reading reveals a relation between acts of sexual transgression on the one hand and social disintegration and violence in the land on the other. That Hosea faced a situation of social disintegration can be confirmed from what we know about Hosea's time: it was a time of bloodshed by the king, internal war, and the threat of Assyrian occupation. But more important for Keefe's interpretation is the socio-economic and political transitions that took place in that time. Israel changed, according to Keefe, from a locally organised, tribe- and kinship-based society of small farmers to a centralized market economy of cash cropping and international trading under monarchical control.³⁶ In this

³⁵ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 13, 221. Other interpretations that show resemblances to Keefe's approach are the studies by Keita and Sherwood mentioned above. Keefe also refers to Sherwood as to the question of claiming the 'correct' reading. Sherwood characterises her approach as a 'metacommentary': this does not follow the traditional strategy of criticising and displacing the criticism of one's predecessors before introducing a new improved account (38). Her aim is not to reveal the 'truth' or 'error' of specific interpretations, but the dominance of certain interpretations and their claiming of 'objectivity.' She does not claim to introduce a reading that is free from ideology but wants to bring 'different ideological interests into play and relativise the dominant (apparently natural) descriptions of Hos. 1,2 by introducing an alternative, more marginal perspective' (39).

³⁶ These processes are called 'latifundialization.' Keefe bases this interpretation on many studies of Israel and Judah in this period from a socio-scientific perspective (cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, e.g., 27–29, where she refers especially to Devadasan N. Premnath, Bernhard Lang, Marvin Chaney, and John Andrew Dearman).

new situation, the traditional importance of the local family and the interdependence of different families in a tribe for their survival diminished. A new class of wealthy rulers came into existence who exploited farmers for the sake of larger interests. Moreover, the class of rulers also tried to control the religious cult and thus reinforce the centralized, monarchical power. It is to this situation that female fornication refers in Hosea: an Israel that is out for profit and is prepared to be unfaithful for the sake of that aim. Thus, Israel eventually puts its own continuity as a people on the line. In the Israelite patrilineally organised society, family is the essential social unit and sacral locus, based upon paternal legitimacy. In this setting the 'imagery of a fornicating wife and her illegitimate children signifies the disintegration and end of that society.' (206) Keefe summarises her interpretation by concluding that 'at stake in Hosea's discourse is the loss of the sacred as it was manifest in the relationship of people to the land, its produce, and to each other, that is, in their relationships to the materiality of their existence' (221).

Keefe thus finds the embodied character of religion not so much in the extreme forms of a fertility religion with matching sexual practices but in the general idea of 'religion as a mode of orientation to the material and corporeal bases of human existence' (12). The interpretation of this orientation in Hosea contributes, according to Keefe, to a better understanding of religion.³⁷ This seems a sensible correction of an important tendency in interpreting the place of the body in religion. But the correction also shows that the project of revaluating the material or bodily as such is not a guarantee for arriving at a broader and thus better understanding of religion. For it cannot be denied that the feminist interpretation of religion takes the body seriously. And, in a precisely opposite sense, the traditional interpretation of Hosea did not deny the possible bodily character of religion, although it vehemently rejected it. How can the rather unspecific character of the search for a more embodied view of religion be overcome while still taking the problem of the spirit-body dualism seriously? In my view, my analysis of Hosea may itself indicate a different approach.

³⁷ Keefe does not elaborate systematically on this contribution and thus does not go beyond her exegetical confines. A few general suggestions are found however, that indicate that this role of her study interests her. (Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 12–14, 73–78, 111, 220–221).

4. DEPENDENCE AND DISCERNMENT

One of the central points to which my analysis of the relationship between God and Israel led was the acknowledgement to be in a relationship with God who cares as the giver of daily sustenance. This was contrasted with securing one's needs by turning to other gods in sacrificial rituals as well as in trusting one's own strength in battle and turning to international superpowers for help. I would like to dub the point of this difference in attitude between acknowledging and not acknowledging 'dependence.' Dependence on God to whose care one may commend oneself is clearly understood in Hosea as a bodily thing. This is contrasted with experiencing the body as a source of disquiet and concern that is to be safeguarded by human effort. This contrast could be easily interpreted in line with a classical criticism of religion, i.e., that it makes people passive and hinders them from having control over themselves. But the difficulty Hosea addresses seems to be that this 'control' needs orientation. The body as such cannot provide this orientation, as undeniable and strong as its need for food, drink, clothing and shelter may be. Israel should find its orientation in being taken care of as a people called out of Egypt by God. Acknowledging this God is paralleled with faithfulness and love and contrasted with 'cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery,' and bloodshed (4:2). It is a dependence that is not to be conceived as a 'spiritual kind of thing' but as one in which the bodily is fully incorporated. It is the reciprocal dependence of a partner-relationship or a parent-child one. This love is one that asks for an answer, an active participation. If it is not or no longer answered, the grief is deep, but the relationship not simply annulled. One remains related, albeit in a very different way.

The thrust, however, of 'this dependence in love' in Hosea is not simply whether Israel participates in it or not but also whether the relationship with God as such is acknowledged as a 'loving' one or not. Hosea confronts Israel not only with their own unfaithful behaviour but also with their hopes and fears concerning how God will respond to this behaviour. Does their being dependent on God mean that God will destroy them, or that God cannot give them up and will renew the loving relationship with them? At times, the Hosea text seems to oscillate between these views of God. But in the end, the announcement of the restoration of the relationship is strongest, as is depicted expressively in God's 'change of heart' in Hos. 11:8. Precisely against the penetrating depictions of the possible punishments, the loving character of the relationship stands out. Nevertheless, the unrest concerning how God will respond, and thus about who God is, is intensely present in Hosea. By

emphasising the centrality of this struggle to understand or 'acknowledge' God, I do not mean to waive the bodily character again. Rather the moment of understanding, or acknowledging God as the loving, the moment of faith, contains a primordial bodily moment.

This may be illuminated by referring to Richard Kearney's notion of 'discernment.' Discernment is one of the components of Kearney's 'anatheist wager.' With this phrase, he indicates the invitation to revisit in the current situation – i.e. 'in the wake of our letting go of God' (5) – what might be termed a 'primary scene of religion,' in order to get beyond the opposites of theism and atheism. This is the primary scene of 'the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God,' a choice between faith or nonfaith (7).³⁸ This moment of choice is further explained in terms of discernment. Discernment is present in an exemplary way in the lives of the prophets, saints, and mystics, but it is also common in the sense that a discernment is always to be made where faith is concerned. Kearney emphasises the carnal character of this discernment. The 'choice' is made in a moment and, as such, is pre-reflective, before it becomes 'a matter of reflective cognitive evaluation' (46). But in spite of its pre-reflectiveness it is choice or interpretation; it is actively responding 'in the moment' to the visiting Stranger, to say 'yes' or 'no.'³⁹ Discernment is difficult, but never completely impossible. It is possible to discern between 'the other who kills, and the other who brings life' (45).⁴⁰ Moreover, it is a risky affair:⁴¹ many invoke the voice of God to

³⁸ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York 2010). Kearney does not mean that the 'event of the Stranger' is the only 'primary scene of religion' (7). Others are creation, salvation, miracle, sovereignty, and judgement. But it is at the core of the anatheist wager, which Kearney regards as the viable option in a current analysis of religion. He indicates five main components of the anatheist wager: imagination, humour, commitment, discernment and hospitality. They should not be regarded as 'sequential moments' but rather as 'equiprimordial aspects of a single hermeneutic arc' (40).

³⁹ By emphasising the choosing, interpretative character of the primary moment of meeting the divine Stranger, Kearney opposes the view of Jean-Luc Marion who understands the moment of 'saturation' as a being overwhelmed completely. Discernment comes only afterwards, according to Marion. Cf. Kearney, *Anatheism*, note 6, 197–199.

⁴⁰ Kearney opposes this view to that of Derrida who says, in Kearney's words, 'we have no way of knowing the difference between one kind of other and another' (Kearney, *Anatheism*, 45 and note 5, 196–197).

⁴¹ The risky character of faith that lies in its being first of all an act of 'pre- or hyper-linguistic response' is also central to the thinking of Ricoeur by whom Kearney is profoundly influenced (e.g., Paul Ricoeur, 'Philosophy and Religious Language,' in: *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, transl. by David A. Pellauer, ed. by Mark Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1995), 35–47, 46–47; cf. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 44–45).

commit atrocities. Kearney emphasises this chance of being mistaken, but argues that the risk is not ‘groundless’: ‘Love – as compassion and justice – is the watermark.’ (47) These are the difficulties and the risk of the ‘drama of discernment.’

This drama is experienced by the prophet Hosea who must decide on the voice he hears. And it is the situation of the reader of the book Hosea, who becomes confronted with the God to whom Israel has to respond, the God on whom they depend and who is first experienced as the one who may punish them or restore their relationship. The book of Hosea also shows that the difficulty and risk of this discernment is never something that can be left behind after having said ‘yes’ or having converted to the faith. Rather, the ‘yes’ is ‘in the moment.’ This difficulty or tension is part of religion, but it is not ‘groundless.’ It comes down to not only the question whether I relate to God or not but also that of whether I want to be dependent on a *loving* God. The momentary character of the answer to this question relates to its embodiedness: it is a response, by the body, ‘the ear and eye’ (46), by ‘emotion and affect, before any theoretical reflection’ (40). As such it is already interpretation. It may be rethought and reinterpreted in a more cognitive sense endlessly, as we do in reinterpreting the discernment present in Hosea.

Is this discernment an entirely personal thing, something between God and the individual believer? Kearney points out that ‘great saints and mystics ... scrupulously insisted upon disciplined criteria of discernment, chief among them being the distinction between the divine visitor who brings compassion and counterfeits who bring confusion’ (47). This idea of ‘disciplined criteria’ presupposes some kind of discerning community who reflects on them, supports them and passes them on. Moreover, responding to the divine Other is very much a question of being and acting in the world, of ethics. It is about ‘giving a cup of cold water to a thirsting stranger’ (153). Therefore, Kearney concludes his book with a reference to the lives of three exemplary figures who respond to the stranger in a life of ‘sacramental action’: Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Gandhi. The disciplined approach of discernment and the ethical practices of discernment in everyday life underscore the bodily character of the discernment. Thus, the concept of the discernment character of faith as going back to a level of primordial, pre-reflective, carnal response allows for thinking spirit and body together. It is more specific than the concept of ‘embodied religion’ and as such gives a more specific contribution to the understanding of religion. Moreover, it sheds light on the issue indicated in the introduction of a religious ‘difficulty with the body.’

5. DIFFICULTY WITH THE BODY OR WITH DISCERNMENT?

The search for a more embodied view of religion is presented as a way to gain a better understanding of religion. But there is also a critical side to it insofar as it implies that from time immemorial there has been a reluctance to recognize the bodily character of religion. This should be overcome by turning to the body explicitly and consciously. If we confine ourselves to the current, post-secular Western context, is it the body that stands between ourselves and religion, that hinders our understanding of religion? Or is it rather a specifically religious idea of embodiment, with its moment of fundamental dependence and responsive discernment? In my view, our current difficulty with the bodily in relation to religion is not Eckhardt's or Tauler's, i.e., the untrustworthiness of the senses, which cannot discriminate between a vision of the devil or God. What they indicated sounds very much like the difficulty of discernment. They emphasised that this difficulty cannot be solved by turning to the body or the senses. In comparison, the current issue is first of all that of arriving at, becoming sensitive to this moment of discernment. A focus on the difficulty of making sense of the embodied character of religion may fail to recognise that our search for a better understanding of religion presupposes a being at a loss at a more primary level of, for example, the primary religious scene of discernment. In my view, the idea that we are in a fundamental sense dependent on God is one of the most difficult to relate to in our times of autonomous choice and control – not just over 'wine, grain, and oil' but also over being a family or not, our health, or international politics. But it is important to reappropriate what this dependence may mean and not reject it beforehand because of an assumed one-sided emphasis on passivity, resignation, or humility. Kearney's notion of discernment unravels the active moment in this dependence: the moment of saying 'yes' or 'no.' In my view, this is also what is at stake in Hosea's struggle for the acknowledgment of God as the giver of daily sustenance.

Understanding oneself in the face of a text, like that of Mechtild von Magdeburg or that Hosea, thus does not mean that important material dimensions of religious life are ignored, as Vásquez and other hard core materialist theorists of religion argue. It does point out the interpretative moment inherent in the response of faith, which may not come to light if one focuses on the apparent obviousness of the body, as if it were a phenomenon without interpretation. Interpretation is a very bodily thing. Because texts intend a

world, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, they ‘call forth on our part a way of dwelling there.... Understanding oneself in front of the text is not something that just happens in one’s head or in language.... [T]o understand the world and to change it are fundamentally the same thing.’⁴² This idea of interpretation as a both active and bodily responding, dependent upon an ‘initiative that always precedes me,’ supports, I hope, Bornemark’s search for ‘a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transcendence and embodiment.’

⁴² Paul Ricoeur, ‘Naming God’, in: *Figuring the Sacred*, 217–235, 234.

Section II:

RITUALS AND SACRAMENTS AS EMBODIMENTS OF GOD
BEYOND A PURELY SYMBOLIC RELIGION

Sacramental Sensibility and the ‘Embodiment of God’

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I follow the conference theme, by considering how ‘rituals and sacraments’ may function as ‘material expressions of a spiritual reality’ and even as ‘embodiments of God’. I begin by noting some of the ways in which human beings can be attuned in bodily terms to place-relative ‘existential meanings’. I then extend this case, and relate it to the religious domain, by examining the nature of sacred sites and the role of religious concepts in aesthetic experience. I also consider what sense we might make of the idea that transcendent ‘meanings’ may be not only imaged in the sensory appearances, but encountered in them. Overall, the paper seeks to identify some of the ways in which bodily demeanour and habits of perception, and in general sensitivity to materially embedded existential meanings, are integral to the religious life.

KEYWORDS

rituals, sacraments, places, meaning

INTRODUCTION

In this session of the conference, we have been invited to examine the idea that ‘rituals and sacraments’ may function as ‘material expressions of a spiritual reality’ and even as ‘embodiments of God’. We have also been given an opportunity to consider what a treatment of these issues might imply for our understanding of ‘magic’, and in concluding I shall touch on that question too.

I would like to approach these themes by turning, first of all, to the question of how ‘existential meanings’ may be presented to a person in their bodily interaction with a material context. Assuming that we do encounter such meanings in this sort of way, then we might suppose that ultimate, or religiously important, existential meanings may be presented to us similarly, that is, via an appropriate bodily engagement with a relevant material context. And if all of this is so, then, so I shall argue, we have one way of elaborating upon the thought that ‘spiritual realities’ may be ‘embodied’, and encountered through ‘ritual’ and in general via an appropriate bodily engagement with material forms.

My remarks will throughout have a rather programmatic character, since my object here is to offer an invitation to conversational exchange, rather than to construct a perspective which is hedged about by qualifications for the sake of pre-empting objections!

THE UNDERSTANDING OF PLACE-RELATIVE EXISTENTIAL MEANINGS

In recent years, philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition in particular have been much occupied by the thought that our understanding of God might be likened to the kind of understanding which derives from scientific enquiry, or the kind of understanding which is rooted in our everyday experience of the sensory world. Such strategies are well known and there is no need to document them here. While undoubtedly of interest, these approaches do pose a number of difficulties, it seems to me, in regard to their conception of the mode and also the object of religious understanding. For example, they may lead us to think of religious understanding as basically theoretical and inferential (if we pattern religious understanding on scientific understanding) or as straightforwardly observational. So neither approach looks like a very promising starting point if our concern is (as ours is here) with the question of how religious understanding may be realised in bodily

and ritual terms. Of course, the body is integral to sensory experience, and in its way it is also integral to scientific forms of enquiry, but sense experience and scientific enquiry do not look much like ritual forms of engagement with the world, above all because they do not require the same sort of attunement of the whole body – an attunement in which all of the senses are implicated – to a value-saturated context. Moreover, if we take scientific understanding, or sensory observation, as a starting point for our reflections upon the nature of religious understanding, then there will presumably be some pressure to think of God's reality by analogy with the reality of particular objects – assuming that we take scientific theorising to have as its goal the identification of fundamental entities which are not themselves observable but postulated to explain the data of observation, and to the extent that everyday observation of the world concerns, as philosophers are wont to say, 'tables and chairs'. But it is of course a commonplace of theological enquiry that the conception of God as some kind of 'thing', whatever its attractions may be in abstractly philosophical terms, is religiously problematic. So on this count too, we have some reason to consider whether other ways of apprehending the world may present a more promising route into the question of how religious understanding is to be conceived.

I would like to suggest that we can make some headway with these questions by turning to our appreciation of place-relative existential meanings. (Certainly, place-relative meanings are not 'things', and their identification is standardly a matter neither of theorisation nor of 'just looking'.) This kind of understanding is so basic to our capacity to orient ourselves in the world that it is easily overlooked from a theoretical point of view. It is perhaps for this reason that in the history of philosophy (and by contrast with the kind of understanding that is grounded in simple sense observation, or in scientific theory construction), understanding of 'place' often seems to drop out of view, despite its fundamental role in our practical dealings with other people and the material world in general. To take just one example, in his discussion of the nature of virtue, Aristotle famously remarks that the person of good character is able to regulate their feelings appropriately; and he adds that this is a matter of 'having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way'.¹ But if we take a particular example of the regulation of feeling, say the feeling of gratitude, it is evident that it matters not only that this feeling should be

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II; I am following Terence Irwin's translation, reproduced in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford 2007), 678.

had at the right time, in relation to the right thing, and so on for the remainder of the items on Aristotle's list, but also that it should be had, and expressed, in the right place. A person could in some abstract sense have the feeling at the right time, and so on, but there would be little merit in that if the feeling were had or expressed at the wrong place. We might prefer to say then that time-relative rightness, and rightness measured against these other dimensions of appraisal, cannot really be disentangled from rightness with respect to place: rightness in temporal terms is in effect rightness in temporal terms relative to rightness in respect of place.

It may also be that we are apt to overlook the significance of rightness in respect of place when we are operating in a theoretical mode because very often achieving this sort of rightness is a rather untheoretical and even unreflective sort of matter. Whether I am in a lecture theatre, or standing at a bus stop, or entering a church, or whatever it might be, I am all the while calibrating my bodily movements to the space in which I am located. And this is not just a matter of making those bodily adjustments which are necessary to negotiate the space from a physical point of view, as when I raise my foot in the way required to surmount the dais at the front of the lecture theatre. It is also and more fundamentally a matter of my calibrating my bodily movements so that they are fitted for this particular space in existential terms. And this sort of calibration is necessary because the action which is constituted by a given stretch of bodily movement will vary with place. To put the point briefly, waving my hands will count as one sort of action, with one kind of existential significance, when I am looking towards a friend who is departing on a train, and another when I am standing on the Kop and Liverpool have scored a goal, and another when I am drifting out to sea, and so on. But typically this regulation of bodily movement in relation to context is not rehearsed reflectively: if I wish to say farewell to my friend as she leaves on the train, I do not work backwards from the thought that my action should be one of bidding farewell, to a consideration of the gestures which relative to this particular material context might carry that sort of significance, to the performance of the relevant gesture. Instead, in normal circumstances, I just wave.

So all of us are all of the time calibrating our bodily movements to spatial context, in recognition of the 'existential meanings' which are embedded in these contexts, and the sense which attaches to various stretches of bodily behaviour given those meanings. There is no achievement more basic to our capacity to function as agents in society than this. And again, when we en-

gage in this sort of calibration of bodily response to context, we are guided often enough by a kind of intelligence in the body – rather than the body being directed by a set of instructions which are the product of some process of ratiocination. When I walk into a room of people, I adjust my bodily movements to the space taking into account its dimensions, the apparent mood of the group, the disposition of people and objects in the space, and so on, without any of these considerations becoming, in the normal case, the object of focal awareness. The capacity to orient oneself in these terms is more akin, then, to the capacity to ride a bike than it is to the capacity to rehearse a mathematical or scientific proof, or to determine whether the object at the other side of the room is a bookcase or a cupboard simply by looking. But by contrast with the bike-riding case, this is not just an achievement of physical dexterity: what is required is a capacity to bring one's body into appropriate alignment with the existential demands of the context, and not only with its demands considered from an abstractly physical point of view.

So in this thoroughly familiar (even if, from a theoretical point of view, sometimes rather opaque) sort of way, we are all of us used to recognising existential meanings as they are embodied in particular material contexts; and we are all of us used to adjusting our bodily movements to these meanings, and to being guided by the body's own 'intelligence' in these matters. If all of this is so, then we have, I think, the beginnings of an account of how a sacramental appreciation of the material world might work. Let's see if we can move a little closer towards such an account by considering next the case of 'sacred sites'.

THE EMBODIMENT OF EXISTENTIAL MEANINGS AT THE 'SACRED SITE'

The phenomenological literature on 'sacred space' suggests that such places are marked by a number of features which recur across cultures. For instance, the sacred site is often deemed to have a 'microcosmic' significance. (That is, the existential meaning which is embedded in the site is thought to represent or embody in miniature the significance of reality as such.) And whether because of its remoteness or because of its intrinsic physical character, the sacred site also poses, typically, a degree of challenge to the body. And lastly, such places are often associated with religiously important events. These events may have occurred at the site; or it may be that while the site is not itself the locus of some such event, it houses objects such as relics which

once played an integral role in the unfolding of events of religious importance.² These accounts ground the sacred significance of a site in rather different features, and these features need not co-vary. For instance, in so far as it is the sensory qualities of a place which mark it out as religiously significant, then a further place which replicates those qualities will, to that extent, share the same religious significance. But in so far as the religious significance of a place is relative to its history, then even a perfect replica of the place will fail to reproduce in full its religious import, in so far as the replica has in relevant respects a different past. These various dimensions of a site's religious import are also capable of interaction. Most obviously, a place's sensory qualities or history may be deemed religiously significant because the place is conceived in microcosmic terms, so that these qualities, or this history, are taken to bear not simply some localised importance, but an ultimate or divine significance.

These truths concerning sacred sites have a counterpart in our dealings with everyday, secular spaces. Here we seem to be responsive to these same varieties of existential meaning in ways which require acknowledgement, once again, in the form of an appropriate bodily response. For example, a place may acquire a particular existential significance on account of its history, and that significance may call for acknowledgement in bodily terms. It is for this reason that we can be drawn intelligibly into debates about what sort of building, for what sort of purpose, it would be appropriate to erect at the site of the 9/11 attacks – and so on for many other, more everyday kinds of example. So a site can in some respects store up the significance of what has happened there, so that this significance exercises an enduring claim upon us, in so far as it invites, or requires, a certain kind of bodily response when we are located at the site in the present. And we might suppose that the same kind of connection is at work when the significance of a sacred site is grounded in its history.

Similarly, we can also encounter microcosmic meanings in our experience of secular spaces. The places of childhood often bear this sort of significance. I recently returned to some of the places of my own childhood in Liverpool. And standing again where that child once stood, and assuming at that place, so far as I could, his perspective on things, I found myself review-

² For an account of broadly this kind, see for example Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, Volume Two, Hermeneutical Calisthenics (Cambridge MA 2000), and Thomas Barrie, *Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture* (Boston MA 1996).

ing later episodes in my life story from the vantage point of his aspirations and sense of the world's significance. In this way, the place was able to assume for me a microcosmic significance, by providing a window on to the sense of my life as a whole. Of course, it would be possible in principle to take up such a stance on my life anywhere, simply by rehearsing the relevant thoughts. But if we revert to the idea that behaviour can be more or less consonant with the history of a place, then we might say that at the places of childhood, it's not just that we can think certain microcosmically significant thoughts (thoughts which we could in principle think anywhere), but also that we can acknowledge the microcosmic meaning of the place in our enacted responses, by virtue of what we do in bodily terms when located at the site, and also by virtue of what we think when we are there. Minimally, we might suppose that it is fitting that I should think microcosmic thoughts about the meaning of my life when located at the places of my childhood (especially if I have been away from them for some considerable time), and the failure to act in this way would signify a kind of unresponsiveness or blindness to meanings which make some genuine claim on me. So there is some sense in the idea that we can not only think about but also encounter, or be claimed by, a microcosmic meaning when located at the relevant place. And when the relevant microcosmic meaning is particularly encompassing, when it concerns the significance of reality in general, then we may suppose that it is fundamentally religious in character.

The case of sacred sites also reveals something of the variety of preconditions which are relevant to the recognition of place-relative existential meanings. It is notable that the approach to a sacred site often poses a degree of challenge to the body: because of its inaccessibility, the site may require the believer to undertake a long and relatively arduous journey; or because of its use of threshold walls or other such structures, the believer may be required to submit to various bodily disciplines as a condition of penetrating to the inner precincts of the site. The recurrence of such features of spatial organisation across traditions suggests that an appropriate attunement of the body is integral to the believer's capacity to apprehend the existential import of the sacred site aright. To put the point briefly, we might say that the structure of many sacred sites suggests that their existential import cannot be grasped in straightforwardly observational terms, just by turning up and looking around, let alone by constructing some sort of inference from the data of observation. Rather, to grasp, or be grasped by, the import of the site, the believer must first take on the relevant bodily and existential condition –

broadly, one of heightened seriousness about the meaning of the site, and heightened attentiveness to that meaning as it is presented in the sensory qualities of the site. The physical challenges posed by the site ensure that such seriousness is presupposed and at the same time cultivated: given these challenges, only the person who is already serious about the prospective meaning of the site will persevere in their resolve to reach the site; and in negotiating the physical demands of the space, such a person will be required to take on a correlative bodily state, and to enter thereby into a condition of focused awareness and heightened seriousness.

Given the need for this sort of preparation of the body, we would expect the believer to be addressed in bodily terms upon arrival at the site. And this is what we do find, in so far as the significance of the site is communicated through its imposing scale, its use of intense light or equally of visual obscurity, and so on for other visual features of the site and for other sensory modalities. The recurrence of such qualities across traditions suggests that to some extent the import of the sacred site is communicated directly in theory- or tradition-independent terms, by virtue simply of its brute impact upon the senses. If we had to generalise, we might say that, in many cases anyway, the site works, at least in part, by imposing a degree of strain upon the senses, so leading the person to an intensified bodily awareness of the space, and in turn to a condition of rapt absorption in the place and its import.³

So the recognition of the existential meaning of the sacred site is realised, in some measure, in the body's responsiveness to its sensory qualities; and given the structure of such sites and their surroundings, we should suppose that this sort of bodily responsiveness cannot always be counted on as a matter of course, but has instead to be cultivated, by the adoption of the requisite physical discipline. We might suppose, once again, that the same sorts of connection hold in secular contexts. To take an everyday kind of example, suppose that the light of the low trajectory winter sun, as it streams towards me from the periphery of my visual field, irradiates the long grasses in the meadow in which I am standing, so that the silhouettes of their bobbing heads are brought into sharp relief and wrapped in a warm glow. All of us (I think I can say) will have been gripped at some time or other by the sensory qualities of some such scene, in a relatively theory-independent way, and reduced thereby to a condition of quietened, rapt attention. Sacred sites seem, in some cases, to aim at inducing a similar sort of bodily response, in so far as

³ I expand on these matters in the discussion of conversion experience below.

they invite the believer into a state of heightened sensory awareness, in which certain material things become compellingly present. But of course, it would be all too easy for me to pass by this scene of sun-lit grasses without further thought, observing in some sense the sensory qualities of the scene, but without being engaged by them. For engagement, and fuller apprehension of these qualities we need, as well as mere observation, the requisite focused attunement of the body, and a quietening of the mind's absorption in other, competing concerns. And the sacred site, in its own way, ensures that these same conditions are realised.

THE ROLE OF CONCEPTS IN THE RECOGNITION OF MATERIALLY EMBEDDED MEANINGS

In everyday contexts, a person's recognition of materially embodied values can also depend of course upon their capacity to deploy appropriate concepts. Let's think about this case next. Once the difference between a swift and a swallow and a martin has been explained to me, then my experience of these swooping forms becomes newly focused and newly informed. And we might suppose similarly that while the significance of sacred sites is to some extent communicated in theory-independent terms, the apprehension of their import can also depend upon the capacity to read them in terms of a relevant doctrinal scheme. And this scheme may work not simply by allowing the believer to provide doctrinally informed comment upon a given experience of the site, but also by entering into that experience, so that the phenomenology of the experience is shaped accordingly. Roger Scruton provides an example of this possibility when he notes how the experience of a Gothic church can be inhabited, or structured from within, by the thought that such churches were intended to present an image of the heavenly city. When our experience is guided by such a thought, he notes, it is possible to apprehend a Gothic church not as a single thing subdivided into various components, but as a composite entity, assembled from parts (by analogy with the way in which a city is a composite entity, assembled from the various buildings and other structures of which it is comprised). So the conceptual distinction between thinking of the church as a composite entity and thinking of it as a single entity subdivided has, Scruton is suggesting, a phenomenological

counterpart. And the person who is acquainted with this conceptual distinction can, in principle, organise their experience accordingly.⁴

It is notable that when the experience of a Gothic church is inhabited in this way by the thought of the heavenly city, then the building as experienced can function as an image of the heavenly city: the building so experienced will share the structure of a city, and will therefore be able to image a city. This possibility suggests a further way in which religious meanings may be materially mediated: when it penetrates or inhabits an experience in this sort of way, a religious thought can be embodied in the sensory appearances, rather than serving simply as commentary upon them. And in such cases, the content of the thought will then be imaged by the appearances, so that it is possible to be addressed by and reckon with the thought through one's engagement with the relevant material forms.

Of course, the example of the Gothic church is a relatively easy case: here one spatially extended thing (the church) is taken to image another spatially extended thing (the heavenly city) once the appearance of the first thing has been organised appropriately. And there is no great mystery about how this is possible. As anyone who has had to entertain small children on a car journey will know, it is possible to take cloud shapes as images of just about any material object you might care to mention: here, the thought of a given object, as named by the child, is inscribed in the appearance of the cloud so as to produce a relevant perceptual gestalt, with the result that the cloud's appearance now images the object. This sort of example works straightforwardly because here we are configuring the appearance of one spatially extended thing by reference to the structure of another spatially extended thing. But we might suppose in addition that abstract thoughts, and not only thoughts of spatially extended things, can be inscribed in the sensory appearances.

Strikingly, many reports of conversion experience seem to suggest something of this kind. If we turn to William James's classic treatment of these matters in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, we find converts reporting that, post-conversion, it is not simply that they feel a new intimacy with God, or that they have come to some deepened doctrinal insight, but rather that the sensory world in general has now taken on a new appearance for them, so that it seems to be in some way glorified, or newly 'real'. And some converts say of their post-conversion condition that the sensory world is now able to

⁴ Scruton develops this example in his book *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton NJ 1979), 74–75.

image the divine nature. For example, Jonathan Edwards, who is not noted for levity in his use of theological language, remarks of his own conversion experience that: 'The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature...'⁵ The experience which Edwards reports here is like Scruton's example of experiencing a Gothic church in so far as, in each case, the appearance of some relevant stretch of the material world is taken to image something else – only here it is the divine nature which is said to be imaged in the appearance of the sensory world in general, rather than the heavenly city being imaged in the appearance of a Gothic church. How is it possible, we might wonder, for the sensory world to image the divine nature in this way? I'll allude just briefly to three possibilities.

First of all, following the drift of Scruton's example, we might suppose that the thought of the divine nature can enter into the appearance of the sensory world, with the result that the sensory world now presents an image of the divine nature. In Scruton's example, the thought of the heavenly city is able to enter into the appearance of the Gothic church because city and church share certain qualities. Notably, they share the property of spatial organisation; and accordingly, the appearance of the church can conform to the thought of the heavenly city once the organisation of the church, as it is presented in the relevant perceptual gestalt, is isomorphic with the organisation of the heavenly city. Taking up Edwards's remarks, we might suppose similarly that the qualities of 'calmness', 'sweetness' and 'glory' can be found in the world and also, in some suitably adjusted sense, in the divine nature. And in turn, we might suppose therefore that the thought of the divine nature can inform the appearance of the sensory world in so far as these qualities (of calmness and sweetness and glory) assume the requisite prominence in our experience of the sensory world.

We might suppose, secondly, that it is not only the organisation of the perceptual field that is relevant here but also its 'hue'. If I discover that the meat which I am chewing derives from Shuttlescock, the pet rabbit, it is not only that the taste of the meat will now assume new salience in my experience of the world. Its intrinsic phenomenal feel will also change, as it comes to be experienced as revolting. Here 'hue' and salience work together to

⁵ Edwards's remarks are cited by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London 1911), 248–249.

communicate the existential import of this stuff. Edwards is clearly talking about a change in the ‘appearance’ of the sensory world, so he has in mind, I take it, some transformation in the sensory phenomena, and not simply some new assessment of the significance of a given body of sensory appearances. And perhaps this transformation can be understood in terms of the ideas of salience and also of hue: relevant features of the world (such as its ‘calmness’) may now be newly salient, and also the world may come to seem (not revolting but) newly meaningful, or it may be presented with a new intensity, where this quality of meaningfulness or intensity is given directly in the vividness of the sensory appearances. (Compare the experience of the person who has fallen in love, and the associated transformation in the appearance of the sensory world in general which is often reported in such cases.)

Edwards also talks of ‘glory’ in nature. Perhaps this possibility can be understood in some measure by reference to the sort of heightened awareness of the natural world which I mentioned before, where the salience of the grasses in my perceptual field and their ‘hue’ are both potentially relevant to the experience of the scene as compellingly present. I take it that something of broadly this kind is also what Hopkins has in mind when we writes that: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God / It will flame out like shining from shook foil.’ (These are of course the opening lines of his poem ‘God’s Grandeur’.) In this sort of way, we might argue that the thought of God’s nature can enter into the appearance of the sensory world not so much because of some isomorphism of spatial structure which unites that nature and the relevant perceptual gestalt, but because certain qualities which we might also associate with the divine nature can become newly prominent in the sensory appearances, and because the sensory world can undergo a correlative shift in ‘hue’.

So here are two ways (relative to the ideas of salience and hue) in which we might understand how it is possible for the sensory world to image the divine nature. A further, related approach to this question might draw on the thought, commonly expressed in reports of conversion experience, that the sensory world post-conversion is somehow newly ‘real’.⁶ Perhaps this intensification in its reality is to be understood simply in terms of its appearing newly glorified in the sense we have just explored. But we might also try to understand this case by analogy with our experience of everyday sensory things when the practical possibilities which they afford are taken to be somehow

⁶ Compare the experience of religious melancholiacs who find that reality is in some fashion ‘un-real’. See James, *Varieties*, 151.

truncated. Matthew Ratcliffe takes up this case in this thought experiment: 'Consider experiencing a table without co-included possibilities like seeing it from another angle, moving it or sitting on a chair in front of it. Without the possibilities of its being accessed from different perspectives, or acted upon, it would appear strangely distant, intangible and incomplete.'⁷ Here, the table comes to seem in some measure unreal (or intangible and incomplete) when some of the practical possibilities which we would normally associate with it fall away. And in a ready sense, the table in that case is indeed less real (than it would have been if it had the normal range of potentialities for a table), in so far as it is not so capable now of contributing causally to the further unfolding of the world. In a similar vein, perhaps we can understand the convert's experience of the sensory world as newly real as a matter of their coming to a new assessment of the causal potentialities of the sensory world, where this newly intensified sense of its reality is registered directly in experience, just as the diminution in the reality of the table in Ratcliffe's example (in the understanding of the subject of the experience) is registered directly in experience. And how might religious conversion involve a new assessment of the sensory world's causal potentialities? Well, minimally, perhaps the convert has a new sense of God's activity in the sensory world, and a new sense therefore of how the sensory world is caught up into a divinely ordained *telos*.

This account suggests a third way in which we might understand the idea that the world can image God. When it is experienced as newly real, perhaps the sensory world can then image God in so far as God is supremely real, or *ipsum esse subsistens*. Here it is not so much that a given concept (such as the concept of the divine nature) comes to inhabit the appearance of the sensory world in so far as certain features of the world acquire a correlative salience or hue; it is, rather, that our experience of the sensory world is now set within a new assessment of its possibilities, and that its appearance in general is transformed for this reason. This way of putting the matter suggests that the new assessment of the sensory world's possibilities comes first, and then a consequent change in its appearance. (And this is the ordering of things which is suggested by Ratcliffe's example.) But we might also suppose that it is possible to move in the other direction: in Ratcliffe's terms, a change

⁷ Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford 2008), 156. Although he does not use the expression 'unreal' in this passage, Ratcliffe associates the example he is developing here with the case where a thing is experienced as 'unreal'. See for example the passage which he quotes on the following page.

in the appearance of the table may issue in the thought that its causal possibilities have been in some way truncated.

If we can make some sense of the idea that the divine nature may be imaged by the sensory appearances in these various ways, then we might suppose that a similar kind of account can be developed for the believer's experience of the sacred site. Here too, the sensory appearances undergo a transformation, with the result that certain material objects become compellingly present; and here too, the believer may suppose that the sensory appearances now provide a window onto the divine nature.

In the first section of this paper, we considered the idea that existential meanings can be embodied in material contexts, and can be identified and appropriately acknowledged in the responses of the body. We have now extended this discussion by considering the role of sacred sites, of conversion experience, and of certain kinds of thought-infused 'seeing', in mediating religious meanings. In these ways, we can make sense of the idea that not only 'secular' meanings but also religiously germane existential meanings can be embedded in material contexts, and can be apprehended and acknowledged in the requisite habits of seeing and responses of the body. So we have now identified a number of ways in which we might elaborate upon the idea that there can be 'material expressions of a spiritual reality' which can be encountered and engaged in bodily terms. But this account is still some way removed from the thought that these 'expressions' can be taken in relevant circumstances as 'embodiments of God'. Let's consider this possibility rather more directly.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE AND THE EMBODIMENT OF GOD

In my discussion of Jonathan Edwards's conversion experience, I concentrated on his suggestion that, following his conversion, the divine nature was in some fashion imaged in the appearance of the sensory world. But Edwards is interested in more than simply the idea that the sensory world can, under appropriate conditions, image the divine nature. As we have seen, he remarks that 'God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature...' And although he does not make this point explicitly here, I take it that the divine nature's capacity to appear in these terms is, for Edwards, a consequence of the fact that this same nature sustains the world in being, so that

its character is in some fashion impressed upon the sensory world. So the imaging relation with which Edwards is concerned derives from the fact that the thing imaged (namely, the divine nature) is causally present in the image. On this point, his example differs from the case where a Gothic church images the heavenly city. We would be reluctant to say, I think, that the heavenly city is present in the Gothic church when the church serves as an image of the city. But on Edwards's account, it makes good sense to say both that the divine nature is imaged in the sensory world, and that the divine nature is present in the sensory world as that which appears or is made manifest there.

There is perhaps a rough analogy here with the case where I press a piece of cloth to my face so that it reveals the lineaments of my face. In this case, the cloth images my face. A second piece of cloth which has just by chance fallen into the relevant shape would also present an image of my face. But we would not wish to say in this second case that my face 'appears' in the cloth, or that my face is present in the cloth. But these ways of speaking seem to be perfectly in order in the first case, assuming that there is here not only an imaging relation, but also a relation of causal sustaining. Suppose that there is a third piece of cloth which owes its shape to being pressed to my face, but which does not, even so, image my face. (Perhaps it has been pressed to my face in a somewhat haphazard way.) Of this cloth too, we would be reluctant to say, I think, that my face appears in the cloth. But if we can affirm both that the cloth owes its shape right now to the impress of my face right now, and that it thereby images my face, then we have some reason to use Edwards's kind of language, and to say that my face 'appears' there. So here we have one way of developing the thought that it is not simply that the divine nature (or some associated reality) may be imaged by the material world, but also that the divine nature can appear in, or be bodied forth in, or 'embodied in', the material world in so far as that nature is imaged by the material world and is here and now the source of that imaging relation.

Let me consider briefly one further way of elaborating upon the thought that God can be embodied in the sensory world. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited prisoners that 'as often as you have done this to one of these my lowliest brothers and sisters, you have done it to me'.⁸ Some commentators have wanted to take this passage at its word, and to suppose that when we treat such people decently, it's not just that we treat people who are in the relevant respect *like*

⁸ Matthew 25: 40. I have based this translation on the English rendering of the text given in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, tr. J. E. Crouch (Minneapolis MN 2005), 264.

Jesus with decency, but that we treat *him* decently. To take one example, Gregory of Nyssa supposes that since Christ and other human beings share a single nature, a person who fails in their regard for another human being will thereby fail in their regard for Christ, and for all who can be counted as human.⁹ We might put this point by saying, for example, that to insult (gratuitously) a given human being is to insult human nature, and thereby to insult each and every human being. On this account, it is not only afflicted human beings (those who are hungry and so on) who are drawn into the relevant moral relation to Christ, but all of us in so far as we share a single nature. It is not difficult to multiply examples of this stronger reading of our text, which takes it to mean more than simply ‘like me’, from across the Christian tradition, though no doubt it remains a minority view.¹⁰ Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that this reading is warranted. In that case, we have another perspective on the thought that God can be embodied in the material world. Of course, Christians in general have wanted to say that the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. But on this reading of Matthew’s text, we can also say that in our dealings with other human beings in general (and perhaps especially in our dealings with afflicted human beings), we encounter Christ himself, and therefore God, in so far as Christ is both human and divine. And in this extended sense, we may say that God is embodied not only in Christ, but in humankind in general. Let’s see if we can press this thought a little further.

We can distinguish the case where I experience another human being as a person who is embodied from the case where I experience them as a body while bracketing out or perhaps even suppressing any thought of their personal significance.¹¹ We might take pornographic experience, in so far as it brackets out the personhood of the other, to illustrate the second of these

⁹ See for instance Gregory’s comment: ‘In condemning the sickness that preys upon the body of this man, you fail to consider whether you might be, in the process condemning yourself and all nature. For you yourself belong to the common nature of all. Treat all therefore as one common reality.’ The passage appears in Gregory’s sermon ‘On the Saying, “Whoever Has Done It to One of These Has Done It to Me”’ and is reproduced in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford 2001), 201. I am grateful to Morwenna Ludlow for this reference.

¹⁰ A well-known medieval example of the same sort of view can be found in the story of Martin of Tours. Having given half his tunic to a beggar, Martin had a dream in which Christ said that it was he who had received the tunic. See Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 272. See too Sarah Coakley’s discussion of Gregory of Nazianzus’s reading of the same passage from Matthew: ‘The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor’, in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids MI 2008), 301–319.

¹¹ As Roger Scruton comments, we can distinguish between ‘an interest in a person’s body and an interest in a person *as embodied*’: Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford 2009), 47.

kinds of experience. Such an experience is evidently very different morally and phenomenologically from one which is infused by the recognition of the person as a person. So while as a matter of fact, it is a person whom I encounter in my experience of another human being, this truth may not be manifest to me directly in the sensory appearances. Similarly, we might suppose (following Gregory's reading of our text) that while it is in fact Christ whom I encounter in my dealings with another human being, it is a further matter for that person's identification with Christ to be presented to me in the sensory appearances. But to the extent that this truth about their relation to Christ can be rendered in the person's appearance, then we may say not only that God can be encountered in another human being, by virtue of the incarnation, but also that God can be presented to me as God, or as Christ, in the appearance of the person. On this second perspective, God is embodied in the sensory order in a particularly radical sense, in so far as the fact of divine embodiment is itself manifest in the sensory appearances.

What would it take for Christ to be presented in the appearance of another person? I am not going to pursue this question at any length here, but by analogy with the case of the convert who takes the divine nature to be presented in the sensory appearances, we might suppose that this Christ-relative construal of another human being's identity can be rendered in the appearances in some measure in so far as the person and their needs become appropriately salient in my perceptual field, and in so far as relevant portions of this field take on an appropriate hue. And perhaps my sense of the person's Christ-relative identity may even mean that they appear to me as more fully real, in so far as this conception of their identity also involves a new and extended assessment of their causal potentialities.

SACRAMENTAL SENSIBILITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD

In concluding, let me try to draw out some of the implications of the picture we have been exploring for the following themes: the idea of a sacramental sensibility; a conception of the sacraments and 'ritual' more narrowly defined; and the question of how we should think of 'magic'.

I have been arguing that just as in familiar, non-religious cases, we can identify and acknowledge existential values through our enacted relationship to particular material contexts, so we can identify and acknowledge religious values through our relationship to places with relevant histories, sensory

qualities and microcosmic significance. In both the secular and the religious case, the relevant values will sometimes be apprehended directly in the responses of the body, as when the sensory qualities of a sacred site have a relatively brute or theory-independent impact on the body, and communicate some religious meaning thereby. These values can also be given due acknowledgement in the responses of the body, as when our bodily demeanour at a site is calibrated to what we know of its history. The history of a site may not be identified directly in bodily terms, but the value which attaches to the site in virtue of that history can be acknowledged in our bodily demeanour, when we are present at the place; and in some cases our appreciation of what kind of bodily demeanour would be most congruent with this history may depend upon an intelligence ‘in the body’, rather than upon any process of ratiocination. For the more metaphysically adventurous, this sort of account can be supplemented by supposing that in sustaining the world, God impresses something of the divine nature upon the world, or by supposing that by virtue of the incarnation, it is Christ whom we encounter in our relations with other people. And we might add that these truths too can be acknowledged and reckoned with not only in abstractly doctrinal terms, but in the sensory appearances, in so far as the appearances display the right kind of salience or hue, or manifest the right degree of ‘reality’.

If we understand the idea of a sacramental sensibility in these terms, then we can make some sense of the thought that a person’s religious or spiritual life may be realised not simply in what they think in some relatively abstract sort of way, but also in their bodily demeanour, and in the sensory phenomenology of their experience, in so far as bodily demeanour and phenomenology both constitute ways in which we can recognise and appropriately acknowledge ‘material expressions of a spiritual reality’. And in this way, we can also make sense of the idea that ‘spiritual practice’ is integral to a sacramental sensibility, to the extent that this sort of bodily and experiential sensitivity is likely to depend in some measure upon the person’s participation in relevant bodily disciplines, upon their acquisition and careful deployment of the requisite concepts, and in general upon a training of their powers of attention.

I have been talking of how religiously significant existential values may be embedded in particular material contexts, and speaking of a ‘sacramental sensibility’ in this regard. But what of the sacraments more narrowly construed? Thomas Aquinas writes that the sacraments:

touch the body and so produce upon it the sort of effects which are connatural to them as physical entities. But in the very act of doing so they may also operate as instruments, producing effects upon the soul in the power of God. For instance the water of baptism, by the very fact of washing the body of its own connatural power, washes the soul too in virtue of being an instrument of the divine power.¹²

On this view, in baptism, for example, God does not suspend or displace the powers which are 'connatural' to water, but instead uses those powers so as to bring about an effect that is beyond their unaided reach. So on this perspective, water achieves in baptism a kind of heightened reality, in so far as it now participates in a more encompassing, divinely ordained network of causes. (By contrast, if the powers which are connatural to water were to be suspended or displaced in baptism, then there would be a sense in which, in the sacramental context, its reality would have been diminished.) So in baptism, and in the other sacraments, the material order takes on a new and heightened significance. And the account we have been developing suggests that this sort of truth, here as elsewhere, can be registered and appropriately acknowledged not only in discursive terms, as it is in Aquinas's text, but also in our bodily demeanour and in thought-infused experience. So we should expect baptism and the other sacraments to be surrounded by relevant forms of bodily and conceptual preparation. And this is, we might suppose, part of the point of 'ritual' in this context. The stylised gestures and forms of words which we associate with baptism and the other sacraments do not serve simply to instruct us in abstractly conceptual terms of what the sacrament signifies. They also help to inform us perceptually, so that in our experience of the sacramental scene, and in our registering of its significance in bodily terms, the sacrament is fittingly received. Although I shall not develop the point here, we might add that the history of the sacraments (and perhaps especially of the Eucharist) also calls for acknowledgement in the form of relevant gestures and habits of seeing.

Aquinas's doctrine of 'connaturality' (as he develops it here, in relation to the sacraments) points towards a broadly sacramental picture of reality as a whole: God acts we might say by setting material things within a larger, God-directed teleology, which does not subvert the natural tendencies of those things, but draws out those tendencies into a more encompassing set of possibilities. This is we might say the nature of divine love: we are invited

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 62. 1, ad 2, in *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 56, *The Sacraments*, tr. D. Bourke (Blackfriars 1975).

hereby into a new set of potentialities which calls for the completion or fulfilment or perfection (and not the displacement or annihilation) of the potentialities which are ours by nature. And in so far as material things in general have that sort of significance (and not only the sort of significance that we recognise when they are understood from a purely secular point of view), then we should expect there to be a form of life and experience (consisting in the relevant kinds of bodily demeanour and habits of perception) in which these truths are fittingly identified and acknowledged.

Lastly, what should we make of magic in that case? Well, the term 'magic' admits of course of many meanings. But if when we think of magic, our focus is upon the capacity of words and gestures to effect some transformation in the material world, then perhaps we should allow that there is a sense in which we can speak of, for example, a 'Christian magic'. This 'magic' invites us to engage in certain practices of intellectual and bodily formation, and to enter thereby a correlative perceptual world – one which is characterised by its own patterns of salience, and by its own 'colouring' and sense of reality. And we might add that this sort of magic is especially remarkable – for here we are concerned not with a change in some narrowly delimited sphere of experience, but with a transformation of the world as a whole.

Arguments for a Symbol Theory of Embodied Religion

A Response to Mark Wynn

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ABSTRACT

Within a scientistic view of the world, rituals and sacraments are suspect. They are often invoked as proof of the incompatibility of religion and modernity. Mark Wynn employs important theoretical and phenomenological arguments against this widespread view. These arguments allow for a non-reductionist understanding of everyday and religious experience. In my reply I reconstruct these considerations in the context of a symbol theory that incorporates insights of philosophical anthropology and the contemporary theory of emotion. In this light, metaphorical language about rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God or religion can be approached with interpretative strategies that can take criticisms into account.

KEYWORDS

symbol theory, rituals, sacraments

This paper presents some critical (but constructive) remarks, directed less at the arguments put forward by Mark Wynn than at the dismissive attitude toward religious symbols implied by this session's subtitle, 'Beyond a purely symbolic religion.' I aim to show that rituals and sacraments make

sense as embodiments of God only within – not beyond – symbol theory. My approach to symbol theory relies on a framework that departs from symbol theory proper, encompassing a whole set of methods for understanding embodied religion. The plausibility of my claim will be measured in large part by whether I succeed in reformulating the sense of ‘purely symbolic’ in terms of symbol theory.

Before sketching out my position, I consider Mark Wynn’s nuanced arguments for a theory of religious experience that he believes paves the way for an understanding of rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God. I begin with our (many) points of agreement. I then identify some problems that lead me to pursue a symbol theory approach to embodied religion.

1. MEANINGS AND EMBODIMENTS OF GOD

Mark Wynn’s text begins with a germane – and, in my view, spot-on – observation: the scientistic worldview has the coercive tendency to see rituals and sacraments as deficient forms of engagement with the world. According to scientism’s naturalist epistemology, rituals and sacraments originate in a prescientific stage of civilization superseded by modern empiricism. In this view, not only rituals and sacraments but also positive religion itself (of which rituals and sacraments are essential embodiments) represent hold-overs from an outdated era.

A recent court ruling in Germany offers a forceful example of scientism at work. A four-year-old Muslim boy was hospitalized due to complications arising from a circumcision procedure he underwent a few days earlier, leading a local prosecutor to file criminal charges against the doctor who performed the operation. The judges at the regional appellate court in Cologne who presided over the case ruled that non-therapeutic circumcision inflicts permanent and irreparable damage to the body and without consent is tantamount to criminal assault. A political uproar followed the court’s decision, with the vast majority of Germans supporting the legality of ritual male circumcision. The ruling and the strong public reaction it provoked exemplify the conflict between the naturalist epistemology of modern medicine and a belief system that makes exceptions for traditional religious rituals.

According to Wynn, this conflict affects the very foundations of a theory of religious experience, and once again I agree. He argues that our idea of religious experience must, therefore, reject the assumptions of scientism.

That is to say, a philosophy of religion cannot be grounded on a concept of experience borrowed from naturalist epistemology. If we did, then religious values would wind up becoming isolated phenomena in a scientistic ontology and we'd be forced to see them in pejorative light.

Wynn attributes scientism's reductionist approach to the analytic tradition, which, as we all know, was greatly shaped by logical positivism. Before anyone raises objections – pointing out the variety of views within the analytical philosophy of religion and the numerous corrections to logical positivism that have been offered over the years – we should see Wynn's claim for what it is: a pointed generalization, and in this sense it can hardly be denied; quite the contrary. Something like a scientist tendency accompanies the West's entire religious history. In every period of Western civilization, movements arose that overemphasized the discursive side of religious experience and that provoked counter movements in return. For instance, medieval scholastics such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham warned against the convergence of knowledge and faith, a concern that culminated in Luther's ideas about religious belief. When the intellectualism of Protestant orthodoxy grew too powerful, the Pietists sought to ground faith in personal devoutness. Any remaining rationalist hopes of securing religion through metaphysical knowledge were dashed once and for all by Kant, who claimed that an unbridgeable gap separated knowledge and faith – a tenet Schleiermacher would later take up as well, albeit in an entirely different way.

How should we address today's scientist approach to religious experience, which is far more virulent than its historical manifestations? I want to highlight two basic methodological premises made by Wynn that I find supremely helpful in this regard. First, Wynn couches his approach to religion in a theory of meaning. Religion – however we understand it – has always been bound up with meanings we can access through understanding. That is, religious or spiritual beliefs always reveal themselves to us as meanings we can understand. One particular advantage of seeing religion this way is that it spans philosophical traditions, uniting positions in continental theories of consciousness, in language philosophy, in theology and in hermeneutics.

Connected to this approach is Wynn's second premise: religious understanding must be distinguished from everyday understanding. For Wynn, this holds true – especially so – even when we acknowledge the structures they have in common.

This twofold approach shapes Wynn's very notion of meaning. His concept of 'existential meanings' takes into account the fact that we understand meanings not only theoretically, discursively and inferentially but also practically. In our everyday dealings with the world we have a special access to meaning that grounds our interactions with the environment. We can attempt to describe these existential meanings abstractly, but such descriptions never capture the actual richness of meaning we experience, and, at any rate, we rarely think about such everyday meanings on a meta-level.

For Wynn, existential meanings are tied to two central elements: bodily movements and place-relative contexts. Both these elements are crucial for religious experience. Just as existential meanings are 'embedded in particular material contexts' (90) to which we adjust our bodily movements, so too are sacraments and rituals. In the second section of his paper, Wynn specifically considers the phenomenology of sacred sites. He identifies many parallels between the meanings experienced at sacred sites and existential meanings in general, which leads him to conclude that the former are a special case of the latter. That is to say: not all existential meanings have religious meaning, but all religious meanings have existential meaning – the kind we register via bodily interactions with a specific place. For Wynn, religious meaning is a kind of microcosmic meaning in that it contains a holistic perspective. Microcosmic meanings may reveal themselves at sacred sites but also in per se nonreligious contexts where we feel a spatial relationship to our biography as a whole (places of childhood) or where we experience nature in a certain light.

The link between existential and microcosmic meanings forces Wynn to consider the epistemic structure of existential meanings in general and of microcosmic meanings in particular. In a somewhat surprising move given his initial arguments, Wynn does this by turning to the role of concepts. He argues that sensory phenomena represent religious meaning only when abstract concepts (divine nature, say) participate in the experience. Yet this does not contradict his basic idea that religious experience is not primarily theoretical or doctrinal; our abstract religious concepts must inhabit the sensory world and be registered by us directly in experience, which is why on several occasions he speaks of the body's own intelligence (77, 90). Wynn seeks to further support his argument with the notions of 'salience,' 'hue,' and the 'newly real,' but, to my mind, the main argumentative burden for Wynn lies on the previous claims that I reconstruct above and that ultimately ground his understanding of sacramental and ritual practice.

This brings me to some criticisms of Wynn's position. I begin with his section on 'Sensory Experience and the Embodiment of God.' There, if I understand him correctly, he draws a distinction that tries to account for the attitude expressed in the *beyond a purely symbolic religion* of the session subtitle. The distinction he makes is between a simple imaging relation and an imaging relation in which 'the thing imagined . . . is causally present in the image,' i.e. one in which divine nature, say, 'can appear in, or be bodied forth in, or "embodied in", the material world' (87). In traditional Christian dogmatics, the later phenomenon concerns the question of God's 'real presence,' a question that arises with particular vehemence in the doctrine of the sacraments. Wynn supports this distinction with several allusions to creation theology – he speaks of 'causal sustaining' and God's 'sustaining the world' (87, 90) – but the main thrust of his argumentation springs from incarnational Christology. His claim goes somewhat like this: if Jesus is the incarnation of God, then the sensory appearance of human beings is the embodiment, or manifestation, of God in a real sense. The moral lesson from this claim is poignant: the dignity of all persons must be acknowledged based on their sensory appearance alone. But this moral argument does not provide a sufficient theological justification for Wynn's position, as it can be argued from a universalist standpoint, which needs no theology. Neither does the doctrine of incarnation, beset as it is by a whole nest of philosophical problems. Wynn's final section, which applies his view to sacraments and rituals, provides no additional attempts at justification. Rather, Wynn describes his account as something 'for the more metaphysically adventurous' (90). Without denying in principle the possibility of such a metaphysics, I see Wynn's ontological assumption as unproven. Moreover, the idea of a supernatural causality, which runs through medieval theology, contradicts Wynn's initial idea: eschewing the scientistic paradigm when developing a philosophical theory of religious rituals and sacraments.

In the following section, I turn to symbol theory to provide an alternative account, especially regarding the reality of rituals and sacraments. I begin by asking what exactly Mark Wynn means when he says that existential meanings are inhabited, or embedded, in material contexts. In conclusion, I offer some thoughts on Wynn's question about the epistemic character of nondiscursive understanding.

2. THREE APPROACHES TO EMBODIED RELIGION

2.1. How do we explain the phenomena of pre-discursive understanding described by Wynn, in which we comprehend existential meanings via bodily interactions with the world? A good place to look for answers is 20th-century philosophical anthropology. One reason its insights are important today is that they draw on natural and social sciences to overcome philosophical dualism and in doing so unintentionally provide biblical anthropology (especially Old Testament anthropology) with a new theoretical language. The basic tenet of philosophical anthropology is that human beings are ‘open to the world.’ Unlike animals, which are rooted in a specific environment, human beings must actively build a world in response to the challenges of existence. Culture – the habitat human beings engineer – is their ‘second nature.’ Crucially, human interactions with the world rely on mind and body as a single unit.¹ Sensomotoric feedback loops, an especially important aspect of early child development, guide our actions in a mutually reinforcing system of sensory perception and motoric orientation.² Over time, these somatosensory operations lend the objects we perceive a symbolic character: we immediately grasp their usefulness without having to interact with them directly; so unburdened, we can focus on adjusting our bodily movements to the exigencies of space. For example, we all know just by looking at a whitewashed wall which tactile or gustatory qualities it possesses without having to touch or taste it anew. This elementary symbolization takes place already at the optical level. Though these optical symbols form at the prelinguistic, or pre-discursive, level (similar to Wynn’s existential meanings), they can also develop into more complex symbols such as language.

2.2. According to the view of philosophical anthropology, our physical orientation in the world is mediated by symbols that do not necessarily start

¹ The sense of body as understood by Wynn and the conference organizers conflates the human body as physical object with the human body as a vehicle for experience. The German language distinguishes between *Körper* (the physical object) and *Leib* (the living body). In Husserl’s phenomenology, the concept of *Leib* plays a central role in overcoming dualistic anthropology. For more on the German notion of *Leib*, see Emmanuel Alloa a.o. (eds.), *Leiblichkeit: Geschichte und Aktualität eines Konzepts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

² For more on feedback loops, see Arnold Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). For more on Gehlen’s anthropology and its influence on the philosophy of religion, see Friedrich Ley, *Arnold Gehlens Begriff der Religion: Ritual – Institution – Subjektivität* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

out linguistic or discursive. Do such symbols play a role in our religious understanding? Let us recall Mark Wynn's premise that specific differences exist between nonreligious and religious forms of understanding. If symbols make religious understanding possible, then there must exist similar differences between symbols as well. Now the anthropological notion of the symbol I have sketched so far is quite broad. It is equivalent to the definition of *cognitio symbolica* in the enlightened hermeneutics of Scholastic philosophy, which understood the symbol as a cognition mediated by a sign. This unspecific understanding can be found in Schleiermacher's idea of symbolic action or in Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. But there also exists a *narrower* idea of the symbol that restricts it to a certain kind of sign. The bulk of this tradition goes back to Immanuel Kant, who understood symbolic cognition as a specific subclass of intuitive cognition (*cognitio intuitiva*) rather than its opposite, as argued by the Scholastics. For Kant, the true antithesis of symbolic cognition is discursive cognition, i.e. cognition through concepts.³

In addition to linking symbolic cognition with intuitive cognition, Kant emphasized religion's need for symbols. Not surprisingly, further contributions to the philosophy of religion have taken much inspiration from Kant's ideas. For instance, Paul Tillich and Paul Ricœur both essentially argue that the language of religion consists of symbols.⁴ Although Tillich and Ricœur start from very different premises,⁵ they agree for the most part that symbols are a class of signs whose indirect and intuitive meaning points beyond itself to a secondary, transcendent meaning. Symbols, thus, have a double intentionality. They represent everyday objects but also render sensible that which transcends representation. The transcendent meaning of symbols, like Wynn's religious forms of understanding, is not entirely irrational; it displays a certain inner logic, which, traditionally, has been understood as a form of analogy. The transcendent meaning ultimately exceeds the finite horizon of discursive imagination. Here lies the affinity between symbols and religious

³ On the intellectual history of the symbol, see Andreas Kubik, *Die Symboltheorie bei Novalis: Eine ideengeschichtliche Studie in ästhetischer und theologischer Absicht* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 25–80.

⁴ See Paul Tillich, 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols,' in *Writings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 417 and Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 8.

⁵ Tillich relies on a theory of the unconditional; Ricœur takes a phenomenological approach.

understanding – and, on the other hand, the reason transcendent meaning must be rendered sensible.⁶

It should be clear from my brief sketch so far that the phenomena Mark Wynn analyses contain classic examples from symbol theory. A distinguishing feature of religious meaning is its ability to transport an experience of totality that affects reality as such or signifies in it a deep dimension that transcends everyday experience. Religious meaning is not intuitive in itself; to be able to imagine it at all, we must register it in sensory form. When Wynn argues that meanings ‘are embodied in material contexts,’ he describes the basic mechanism of the symbol.

This why we find at the heart of Wynn’s ideas about the relationship between sensory appearance and religious understanding the classical topos of religious aesthetics: the experience of grandeur, also known as the sublime. Kant believes the sublime comes in two forms: the mathematical sublime (things that have great magnitude) and the dynamic sublime (things that have great power).⁷ According to Tillich and Ricœur, not only linguistic signs can be understood as symbols in the narrower sense of the term; cultic acts and rituals can as well. Such activities and objects are made comprehensible by virtue of the symbolic function of language.

Although more can be said about the sublime and its relationship to symbolic cognition, I now want to address the suspicion that symbols are ‘purely’ symbolic – that they inadequately describe God’s reality – as this session’s title appears to insinuate. This suspicion is nothing new. As early as 1925, Tillich addressed misgivings about symbols, and he almost succeeded in eliminating them. In his view, the ‘nothing more’ of the symbolic was, in truth, a ‘nothing less,’ as without symbols we misjudge actual religious practice, if not close ourselves off to religious meaning entirely. But the actual argument used by Tillich and Ricœur to explain the symbol’s dialectic was this: religious meaning can only appear in the form of symbols.⁸ And, as I

⁶ See Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 10–18; and Paul Tillich, ‘The Religion Symbol,’ in *Writings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 213–28.

⁷ For more on Kant’s notion of the sublime, see Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 23–29, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 98–146. Wynn’s concept of ‘hue’ corresponds to that of the sublime (12); his notions of ‘salience’ (11) and ‘the newly real’ (12–13) describe the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime, respectively.

⁸ Tillich implies so much in his *Religionsphilosophie* when he chooses to discuss symbolic action and language not in the first part (‘The Essence of Religion’) but in the second, titled ‘The Philosophical

have argued, religious meaning is embodied in actions, objects and words whose intuitive meanings are finite. Indeed, on close examination, we discover that *symbols need reality*. It is precisely in this sense that we refer to the transcendent *through* symbols without representing the transcendent as itself as 'purely' symbolic. This paradox between the infinite meaning of content and the finite meaning of form explains also the need from within positive religion to criticize its own finite manifestations. Think of the positions taken in the Jewish prophecy movement, in Early Christianity, in Monasticism, in the Christian sects, in Protestantism, or in the conflicts about the status of the sacraments. The telos of religious history in this respect is the full awareness of the symbol *as* symbol *in* the symbol. For Tillich it is at least the concrete, Christological symbol of a self-sacrificing intermediary that is paradigmatic; but so too are rituals, which as active performances prevent symbolic meaning as it pertains to objects from coagulating, so to speak. Both these examples – Christ as sacrifice and rituals as active performances – make explicit that even the most inverted symbols need a meaning in everyday reality to express transcendent meaning. This point was best emphasized by Ricœur, who in his hermeneutics of symbols also demonstrated its truth.

2.3. We are left with the question as to the epistemology of symbolic understanding. As I mention above, Wynn too poses this question and hints that its answer lies in concepts, which he believes both inform our sensory experiences of religious meaning and develop from them. But this suggestion, as well as Wynn's idea that we are guided by the 'body's own intelligence,' does not identify the specific epistemic form of religious understanding.

The beginnings of a real answer, I argue, can be taken from recent studies in the philosophy of emotion, and I believe Wynn would follow me in this. Unlike previous generations of theorists, in the last 15 years or so philosophers have sought to prove that emotions possess a specific form of rationality or intelligence.⁹ Despite their many differences, they all agree that emotions neither result from propositional or discursive beliefs nor represent subject-

Doctrine of Appearance.' See Paul Tillich, *Religionsphilosophie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, I (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959), 294–364.

⁹ See, for instance, Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

tive states or desires. Rather, emotions are states that represent and evaluate objects in a specific sort of way. But what these philosophers deliberately overlook is that this understanding of emotions was already put forth in the classic texts of religious phenomenology. The German theologian Rudolf Otto, for instance, rejects the idea that the emotion of the numinous is an irrational condition existing only in opposition to rationality. Instead he argues that it is a 'category of value and [...] a definitely "numinous" state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied.'¹⁰ In our emotional response to experience, the world – and with it, our very selves – appears in a new 'hue,' to borrow Wynn's expression. From this perspective, emotions can be seen as mental correlates of religious symbols and as forms of religious understanding. Neither for Otto nor for recent philosophers of emotion does this perspective speak in favour of irrationalism. Rather, it provides a more complete idea of rationality, including the rationality of religious symbols. And since emotions belong to the embodied soul we have a quite narrow sense of embodied religion.

¹⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 7.

Section III:

NEUROSCIENCE AND FREE WILL

CAN WE STILL SAY THAT WE 'ARE CALLED TO BE FREE'?

Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution I explain what the libertarian conception of free will is, and why it is of moral and religious importance. Consequently, I defend this conception of free will against secular and religious charges. After that, I present and evaluate neuroscientific experiments on free will, especially Benjamin Libet's experiments. I argue that Libet's experiments do not decide the debate between compatibilist and incompatibilist conceptions of free will; that is a conceptual issue and not an empirical one. Nor do Libet's experiments count against the libertarian conception of free will that I defend, because they deal with arbitrary actions rather than actions that we do for a reason. I conclude by summing up the case for a libertarian conception of free will, giving attention especially to a religious reason for preferring this conception.

KEYWORDS

free will, libertarianism, compatibilism, incompatibilism, Benjamin Libet

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, neuroscience is booming and in its wake, belief in free will is on the decline. In this contribution I will inquire (1) how free will and morality are connected and (2) how free will and Christian

faith are connected. Moreover, (3) I will give a brief survey of neuroscientific findings on free will. Consequently, (4) I will discuss the claim that Christian faith and/or morality are threatened by neuroscientific findings on free will. To what extent is this the case? In light of the complexity of the field, it is inevitable that I simplify some of the issues. If, however, I succeed in providing a conceptual map of the main issues, in demythologizing some contemporary myths and in indicating what are the main issues that deserve further discussion in the philosophy of religion, I will consider my mission for this contribution to be completed.

FREE WILL: INTRODUCTORY CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATIONS

A quarter of an hour ago, at 7:30 on 27 February 2012, I have begun to write down my paper for the ESPR conference 2012. Though the deadline for this paper has already elapsed and the second speaker of the ESPR session on neuroscience and free will is eagerly awaiting my first paper, I might have postponed the writing of the paper even further. I *decided*, however, that further postponement would be irresponsible and I started writing. Now let's step back and take a look at what I have just said. I have claimed that the fact that I started to write this paper did not just *happen* to me, was not the result of a chain of events inevitably leading to it (e.g., mail exchanges with Peter Jonkers and Aku Visala), but was the result of my decision. In my experience, it was I who took the decision; I am in charge and responsible, both for the fact that there is a delay and for the fact that there is to be no further delay. I am aware, of course, that external factors have influenced me. If I had not received reminders I would probably have given precedence to yet another paper. Nevertheless, the fact that I have begun today is the result of *my* decision.

This is, I submit, what is involved in a common sense view of free will. Note that the word 'will' does not appear in this account. It is not needed. The point is that ordinarily, *I* take my decisions and commit my actions. I just added *ordinarily*, because most people would claim that this is the default position, but would have no problem in admitting that there would be exceptions. Under the influence of alcohol, for instance, people apparently do things that they would ordinarily not have done: Alcohol reduces our control. That is one of the reasons why we should control our consumption of alcohol. Medicine may have a similar effect – even though we may not be aware

of that when taking it – and so may some psychological conditions. These exceptions do not endanger the default position that *I am in control*. Moreover, most people would readily admit that even under ordinary circumstances, they do not control themselves entirely. Our actions are rooted in a bodily basis, a physiological pattern that is given to us, perpetuating itself automatically. This stable pattern of bodily activity – heart beat, respiration, blood circulation – may be under our control to a very limited extent only (if I stop these processes, that is the end of my career as an agent), but that is not considered as threatening my control. As Thomas F. Tracy has argued, ‘this stable pattern of bodily activity provides the foundation for the life of an *agent* because it permits a margin of intentional variation.’¹ In other words, our actions are rooted in a bodily substrate that is to a large extent given to us; this does not threaten our being agents but enable it, as long as we are able to control our body to some extent. The more control, the more freedom to act. That is why we take trouble to increase the control of our bodies (whether it is in learning to walk or in learning to play the piano): it increases our range of actions.

The above may be summarized as follows: freedom is always freedom *of*, freedom *to* and freedom *from*, and freedom involves *control*. *Freedom of*: A free act is not an arbitrary act; it is the act *of someone*. My action is explained by *me*, by *my decision*. In many cases those who know me can to a certain extent predict me. *Freedom to*: It is the freedom to start writing a paper or to delay that start; more generally, it is the ability to do something or to abstain from it. *Freedom from*: Freedom is always freedom *from* compulsion: when I am free, the causal antecedents of my action do not make that action inevitable. *Control*: If the agent does not control the action, but the action is random, it is not free. *Absolute freedom*, then, does not exist.

In our daily lives, we consider freedom to be important. Why? *On a secular level*, I think, because we see freedom as a necessary condition for responsibility: No responsibility without control. If an agent does not act freely, she cannot be held responsible for her actions. In other words, persons who are not free from compulsion or who did not have alternatives, cannot be held responsible. This also means that our legal system is based on the assumption that in principle, people are free. To the extent that they are not, they are in a state of diminished responsibility and qualify for reduction of

¹ Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 104.

sentence. Freedom is important in other domains of life as well. Our whole way of thinking about love and friendship assumes that we are free to choose with whom we will have these relationships. The fact that a person freely chooses me for a friend is one of the things that makes his friendship valuable for me. And the fact that I am free to return his friendship or not is one of the things that make my positive response valuable to him. Moreover, one of the most influential ideals in contemporary society, that of autonomy, presupposes that we are free. We can be autonomous only to the extent that our actions are truly our own and are not caused by factors outside our control, i.e., in so far as we are free. The same applies to the political ideal of democracy: people are allowed to choose their own government on the presupposition that when they choose, this choice is *their choice*, so that the resulting government expresses *the will of the people*.

On a religious level, freedom and responsibility are not less important. Theists generally think that it matters what we believe and that it matters that we live according to our beliefs. They may even think that our final destiny depends upon it. Now if that is the case, we must again be responsible and therefore free. Even those who do not think that our final destiny depends upon the decisions we make during our lives, however, will often argue that it is of paramount importance that we return the love of God and that we love our neighbors. And here again, love requires freedom. Moreover, free will may – but need not – play a role in various contexts in theology and philosophy of religion, for example in a free will defence, an attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of a good, omnipotent and omniscient God by arguing that evil is due to human free actions for which God cannot be held responsible.

FURTHER CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATIONS: THREATS TO BELIEF IN FREE WILL²

Free will may be important, but there are a number of reasons not to believe that we actually have free will. These reasons again fall apart into two groups: secular reasons and religious reasons.

² For the philosophical distinctions introduced in this section see current introductions to free will like Joseph Keim Campbell, *Free Will* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); T.J. Mawson, *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2011); Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Determinism and Freedom Philosophy Website*, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwIntroIndex.htm> (visited 5 May 2012).

Secular reasons for not believing in free will are motivated by science. Science seeks to explain things, and in the course of doing so it lays bare causal sequences: chains of cause and effect. It is useful to be aware here of the fact that causal explanation hardly ever involves single causes: mostly, it is a causal condition rather than a single cause that explains an effect. If I turn the light switch, that may be called the cause of the room becoming illuminated; nevertheless, the room would still in darkness if the Electricity Company would not supply electricity, if my wife would not have paid the bills, etc. etc. A full causal explanation is almost always complicate rather than simple. A full causal complication, moreover, does not only include causes, but also the causes of these causes etc. In principle, for each cause science may legitimately ask for the cause of that. It is here that a tension with belief in free will emerges, for as we have just seen, this belief supposes that the explanation of free actions has an end in the person who acts, or in that person's free will. If I claim that I did a certain action, I do not claim my act of will is a full explanation for that action; circumstances like those just mentioned (e.g., there being electricity) will invariably figure in full explanations of my actions. But I do claim that my choice is not explained by a chain of cause and effect that stretches back for an indefinite time: It was I who made the choice or committed the action, and if this is merely an appropriation of a particular part of a chain of causes and effects that in no way differs from other chains of cause and effect like those determining the weather or the orbits of the planets, it becomes meaningless to claim that my act is a free act.

This comes down to the claim that free will and determinism are incompatible, a claim that I would like to defend. I defend indeterminism with respect to human choices and actions, therefore; I do not take position here with respect to the choice between determinism and indeterminism in a more general or cosmic way. Indeterminism with respect to human choices and actions is compatible both with cosmic determinism and cosmic indeterminism, I submit.³ It is important to note, however, that in the philosophical literature on free will and determinism another position is frequently defended: Simultaneous acceptance of determinism and free will, made possible by a revised, more limited definition of free will. Because this view of free will

³ In that case, of course, cosmic determinism becomes determinism with an exception: Free will. From now on, I will use '(in)determinism' in the limited sense of (in)determinism with respect to human choices and actions only, not in the wider sense of cosmic (in)determinism.

is compatible with determinism, it is called the compatibilist view of free will. *Compatibilists* assert that if an action is voluntary in the sense that we are not compelled to do it against our will, that action is free. Most philosophers would admit that determinism leaves room for actions that are free in this sense: Determinism asserts that insofar as we have a will, that will is the effect of a causal sequence (genetic factors and environmental factors) as well, but it does not assert that our actions take place against that will. For these philosophers, this compatibilist form of free will is sufficient for responsibility. For them, I would say, appropriation of the action is more important than control or origination (in the sense of having done the action while being able not to do the action).

The opposite of compatibilism is *incompatibilism*; incompatibilists defend *libertarian free will*, that is to say they defend that if a person freely commits an action, this person should have been able to act otherwise as well. Mere identification with an action is insufficient for full responsibility, incompatibilists hold. We generally hold that this applies to other persons' actions: identifying with someone else's terrorist attack is morally repugnant, but does not bring full moral and legal responsibility for that attack with it. Incompatibilists hold that this also applies to one's own actions: if one could not avoid one's own actions because these are fully causally determined, identification with or appropriation of these actions does not suffice to make one fully morally and legally responsible. I am not going to argue in full for this view here. I suggest, however, that most compatibilists will to a certain extent share my intuition with respect to identification being insufficient for responsibility; the reason they nevertheless reject a libertarian view of free will is that they judge that it is either indefensible in light of the findings of science, or has never yet been articulated in a philosophically acceptable way. By confronting some of the scientific findings that are the most difficult to accommodate within a libertarian view of free will, those of the Libet experiments, later on in this paper, I hope to take away at least part of their objections to libertarian free will.

Religious reasons for not believing in free will are motivated by the Christian understanding of either God's foreknowledge, providence or predestination. *Providence* and predestination, if they are well understood, constitute no problems for free will, I submit. When we say that God is provident, we say that God guides nature, history and individual lives in accordance with God's goals. If we are determinists as outlined above, we may believe that God can fully determine nature, history and individual lives; if we

are not, we can interpret God's providence in terms of a salvific influence that in no way hinders free will. *Predestination* is about one's eternal destiny rather than about one's free choices; this doctrine wants to assert that human salvation is entirely dependent upon God, not upon human choice. Contrary to what is often thought, even the strictest form of predestination, double predestination, is compatible with libertarian free will. Predestinarian theologies do assert that there are limits to free will, of course: one cannot will oneself to salvation. That there are limits to free will, however, is a general given of experience: I cannot by the exertion of free will jump to the moon or become a marathon champion either, because the first is impossible and the second is impossible for me, given my lack of talents in this field.

Foreknowledge is a different cup of tea, I think, because the assertion of full foreknowledge does create problems for libertarian free will. If God knows all free acts in advance, these acts are determined when God knows them and the actors lack the ability to act otherwise. For determinists this is not a problem; it is merely another argument against libertarian free will. Incompatibilists like myself have two options available. Firstly, they may – with Augustine and Boethius – assert that God does not exist in time but eternally, which means that He lacks temporal location and extension. Foreknowledge is then no longer *foreknowledge*; God does not know in time. Ingenious attempts have been made to show how eternal existence can yield omniscience with respect to temporal events and (free) actions even if determinism is not true.⁴ Personally, I don't believe that these attempts work; as soon as one uncovers their hidden inconsistencies, a hidden determinism is uncovered as well.⁵ That is why I opt for another possibility: God has limited knowledge of the future only: 'It is logically impossible for God to know with certainty the future choices to be made by free persons. This should not be seen as a denial of omniscience, any more than it is a denial of omnipotence that God cannot perform actions that are logically impossible.'⁶

Though there is a tension between divine foreknowledge and libertarian free will, then, there is no need to resolve this tension in such a way that lib-

⁴ Eleonore Stump & Norman Kretzmann, 'Eternity,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 78/8 (August 1981), 429–458, reprinted in: Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *The Concept of God* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 219–252.

⁵ Marcel Sarot, 'Omniscient and Eternal God,' in: M. Wisse, M. Sarot & W. Otten (eds.), *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 280–302.

⁶ William Hasker, 'Analytic Philosophy of Religion,' in: William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 421–446, quot. 437.

ertarian free will is denied. Since I have argued above that libertarian free will is important to theism, the upshot of the religious considerations concerning libertarian free will seems to be in favour of it. It seems that the findings of science are a more serious problem for those who want to ascribe libertarian free will to human beings than the beliefs of Christendom. Let us now turn, therefore, to the findings of science, and more specifically to those of Benjamin Libet.

BENJAMIN LIBET'S EXPERIMENTS ON FREE WILL

Benjamin Libet's experiments on free will did not come out of the blue. In these experiments, he built on earlier experiments that suggested that conscious awareness of certain brain processes was delayed by 500 milliseconds, and that people in hindsight often think that their conscious experiences took place at an earlier moment than they in fact did ('backward referral').⁷ In the most famous experiment in which Libet brings empirical evidence to bear on the question whether we have free will,⁸ he starts from the fact that if people perform self-initiated voluntary acts, like a quick flexion of the fingers or wrist, a DC system with an active electrode on the scalp can measure a slow electrical change at the vertex that precedes the actual movement by up to 1 second or more. This electrical change is called the readiness potential (RP). In other words, approximately a second elapses between the first perceptible brain change (RP) and the actual movement. Libet knew, as we all know, that our conscious decision to move precedes our movements. He doubted, however, whether the time between conscious decision and actual movement is as long as a second. If the time was smaller, that would mean that brain changes leading to the movement were beginning before the conscious decision was made. In order to ascertain whether this really is the case, he devised an ingenious clock, an oscilloscope timer, which has a dot that moves at approximately 25 times the speed of the

⁷ On these experiments, see Adina L. Roskies, 'Why Libet's Studies Don't Pose a Threat to Free Will,' in: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong & Lynn Nadel (eds.), *Conscious Will and Responsibility: A Tribute to Benjamin Libet* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 11–14.

⁸ Libet began to publish about these experiments in the early 1980s. For an elegant and famous summary of his findings, see Benjamin Libet, 'Do We Have Free Will?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/8–9 (1999), 47–57; reprinted in Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 551–564 and in Sinnott-Armstrong & Nadel (eds.), *Conscious Will*, 1–10.

sweep-second hand of an ordinary clock. The ‘seconds’ at the dial of this clock were equivalent to about 40 milliseconds. Experiments show that subjects using such a clock can report the actual time at which a weak electrical stimulus was delivered to their skins with an error of only -50 milliseconds. When Libet asked subjects to indicate the moment of their actual conscious decision at this clock, he found that RP started 550 milliseconds before the act, human subjects became aware of the intention to act 350–400 msec after RP and 200 msec before the actual motor act. Even admitting an error of -50msec, this would still place the conscious decision firmly after the RP.

Many scholars conclude from Libet’s experiments to free will scepticism, so much so that Benjamin Libet, Anthony Freeman and Keith Sutherland write that

Much of the contemporary case for the illusory nature of free will is derived from the experimental work of Libet and his colleagues⁹

and Tim Bayne calls

Libet’s studies concerning the neural basis of human agency ... the most influential rebutting [of free will – MS] objection in the current literature.¹⁰

Libet’s alleged objection is reinforced by more recent experiments, that suggest that we can view the process leading to free acts begin up to ten seconds before the act.¹¹ Thus, the indications that free will – if we may continue to call the process through which we make our decisions thus – is rooted in brain processes that precede (and partly elude) consciousness, become stronger and stronger. On the other hand, as John Searle has noted, ‘This experience of free will is very compelling, and even those of us who think it is

⁹ Benjamin Libet, Anthony Freeman & Keith Sutherland, ‘Editor’s Introduction: The Volitional Brain,’ *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/8–9 (1999), ix–xxiii, xvi.

¹⁰ Tim Bayne, ‘Libet and the Case for Free Will Scepticism,’ in: Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Free Will and Modern Science* (Oxford: OUP: 2011), 25–46, 26. Free will scepticists who appeal to Libet include Gerhard Roth, *Das Gehirn und seine Wirklichkeit: Kognitive Neurobiologie und ihre philosophischen Konsequenzen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994); Sean A. Spence, ‘Free Will in the Light of Neuropsychiatry,’ *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 3/2 (1996), 75–90; Dick Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein: Van baarmoeder tot alzheimer* (Amsterdam: Contact, 2010); Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

¹¹ See Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze & John-Dylan Haynes, ‘Unconscious Determinants of Free Decisions in the Human Brain,’ *Nature Neuroscience* 11 (2008), 543–545.

an illusion find that we cannot in practice act on the presupposition that it is an illusion.¹²

Libet himself is a clear example of this. He concludes from his experiment:

The volitional process is therefore *initiated* unconsciously. But the conscious function could still control the outcome; it can veto the act. Free will is therefore not excluded. These findings put constraints on views of how free will may operate; it would not initiate a voluntary act, but it could *control* performance of the act.¹³

In other words, Libet suggests that free will is not nonexistent, but operates in a different way: it does not generate our decisions but controls them. If it wants to, free will interrupts the process leading to our acts and thereby prevents them. If it endorses the act, free will gives in to the process leading to it. In the literature this is sometimes characterized as freedom of won't rather than freedom of will.¹⁴

There's a host of technical questions that could be asked about the reliability of Libet's experiments. Libet may have been the first to engage in significant empirical research on free will, but novel research designs are prone to contain errors that have to be corrected by later generations of researchers. There's the technical question, for example, if subjects who are required to divide their attention between their own action and position of the clock face are not likely to make errors in temporal order judgements.¹⁵ There's the not less technical, but crucial question whether RP reflects processes involved in initiating a movement or in forming a conscious intention.¹⁶ Since we are often unaware of our intentions (e.g., I am aware of driving, steering, accelerating, changing gear, etc. but not of the *intentions* to do all these things), becoming conscious of the intention (as required in Libet's experiments) may often temporally follow the intention itself – even though we

¹² John Searle, 'Free Will as a Problem in Neurobiology,' *Philosophy* 76 (2001), 491–514, quot. 494.

¹³ Libet, 'Do We Have Free Will?', 47.

¹⁴ Alan L. Mittleman, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics: Conduct and Character in the Context of Covenant* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 36; Sukhvinder S. Obhi & Patrick Haggard, 'Free Will and Free Won't,' *American Scientist* 92 (2004), 358–365.

¹⁵ Bayne, 'Libet and the Case for Free Will Scepticism,' 27; Roskies, 'Why Libet's Studies Don't Pose a Threat to Free Will,' 20; T.J. Mawson, *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2011), 129.

¹⁶ Roskies, 'Why Libet's Studies Don't Pose a Threat to Free Will,' 15–16.

would ordinarily call the intention itself a ‘conscious intention.’ If that is the case, we can ask: Is Libet measuring the interval between conscious intention and movement, or between consciousness of conscious intention and movement?¹⁷ While all of these questions on Libet’s experiments can be seen as throwing doubt on his results and thus supporting libertarian free will, some empirical questions go in the opposite direction. For example, if brain processes precede our conscious decision to act, is it not likely that brain processes also precede our conscious processes to veto an act? In what sense do we have ‘free won’t,’ then?¹⁸ I abstain from an in-depth discussion of these questions for three reasons. (1) Scientists themselves have not come to definitive decisions on these. (2) As long as scientists disagree, philosophers cannot do much more than pick and choose, and that with less authority than a scientist making such a choice would have. (3) We don’t need answers to all of these questions for our purposes.

The main reason why we don’t need these answers is that the type of actions that is studied in Libet’s experiments and the like, is neither morally nor religiously relevant. Spontaneously generated simple motor movements that have no real consequences do qualify as free acts for those who believe in free acts; there is no question about that. Nor is it difficult to understand why Libet studies this type of movements: In order to shed experimental light on the genesis of free actions, Libet focuses on the simplest examples. The whimsical movements that he studies, however, are hardly meaningful examples of free agency. It is not even clear that Libet studies the relation between the *intention* to act and *the act itself*. The subjects in Libet’s experiments are in fact invited to adopt a certain mental set, namely *move wrist at random moment*. The decision they have to make after this is not *whether* to move, but *when* to. And there are no reasons that govern this decision.¹⁹

It is not with pointless movements that religion and morality are concerned. They are concerned, rather, with our ability to act *for a reason*, and for a reason that we consider good. They are concerned with acts that are rooted in our deepest convictions and are the result of conscious deliberation. It is not clear that Libet-experiments shed any light on these. Adina Roskies concludes:

¹⁷ Roskies, ‘Why Libet’s Studies Don’t Pose a Threat to Free Will,’ 20–22.

¹⁸ Marcel Brass & Patrick Haggard, ‘To Do or Not to Do: The Neural Signature of Self-Control,’ *The Journal of Neuroscience* 27(34) (22 August 2007), 9141–9145.

¹⁹ Roskies, ‘Why Libet’s Studies Don’t Pose a Threat to Free Will,’ 18–19.

Arbitrary action is, at best, a degenerate case of freedom of the will. ... Suppose ... that it turned out that in purely arbitrary cases in the absence of reasons (including foreseeable consequences of those actions), actions were the results of random fluctuations in the nervous system, and suppose further that in all cases in which there are reasons relevant to the decision to act, we responded appropriately to these reasons, deliberating and weighing them, and then regulating our actions so as to bring them in line with our deliberations. Would we conclude on the basis of the random mechanisms that caused actions in cases where our actions had no consequences that we lacked freedom?²⁰

The answer is, of course: No. If this is how things stand, in the cases that matter we do have the relevant form of freedom. Consider the following example: While dusk is beginning to fall, a couple is taking a stroll in the forest near their home. Towards the end of their walk, one of them believes that she has heard a women crying. They stand still and listen together, briefly discuss what might be the case and then run together into the direction from which the voice is coming. Up to then, their walk did not have a moral significance; even if their route had been the result of random fluctuations in their nervous systems, that is hardly relevant to the question whether they really have free will. The decision they make when they hear the cries, however, is morally relevant; and it *this* decision turned out to be the result of random fluctuations rather than conscious deliberations, this would be very relevant to the question whether they have free will. On this type of decisions, however, Libet-type experiments do not shed much light.

THE LIMITS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON FREE WILL

Benjamin Libet is perhaps the most prominent among those who bring empirical research to bear on questions of free will, but he is certainly not the only one: Robert Kane, Daniel Dennett and Daniel Wegner should be mentioned here as well.²¹ The reason that I don't analyse their views here is that the above discussion of Libet's experiments suffices to give us some insight

²⁰ Roskies, 'Why Libet's Studies Don't Pose a Threat to Free Will,' 18. Similar points are made in: Bayne, 'Libet and the Case for Free Will Scepticism,' 28–31; Mawson, *Free Will*, 132–133.

²¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003); Robert R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: OUP, 1996); Kane, 'Responsibility, Luck and Chance,' *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), 217–240; Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. Cf. Stephen Hawking & Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 32.

into both the value and the limits of empirical research on free will. Discussion of more scholars and their positions would in this respect yield no new insights.

We have seen that empirical research sheds some light on the question to what extent acts that in ordinary life we would call 'free' are causally determined by processes other than conscious decisions. I write 'some light' because we have seen that Libet's research concerns only a limited class of free actions – random and pointless bodily movements – and not the type of free actions that we would ordinarily consider of paramount importance: acts of moral or religious significance that are preceded by serious conscious deliberation. The current limitations of empirical research into free will, however, are not limitations of principle but of practice. This type of research is still in its infancy and we have good reason to suppose that in the long run it will provide fuller and more reliable data about Libet-type of actions and, moreover, will provide data about more central examples of exertion of the free will as well. It may well be the case, then, that in the long run the issue of determinism versus indeterminism will be empirically decidable.

This, however, does not apply to the issue of compatibilism versus incompatibilism. The issue that is at stake here is not to what extent our actions are in fact determined, but under which circumstances we are prepared to call an action free (and blame or praise a person for it) and under which circumstances not. That's an issue on which we have to make up our minds on philosophical grounds and that cannot be decided by empirical research. Empirical research should settle the question to what extent our actions are determined; philosophy should help us settle whether we should call our actions free.²²

We have seen above that absence of coercion is insufficient for incompatibilists. Incompatibilists assert that an action is free only if the actor might have acted otherwise if s/he had wanted to. In other words, incompatibilists assert that an action is free if and only if (1) it is at least partly explained by a conscious decision of the actor, (2) the actor was capable of deciding other-

²² This also means that *if* one accepts determinism, it is up to philosophy and not to empirical research to decide whether this should be soft determinism (determinism accepting a compatibilist form of free will) or hard determinism (determinism rejecting the reality of free will). See on these issues Peter W. Ross, 'Empirical Constraints on the Problem of Free Will,' in: Susan Pockett, William P. Banks & Shaun Gallagher (eds.), *Does Consciousness Cause Behaviour?* (Cambridge, MA: Mit Press, 2006), 125–144.

wise, so that the action in question would not have taken place, and (3) the decision of will itself cannot restlessly be explained from its causal antecedents. Incompatibilists therefore assume that free agency requires conscious states to be causally efficacious in producing an action in a way that cannot be restlessly explained in terms of genetics, environment, etc. Whether this is *really* required for free agency is a conceptual question to be discussed in philosophy; whether this type of freedom actually obtains in our world, is an empirical question to be settled by science.

Given the current scientific state of affairs, where does this bring us? Firstly, above I have distinguished between cosmic determinism and determinism with respect to human will. On the standard interpretation of quantum mechanics, cosmic determinism has been proven false, with quantum indeterminacy as the exception.²³ Secondly, quantum indeterminacy does not suffice to prove that we have libertarian free will. It is not clear that quantum indeterminacy leads to indeterminacy at the level of phenomena that are observable with the naked eye, while that is the level at which we would like our free will to have effect.²⁴ Moreover, even if higher level indeterminacy could be proven, that could be explained by chance rather than by volitional control. The fact that there is an exception to cosmic determinism does undermine determinism, however. Thirdly, as I have shown in my discussion of Libet's experiments, science is still a long way off from proving key examples of libertarian free will an illusion. In the absence of decisive scientific evidence, other considerations should guide our decision on the issue of free will. Fourthly, one such consideration may be introspection, which – in the absence of scientific evidence to the contrary – provides a 'very compelling' argument in favour of libertarian free will. Fifthly, a second such consideration is provided by the conceptual link between moral responsibility and libertarian free will. Until now, no convincing example has been given in which we would without hesitation hold someone without libertarian free will responsible for her actions.

²³ Ross, 'Empirical Constraints,' 129.

²⁴ Huw Owen, 'Providence and Science,' in: Maurice Wiles (ed.), *Providence* (London: SPCK, 1969), 77–87, 84; Mats J. Hansson, *Understanding an Act of God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1991), 99. In another way Stephen Hawking also argues that quantum physics does not lead us away from determinism: Hawking & Mlodinow, *Grand Design*, 72.

FINAL CONSIDERATION

Those who reject libertarian free will mostly do so because of scientific reasons: they believe that science rules out the possibility that conscious decisions that are themselves at least partly independent of (material) causal antecedents, decide our courses of action. However, while it is true that science has not proven that conscious decisions are causal factors, it cannot rule them out either. And while it is true that on scientific grounds one cannot rule out the possibility that conscious decisions are epiphenomena of other conditions that can be studied empirically, one cannot prove them to be so either. Empirically, it is impossible to prove that consciousness is always and under all circumstances consciousness *of* a body and *originated by* that body. Moreover, for those who believe in a conscious God or other supernatural conscious beings, this seems a very unpromising position to adopt. For it would imply that God could be no more than a function of this world (*aliquid mundi*)²⁵, that He could in no way act or know or be independently of the world, and that He could neither begin to exist before creation began to exist, nor continue to exist after creation had stopped to exist. Therefore it seems that those philosophers of religion who defend the existence of a God who exists independently of the world, have good reason to defend the existence of libertarian free will as well.

We have seen above that both morality and theism seem to require libertarian free will. Contrary to what is often thought, neuroscientific experiments on free will like those of Benjamin Libet give us little reason to reject the idea that human beings have libertarian free will. Therefore these findings do not undermine morality and religion either.

²⁵ Austin Farrer, *Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1972), 186.

Theism, Compatibilism and Neurodeterminism: *A Response to Marcel Sarot*

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ABSTRACT

Christian theology affirms that humans are free. In his paper ‘Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,’ Marcel Sarot defends the view that libertarianism is the best account of our freedom and argues that recent results of neuroscience are compatible with libertarianism. Although I am sympathetic towards his latter conclusion, I am not as sure about the former. My paper discusses some of Sarot’s arguments and maintains that theists might still have some good reasons to be compatibilists. Theological reasons for compatibilism have to do with traditional doctrines of providence, grace and human sinfulness. Certain solutions to the problem of free will and foreknowledge also suggest compatibilism. Philosophically, libertarianism suffers from problems that have to do with reasons causing actions. Furthermore, the paper also provides some reasons to think that the results of neuroscience are, for the most part, irrelevant for assessing whether we are free in the compatibilist or libertarian sense. This is because neuroscience seems to be unable to give us evidence that neuroscientific / psychological laws are universal or exceptionless.

KEYWORDS

free will, neuroscience, theism, compatibilism, determinism, libertarianism

I take it that Christian theology affirms human free will and moral responsibility. Thus, Christians need to reject all views that entail either *hard determinism* or *fatalism*. If hard determinism is true, we have no free will or moral responsibility. If fatalism is true, there is nothing we can do to influence how the future will turn out. Against these views, Christian theologians affirm that we are indeed responsible and free and can influence the future. Now, two questions are before us: first, do we need libertarian free will to account for what Christians affirm or is compatibilism enough; and second, will neuroscience make any difference in this issue.

In his paper, *Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience*, prof. Marcel Sarot argues that we need not give up our belief in libertarian freedom because of theological or neuroscientific reasons. On the theological side, he argues that God's providence and foreknowledge do not conflict with libertarian free will. With respect to foreknowledge, he adopts the Open Theist position: namely, that propositions about future free actions do not have truth-values, so even God cannot know them. On the scientific side, according to him, one major reason for rejecting libertarian free will is the work of Benjamin Libet (and other neuroscientists). He then presents arguments for the conclusion that Libet's experiments only deal with actions that are morally irrelevant; morally relevant actions, Sarot claims, are much more complicated than the actions that Libet studies, so Libet's experiments say very little about moral responsibility. Major threats to libertarian free will are thus removed.

Although I agree with the general thrust of Sarot's paper – especially his criticisms of Libet's experiments and their interpretation – I am prepared to play the devil's advocate here. I will argue that Sarot lets the libertarian off the hook a bit too easily and simplifies the compatibilist position unjustifiably. So, I think that a much stronger case for theistic compatibilism can be made – a case that is not so easily defeated. I will not present a complete case for Christian compatibilism here, but I will be presenting some reasons for it.

Before I go on, I want to say that I am not a card-carrying Christian compatibilist (or at least not yet). But I do think that there are some good reasons for Christians to be compatibilists and that there are good arguments against theistic libertarianism. I also want to highlight the fact that neuroscience does *not*, I think, feature in these arguments. Whether these arguments – all things considered – warrant compatibilism over libertarianism or whether the libertarian position could be formulated in such a way to make it immune to criticisms I will present I am not sure.

My article has three parts. In the first part, I will argue that there are some theological reasons for compatibilism. These reasons have to do with providence, grace and human sin. Further, I will present some criticisms of Sarot's solution to the problem of free will and foreknowledge. In the second part, I will take issue with some of the more philosophical aspects of Sarot's libertarianism. Sarot has failed to discuss the biggest obstacle to a libertarian theory of free will, the issue of randomness or arbitrariness. Finally, in the third part I will present some arguments in support of Sarot's position on neuroscience and determinism.

1. DEFINITIONS

As I said, the contest is in between libertarians and compatibilists. For the sake of clarity, let me briefly say what I mean by these views.¹

First of all, determinism is the view that for any S's action A (or choice or decision) at some time is necessitated by antecedent factors. What is meant by 'necessitated' here is that there are some conditions such that if those conditions occur, then S's action A will always occur. In other words, the conditions – whatever they are – make it necessary for S's action A to occur.

This way of defining determinism has the benefit of being rather liberal as to what the necessitating antecedent factors are. In the scientific case, these factors would be antecedent physical events and physical laws, but there might be other conditions as well. More specifically, some neuroscientists think that our actions are not necessitated by general physical laws and events, but instead our brain events and laws governing those events. Finally, a religious person could believe that there is a God that necessitates our actions. Or one might believe in some other, non-personal force, like fate. Let us call these views *scientific determinism*, *neurodeterminism* and *theological determinism* respectively.²

Generally speaking, a *compatibilist* claims that for S to be free and morally responsible in performing action A is compatible with action A being ultimately caused by factors outside S's control. In other words, despite the fact that our actions and choices are caused by factors outside our influence,

¹ My basic definitions draw more or less from Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York 2005) and the introduction to Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford 2011).

² Notice, that these three types of determinism are independent of each other.

let us say our brain states plus psychological laws, we are still free and morally responsible. Of course, some causes remove moral responsibility – let us say external coercion or some other external constraint – but other causes do not. These causes are usually understood to involve the subject's own reasons and desires for acting. Furthermore, the compatibilist has to deny that for S's action A to be free, S had a power to do action B instead of A. In other words, S's action A can be considered free even when S could not have done otherwise. This is why the compatibilist thinks that freedom and determinism are compatible.

Equally roughly, a *libertarian* argues that for S to be free and morally responsible for performing action A is incompatible with action A being ultimately caused by factors outside S's control. In other words, in order to be free and responsible for A, S has to be in some sense control of the factors that ultimately cause A. Thus, most libertarians affirm that free actions are indeed caused, but those causes are such that they themselves are under the control of the agent. A libertarian would say that although my reasons for acting cause my actions in some particular situation, I could reflect and change my beliefs that constitute my reasons for acting. Further, a libertarian insists that free actions require the power to do otherwise. If determinism of any kind is true, then S could have not done otherwise. Since freedom requires the power to do otherwise and determinism entails that S cannot do otherwise, determinism is incompatible with freedom.

2. THEOLOGICAL REASONS FOR COMPATIBILISM

Sarot seems to think that libertarianism is required to make sense of the core Christian conviction that human beings are free. What I find surprising, however, is how easily Sarot rejects the theological case for compatibilism. I think the theological case for compatibilist free will is rather strong. Compatibilism (or something like it) is, after all, a venerable Christian tradition. Theologians, such as Augustine, Luther, Aquinas and Calvin are much closer to compatibilism than libertarianism. One reason for this is that all these thinkers are *theological determinists* of some kind or another. Further, embracing compatibilism would solve many problems that have to do with providence, predestination and God's foreknowledge.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss two topics: first, I will give some reasons to think that traditional Augustinian-Lutheran views of providence, grace and sin suggest compatibilism (or at least do not require libertarianism);

second, I will present a few arguments against Open Theism and its view about God's foreknowledge and providence.

2.1. PROVIDENCE, GRACE AND PREDESTINATION

I was surprised by Sarot's claim that neither providence nor predestination present problems to libertarian free will. With respect to predestination, he does not even give an argument for his conclusion. Contrary to this, it seems to me that classical ideas of providence and the justification by grace strongly suggest, a compatibilist notion of free will.³

Since I have little space, let me just talk about Luther here. I am no Luther-scholar so permit me to simply quote one:

Luther asserted God's complete freedom and complete control of his creation, his total responsibility for all that happens within it. God has predestined and provides for all his creatures according to his decisions, conditioned by nothing else. Nothing impedes or impairs the power of his will to make happen what he has decided. Preparing to treat human creatures as totally responsible within the sphere God gives them, Luther did not flinch before the logical necessity of the Almighty Creator's being totally responsible for all things. Luther was determined to hold these two total responsibilities in tension and not harmonize or homogenize them, as had his teachers. Therefore, he rejected their finely honed logical distinctions framing God's almighty power with the maneuvering room of contingency, which permitted human freedom. God's 'immutable, eternal, and infallible will' foresees, plans, and enacts all things that ensue in the course of creation. His foreknowledge is creative and determinative, not passively observing human actions and decisions but governing and affecting their thoughts and actions.⁴

For Luther, it seems that the causal influence of God necessitates human action and thinking so as to remove the power to do otherwise, but he still maintain that humans are free in the space that God has given them. Recall that libertarian free will entails the power to do otherwise. For Luther, such a power seems impossible: God determines everything, including our wills. Since Luther nevertheless maintains that humans are morally responsible, his freedom is surely of the compatibilist kind.

³ Such a case is made more comprehensively in Lynne Rudder Baker, 'Why Christians Should not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge,' *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003), 460–478. See also the response, Kevin Timpe, 'Why Christians Might Be Libertarians: A Response to Lynne Rudder Baker,' *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004), 279–288.

⁴ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of Faith* (Oxford 2009), chapter 6.

We can put the problem in the form of a brief argument. Let us imagine that God's providential plan for the world entails that I become a good person. God being omnipotent and being in full providential control I cannot choose to act against God's plan. Thus, given that libertarian freedom requires the power to do otherwise, I am not free regarding whether I will become a good person or a bad person. Further, I am neither morally responsible nor praiseworthy when I finally become a good person. So, I think that there is a dilemma here for the libertarian. Either (1) the libertarian has to give up the notion that freedom requires the power to do otherwise and become a compatibilist; (2) loosen God's providential control of the creation, or (3) try to combine libertarian free will with God's providential control in some roundabout way. Something is got to give here. Given what Sarot says about providence, I take it that he goes with (2), that is, loosening God's providential control over creation.

A similar dilemma emerges in the case of grace and salvation. Luther argued in his *De Servo Arbitrio* against Erasmus that if humans have libertarian free will, they could resist God's providential plans and possibly reject or earn God's grace. For Luther as for Augustine, earning God's grace through human actions is a non-Biblical idea. God's grace is a pure gift that requires nothing from the recipient. If it did so, it would not be a free gift. Taking a strong stance on original sin, Luther argued that it is impossible for humans even to turn towards God without God first causing their will to act this way. So no previous act of will to turn towards God is even possible for sinful humans. Contrary to Luther, Erasmus insisted that although humans cannot by their own will save themselves, the human will can co-operate with God's grace in order to cause salvation.

So, the dispute between Erasmus and Luther was between these two theses (among other things):

1. Luther: God's unwarranted grace is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. No libertarian act of the will is needed.
2. Erasmus: God's unwarranted grace is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. A libertarian act of the will is needed.

Notice, that both of these views are orthodox, as I understand orthodoxy. Both rule out what I take to be the Pelagian position:

1. Pelagius: God's unwarranted grace is neither necessary nor sufficient for salvation. Libertarian actions are enough.

Notice, that if (1) is correct and the power to do otherwise is required for freedom, then none of us is free or morally responsible for our salvation or the lack of it. The argument can be put, very roughly, like this. If I am predestined to heaven, there is nothing I can do to prevent this. I cannot choose not to go to heaven. Thus, my going to heaven or hell is not under my control, nor have I the power to choose otherwise. There is nothing we can do to change God's plan to save (or not to save) us. This conclusion, it seems to me, entails the doctrine of double predestination and the rejection of libertarian free will. Again, the libertarian is faced with a dilemma here. They either need to go with Erasmus and concede that at least some libertarian acts are required for salvation or go with Luther and reject the idea that freedom requires the power to do otherwise *and* accept double predestination.

2.2. SOME PROBLEMS IN OPEN THEISM

Sarot wisely distinguishes the issues of providence and predestination from the issue of God's foreknowledge. Sarot wants to solve the problem of freedom and foreknowledge by adopting Open Theism. According to Open Theism, God is everlasting, not timeless, and has limited knowledge of the future, especially about future contingent events, such as free actions. God can, however, predict what is going to happen, but he cannot know it. For the Open Theist, this does not hinder God's omniscience, because there are no truths to be known about future contingent events.⁵

Despite its relative popularity, Open Theism has various problems. Instead of developing them fully, I will simply mention a few. The first is, of course, that it is an innovation: the traditional view is that God is atemporal or eternal and has full knowledge and providential control over the past, present and future. Further, on the Open Theist view, God would be subject to change and influence from the outside through our actions and the increase and decrease of His knowledge. God would also need to be complex for these reasons. For the classical theist, none of the above is acceptable. But going against the tradition might not be that bad, especially if you have good reasons for it.

⁵ For a sophisticated version of Open Theism, see, e.g., William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London 2004).

Second, on Open Theism, some of God's beliefs could end up being false. Indeed, this is rather likely.⁶ God's beliefs about the future are based on the knowledge that He now has. God can know a lot about the future by predicting on the basis of His full knowledge of the present. This way God knows truths about what free beings are likely to do in the future and what contingent events are likely to occur. But given that there is an infinite set of libertarian free actions that free beings could do in the future, it is likely that a small subset of God's beliefs about what free beings do in the future turn out to be false when the time comes. So it seems that the Open Theist has to accept that God has false beliefs. But this is problematic. First of all, it flies against the face of the tradition of omniscience. Second, the opponent of Open Theism is now free to argue that it is possible that a being exists who does not have false beliefs but is in all other ways similar to the God of Open Theism. Thus, the God of Open Theism would no longer be the most perfect being.

Third, the claim that propositions about future contingent events have no truth-values is contested among philosophers. The main reason for this is that if this is true, we can have no knowledge about future actions or contingent events. If there is no truth to be known about whether I will go to the bar tomorrow, I cannot now know whether I will go to the bar tomorrow. This is a high price to pay. However, the Open Theist might have a response here: William Hasker, for instance, has argued that propositions about future free actions do have truth-value, but the truth-value is in principle unknowable before the time of the action. This seems to me to be a more promising avenue for the Open Theist to take.

Finally, Open Theism has problems with God's providence. For the Open Theist, God is like a chess master playing against a novice. The master does not know what the novice is going to do, but he has a plan for every possible contingency. No matter what the novice does, the master can counter that and win. Now, the problem is that this is not certain. It is not metaphysically impossible for the novice to win against the master. In the case of the God of Open Theism, it is possible that His plans for saving me are thwarted because of the choices that other people make. This seems very unlikely but it is not impossible. Although God can control events, the inherent contingency of the world can, in principle, prevent his plans coming into fruition. The Open

⁶ This argument was originally put forward by Alexander Pruss. See his weblog: <http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.co.uk/2010/10/open-theism-and-divine-error.html>

Theists must acknowledge that their God is a *risk-taker* and that his plans are not necessarily realised.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES WITH LIBERTARIANISM

I have now given a few theological reasons for compatibilism and discussed some problems with libertarianism. In what follows, I will discuss a few philosophical issues that have to do with compatibilism and libertarianism. I do this because I think that Sarot has neglected a few good philosophical arguments for compatibilism and also failed to discuss some of the central problems of libertarianism.

As I said before, a decent theological case for compatibilist free will can be made. The question then is whether there are insurmountable philosophical barriers to overcome. Most contemporary philosophers do not seem to think so. Almost 60% of contemporary analytic philosophers accept compatibilism – the claim that determinism and freedom and moral responsibility are compatible.⁷ If some compatibilist position is workable, and I think that at least some of them are, this would clearly support the case for theistic compatibilism.

3.1. COMPATIBILISM AND THE POWER TO DO OTHERWISE

I think Sarot might not be challenging the strongest forms of compatibilism. When he describes compatibilism, he presents it as a view according to which an action is free if it proceeds from a person's desires and is not subject to external constraints. This is the view of *classical compatibilism*. He then claims that classical compatibilism is not enough for moral responsibility. But this is something that most contemporary compatibilists would agree with anyway, so it is not enough to refute compatibilism as a whole.

So for the classical compatibilist, we are free to the extent that we have the power to do what we want and are not constrained by external factors. Notice how this way of defining freedom says nothing about alternative futures or the origins of our desires. But there is a well-known problem with classical compatibilism: it cannot accommodate compulsive, deviant or artificially engineered desires and motivations. On the classical compatibilist

⁷ The PhilPapers Survey: <http://philpapers.org/surveys/>.

analysis, a person who has been genetically engineered to wanting to become a fighter pilot would come out being free when becoming one. He is acting according to his desires and is not subject to some external constraint. But the problem is that his desires are manufactured for that very purpose. Our intuition is very strong on this: this person is not free when he decides and becomes a fighter pilot.

To distinguish such cases from genuine freedom, contemporary compatibilist have adopted a more nuanced idea of hierarchically ordered desires. These *new compatibilists* insist that it is not enough for freedom to have the power to act on one's desires; one also needs the power to reflect, evaluate and control one's own reasons and desires for acting. This involves making a distinction between first-order and second-order desires. In the case of our fighter pilot, the compatibilist can now insist that he is not free. It is true that in becoming a fighter pilot he is acting according to his desires, but he is unable to reflect upon the reasons for his actions and he lacks the power to control and shape them on the basis of his reflection. In other words, his first-order desires are not in control of his second-order desires. Thus, he lacks *rational self-control* and so is not free.

Notice that second-order desires and reflections can be causally necessitated by antecedent factors, which means that such an account is compatible with determinism. On the basis of such analysis, the compatibilist is able to give an account of reason or desire-based actions – an account that does not entail that the person has the power to do otherwise.

But for the libertarian, the power to do otherwise is necessary for freedom and responsibility. Surprisingly, Sarot claims that no good example of morally responsible action where the person lacks the power to do otherwise has been presented. I think this is false. I think there are rather good arguments for the conclusion that the power to do otherwise – *the principle of alternative possibilities* – is not necessary for moral responsibility.

A well know defender of compatibilism, Harry Frankfurt, has various examples, known as the *Frankfurt examples* that seek to establish this.⁸ Let me simply adopt one. Suppose that Dr Jones wants his patient Mr Smith to kill one of their mutual acquaintances, Mr Black. When Mr Smith comes to Dr. Jones for brain surgery, Dr Jones installs a microchip in the head of Mr Smith. This microchip can detect the neural correlates of Mr Smith's decisions and direct them. Now, Dr Jones' plan is to send instructions to Mr Smith's

⁸ For discussion, see the essays in Part V of Kane, *Oxford Handbook*.

microchip as to make him kill their acquaintance, Mr Black, when they next meet. But when they meet the next time, Mr Smith has himself decided to kill Mr Black. Dr Jones then does not need to exert control over Mr Smith via the microchip and is happy when Smith kills Mr Black. Now, it is clear that Mr Smith does not have the power to do otherwise. He could not have decided not to kill Mr Black, because if he had tried, Dr Jones' microchip would have overridden his decision. Does this mean that Mr Smith is not morally responsible for killing Mr Black? It seems to me that it does not: Mr Smith killed Mr Black in cold blood without any external or internal compulsion. Yet, he could not have done otherwise. If this is correct and the power to do otherwise is not a necessary condition for moral responsibility and freedom, then the compatibilist is in the clear: he can say that an action is free when the action is caused by well-reflected desires and reasons of the subject.

3.2. LIBERTARIANISM, REASONS AND ARBITRARINESS

In addition to not backing up his claim that the power to do otherwise is necessary for freedom, Sarot does not give an account of how reasons cause actions in the libertarian scheme. For the compatibilist, free actions are those that are determined by properly reflected reasons and desires. For Sarot, a libertarian free decision cannot be causally necessitated by anything. But is it not the case that reasons for action are causal factors in our actions and decisions? The compatibilist can accuse the libertarian here as follows: if one's action is not causally necessitated by well-reflected reasons, then the action is random or arbitrary; it has no reason whatsoever.

Sarot says that libertarian actions are not arbitrary because they are actions of someone. But this is not enough to establish the conclusion that actions are not arbitrary. Arbitrary actions, it seems to me, are actions that are done by someone but without any reason. If an action is done without any reason, without any desire, it is hardly a free action, hardly an action at all. Sarot also says that non-arbitrary actions are explained by the decision that the person makes. This is true, but, again, it is not enough to make the arbitrariness objection go away: we need a reason or an explanation for the decision that the person made. It is not the decision to act that removes randomness, but the fact that the decision is grounded in reasons and desires. As I already pointed out, the compatibilist can make sense of reasons and desires causing actions, but it seems that if Sarot claims that all antecedent conditions that cause our actions make those actions less free, for him having

reasons and desires for action actually take your freedom away. So if I have good reasons to act in a certain way, I am not really free in a libertarian sense. Surely, this cannot be the case.

Sarot could now respond in two ways. First, he could deny that reasons relate causally to our actions. Some libertarians do this and the result is called *non-causal libertarianism*. The problem here is that the non-causal libertarian has to account for reason-guided actions somehow without causation. Most philosophers think that this is extremely difficult and implausible. The arguments are in the literature, if anyone wants them.⁹ But I do not think that Sarot wants to go this way. He might want to take the second route, namely, to argue that reasons do causally contribute to actions but they do not necessitate them. In other words, our reasons do operate as causal factors in our actions but they do not determine our actions. Fair enough, but I can still insist that the causal influence that the decision has on the action apart from reasons and desires is random. It must be, since Sarot has to insist that *they do not ultimately cause the decision*. Since he is an indeterminist, he must insist that there is a causal gap between whatever causes an action has and the decision to act. What the compatibilist can say here is whatever fills that gap is bound to be random and arbitrary.

Imagine a world in which you are faced with a choice. You have been offered a job in, let us say, Princeton University. You consider the reason for going and not going. For the libertarian who insists that a power to do otherwise is necessary, there must be one possible world in which you take the job and another in which you do not take it. But notice that these worlds are identical before the actual decision is made. In other words, at the moment of the decision you have access to exactly the same reasons and deliberations and have exactly the same desires, but in one world you choose differently than in the other. If this were not the case, there would be no causal gap between the decision and the action would not be a free action, as the libertarian understands it. But, as I pointed out, it is extremely difficult to see what could fill that gap, since it cannot be any reason or desire or a deliberation that the person has. What we have here is a metaphysically brute, non-grounded, non-caused decision.

What I am trying to say here is that if we endorse causal indeterminism, we have difficulties in explaining how our actions can be anything else than random or arbitrary. Causally indeterministic actions are not determined by

⁹ See, again, essays in Kane, *Oxford Handbook*.

anything apart from some kind of ungrounded decision. Notice that the causal indeterminist cannot simply resort to reasons here: if he did, he would no longer be an indeterminist. The compatibilist has no such problems, since, for him, actions are determined by people's desires and reasons for acting (among other things).

4. AVOIDING NEURODETERMINISM: ALTERNATE ACCOUNTS

Finally, I want address the issue of neuroscience and determinism. Now, both Sarot and I agree that with respect to free will, there is a gap in science. The question is what kind of a gap this is. Sarot concludes that, as neuroscience currently stands, it does not explain morally relevant actions. Thus, there is no threat to libertarian free will. This, however, leaves open the possibility of the gap closing in the future. Sarot has given us no reason to think that neuroscience is unable to explain morally relevant actions and threaten free will in the future. In other words, some day a genius neuroscientist might come up with an experimental setting in which she could explain morally relevant actions. Sarot's position would be stronger if he could give a reason why this is unlikely or impossible. But he thinks that the issues surrounding free will and determinism might be, at least to some extent, empirically tractable.

I, on the contrary, think that there are some reasonably good arguments against such a conclusion. To be more specific, I think that there are some reasons to think that the issue of free will and determinism is not a scientific issue at all and that any amount of experimental data will not solve it. The first reason has to do with what the sciences of the mind are actually like and the second with the nature of freedom itself. But before I can get to these arguments, I will claim that the issue of neuroscientific determinism goes deeper than to Libet's experiments.

4.1. NEURODETERMINISM: THE DEEP PROBLEM

Sarot identifies Benjamin Libet's studies as potentially problematic for libertarian free will. He then argues that they are only potentially problematic because they do not deal with morally relevant free actions. The problem, I think, goes much deeper than this. Not only are specific experiments in neuroscience problematic for libertarian free will, but also the whole thrust of the enterprise of neuroscience, if it is interpreted in a certain way. Libet's views

are only a symptom of a comprehensive view that many neuroscientists share. Here is one example by Colin Blakemore:

The human brain is a machine, which alone accounts for all our actions, our most private thoughts, our beliefs ... All our actions are products of the activity of our brain. It makes no sense (in scientific terms) to try to distinguish sharply between acts that result from conscious attention and those that result from our reflexes or are caused by disease or damage to the brain.¹⁰

The basic idea seems to be that there is a closed flow of physical events caused by other physical events in our brains. This is what neuroscience sees when it looks at the brain. It follows that an active self or any other process of conscious decision-making cannot influence what goes on in the brain. We see no selves actively controlling neural circuitry, no acts of the will, nothing like that. The conscious choice seems to be a mere epiphenomenon instead of being causally efficacious. Since freedom requires something like conscious decisions or choices to be found by neuroscience in the brain, free will is an illusion.

The problem can also be stated in a more philosophical way. Most contemporary neuroscientists and philosophers are *physicalists*. As physicalists, they believe that for all events there are sufficient physical causes (that is antecedent physical events governed by physical laws) for that event to occur. This thesis is usually called *the causal closure thesis*. It entails that an ideal science, complete and true physics, can explain all mental events and actions that are supposedly caused by those events in terms of physical interactions and physical laws that make no reference to any events or objects of mental kinds. If physicalism and the causal closure thesis are true, it seems that there can be no free will in the sense of the subject herself determining or causing her actions on the basis of her mental states. Instead, antecedent physical events and the universally quantifiable neuroscientific / psychological laws necessitate the mental states and actions of the subject.

4.2. NEUROSCIENCE AND LAWS

Now, the question is whether neuroscience can ever tell us that neurodeterminism is true. In other words, could neuroscience tell us that antecedent brain states and universally quantifiable neuroscientific / psychological laws determine all human actions? I, and many others, do not

¹⁰ Quoted in Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham 2011), 52.

think so. This is because neuroscience can never give us the kind of universally quantifiable laws that neurodeterminism requires.

In his book *Laws, Mind and Free Will* (2011) Steven Horst argues that the problems with free will have to do with our ideas about neuroscientific / psychological laws. As we have already seen, when formulating the notion of determinism laws are understood 'strictly' or universally quantifiable and exceptionless. Among several others, Horst has argued that at least neuroscientific / psychological laws are not like this at all. Instead these laws resemble *ideal models* that abstract away numerous causal factors and are highly context sensitive. Thus,

one can embrace the truth of individual laws, or indeed any set of such laws, without any implication of determinism, because the idealization conditions of each law are essentially open-ended. ... Likewise, psychological laws, as idealized laws, do not claim to govern all possible behavior, but only extract a partial list of real invariants in psychodynamics. In no way are further lawful invariants or voluntary anomic spontaneity excluded.¹¹

Psychological / neuroscientific laws are, thus, idealizations that abstract away 'from facts about other parts that may matter crucially in vivo in modulating the behaviour of the system we are studying.' In this sense, laws of psychology and neuroscience are far more complicated than physical laws that benefit from a very small number of physical forces and variables.

Horst's view of laws is based on his more general framework he calls *cognitive pluralism*. According to cognitive pluralism, our representations of the world depend on our cognitive processes. Our models and representations indeed represent the world, or at least have realistic intent, but they are not simply reflections of how things are in the world. They are idealised representations of some highly specific parts of the world for a certain purpose and are entertained by some specific cognitive systems. This dependency of our models from our cognitive systems creates a situation that Horst calls pluralistic: we have numerous models in representing the world, but no unambiguous way to reduce them into one single 'super-model' of the world that would allow us to explain everything. This plurality of non-reducible models, Horst suggests, is not an immature state of science, but a permanent feature due to our cognitive limitations.

Horst's account of scientific and psychological laws leads to the conclusions that neuroscience can no longer be seen as producing laws that

¹¹ Steven Horst, *Laws, Mind and Free Will* (Cambridge 2011), 9.

force us to accept any kind neurodeterminism. The laws in neuroscience are not universally quantifiable, but instead highly context specific and have *ceteris paribus* clauses. ‘The motivation for determinism must, thus, be found either in misunderstanding of the laws we have received from the scientists or else in a commitment to some additional type of principle.’¹² These additional principles are usually metaphysical in nature – the most common being the causal closure thesis that I just mentioned.

4.3. FREEDOM AS TRANSCENDENTAL

Horst’s argument can be supported by arguments coming from other sources. For Horst, the necessary plurality of our models of human minds and behaviour entails that we cannot get from neuroscientific models to neurodeterminism. One supporting line of argument could be that freedom is not the kind of phenomenon that neuroscience can say anything about anyway. Raymond Tallis and Roger Scruton, among many others, have argued that the concept of freedom is not really an empirical notion, but rather a transcendental one. Freedom is, in this view, something that is beyond neuroscience.

Both Tallis and Scruton argue that the issue of human freedom has to do with what human selves are and how *intentionality*, aboutness, works. Further, they argue that neurodeterministic interpretations of neuroscience threaten not only freedom, but all our mental concepts based on intentionality: selves, consciousness, responsibility, duty, purpose and all such notions that are irreducibly *teleological*, or purpose-driven. Teleological notions cannot be translated into the notions of science because science, in principle, rules them out. This does not mean that the phenomena they refer to are not real.

Let us think of mental states as propositional attitudes towards certain propositions. Let us further say that propositions can be understood as representing some states of the world being such and such.¹³ When I am aware of, let us say, a hat in front of me, I have a certain propositional attitude towards it, namely, the attitude of believing that there is a hat in front of me. On the one hand, there are all sorts of causal processes connecting the hat and my awareness of it – processes that neuroscientists study. These involve light rays hitting my eyes, them being converted into electric impulses and

¹² Horst, *Laws, Mind and Free Will*, 139.

¹³ Here, we can leave aside the question whether all mental states are intentional in this sense. It is enough for the argument that there are some mental states that are. I myself tend to think that there are some mental states that do not exhibit this kind of intentionality.

processed in a certain way in my cerebral cortex. But this is not everything that is going on. According to Tallis, there is another process, intentionality, which reaches from the causal effect of the hat to the cause, the hat itself. Not only does my perception consist of the hat causing certain things in me, there is my awareness of the hat as an object with certain properties that proceeds from me towards the hat. Without this 'reaching out' of intentionality, there would be no awareness or aboutness that connects my propositional attitudes to the hat. Thus, with respect to persons and the way that they relate to themselves and their surroundings, there is always two-way traffic: causal influences from the objects of awareness to the experiencer that the sciences can track and intentional influence from the experiencer towards the object of awareness.¹⁴

According to Scruton, this intentionality makes it impossible to replace our everyday mental concepts with those of neuroscience. Our mental concepts do not provide us with causal explanations of our actions; rather they represent others and us in the light of rationality. Scruton writes:

Our way of representing the Lebenswelt is not replaceable by the theory that explains it. Our world is the world of appearances, ordered by concepts that are rooted in dialogue, and therefore in the first-person perspective. But that perspective will not feature in the data of any science.¹⁵

Our *life world* interpreted through intentional concepts is, thus, not understandable in causal, scientific terms:

People can be conceptualized in two ways, as organisms and as agents. The first way employs the concept of 'human being' (a natural kind); it divides our actions at the joints of explanation, and derives our behavior from a biological science of man. The second way employs the concept of 'person,' which is not a concept of a natural kind, but *sui generis*. Though this concept, and the associated notions of freedom, responsibility, reason for action, right, duty, justice, and so on, we gain the description under which a human being is seen, by those who respond to him or her as a person.¹⁶

Thus, for both Scruton and Tallis, the capacity for first-person awareness and intentionality allows us to see ourselves and other people from a non-scientific and non-causal point of view, from the point of view of reasons and freedom. In other words, humans are special because they act as agents in a human

¹⁴ Tallis, *Aping Mankind*, 103–111.

¹⁵ Roger Scruton, 'Neurononsense and the Soul,' J. Wentzel van Huyssteen & Erik Wiebe (ed.), *In Search of Self: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Personhood* (Grand Rapids 2012), 338–356.

¹⁶ Scruton, *Neurononsense*, 345.

world created and sustained by first-person awareness and sharing of that awareness through numerous social interactions and behaviours.

Freedom, as Tallis and Scruton understand it, is the human capacity to 'own' one's actions and take actions as representing what one is. Free actions are actions that can be made sense of in terms of a person's reasons for action. Notice, that reasons for actions are irreducibly intentional:

The countless events that are subsumed in reasons cannot be generated – requisitioned, orchestrated – by ordinary causation by processes of the kind that are described in neuroscience. ... Wishes, intentions and other propositional attitudes are not simply caused, nor simply causes. ... Actions are not – and could not be – caused in the narrow, atomic, linear sense implied in the term 'cause.' To see actions aright, we have to invoke the notion of an explicit purpose, which pulls us towards goal, which we have ourselves envisaged and articulated, and shapes the succession of action-components we undertake.¹⁷

And because of the peculiar aboutness of intentionality, reasons cannot be made sense in causal terms. Thus, all attempts to see human actions in purely causal, neuroscientific terms will fail: they remove the whole context of meaningful action and the agent's reasons for acting thus losing the possibility to judge whether an action was a free action or not.

Given their analysis of freedom, one need not be particularly bright to predict what Scruton and Tallis say about Libet's experiments. Although their solution to the problems presented by Libet's research is somewhat similar to Sarot's, the difference is their insistence that intentional phenomena cannot be studied the way in which Libet set up his experiments. Scruton and Tallis argue that Libet's experimental setting is naïve and simplified because it attempts to address the issue of freedom by tracking the neural correlates of simple hand movements and removing their intentional context. This is to forget the immense network of decisions, goals and reasons that go into the whole situation in the lab itself: what is expected from the participants, what they think is going on, what they want by participating in those experiments, and so on. Flexing one's hands is not the goal of the participant's action, rather the participant's reason for flexing his hand is that he wants to do what Libet says, that is, respond accordingly to what he is asked to do. Thus, the fact that there is a physical-causal antecedent for the participant's hand flexing before

¹⁷ Tallis, *Aping Mankind*, 251.

the conscious awareness of it, is neither here nor there as to the question whether that action was free or not.¹⁸

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have presented some theological and philosophical reasons for Christian compatibilism. I have also argued that despite all the (pop) science fuzz, the nature of our freedom and what is required for it are outside the sciences. In this sense, I think, I am willing to go as far as saying that not only is it the case that current neuroscience does not eliminate libertarian free will, but it seems that it is not even possible for any conceivable theory of neuroscience to do this. What neuroscience can do, however, is to highlight the fact that some of our actions are driven by causal factors which we have not previously recognised and which we have no control over. Thus, neuroscience (as well as cognitive science and cognitive psychology) gives us a reason to reflect whether we are actually as free as we think we are. This might lead us to consider the theological and philosophical reasons for libertarianism and compatibilism.

¹⁸ For Tallis' view on Libet, see Tallis, *Aping Mankind*, chapter 7.

Section IV:

RELIGION, MORALITY AND BEING HUMAN

WHAT ABOUT 'THY WILL BE DONE'?

Religion, Morality and Being Human: *The Controversial Status of Human Dignity*

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ABSTRACT

'Dignity' holds a controversial place in contemporary debates in ethics, policy, and studies in human personhood. Is 'dignity' a property predicated of something called 'human'? Is it something humans have by virtue of being human, or by virtue of existing as humans? Can it be damaged, or taken away? And does discussion of the term add anything at all to our understanding of how to treat other human beings, or is it a useless term? Here we see that when viewed from a Kantian and Christian perspective, 'dignity' is best understood as an orienting term which distinguishes not the or a basic set of features which separate humans from everything else, or some humans from some others, but rather an orientation which calls attention to the humane vs. inhumane way of life to which we commit ourselves when we ascribe dignity to others and ourselves. From a Christian point of view, this humane way of life is a consequence of acknowledging the basic passivity of human life with respect to what is made possible in and for us through the gift of the love of God.

KEYWORDS

dignity, love, orientation, ethics, Kant, Nietzsche, elitism

1. A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE

In recent years human dignity has become a central and controversial issue in legal, political, moral, philosophical, and theological debates. Some take human dignity to be the fundamental ‘right to have rights’ that underpins all our other rights and duties, whether laid down in a written constitution or not.¹ Others dismiss it as a useless and harmful notion that adds nothing substantive to the understanding of our rights but rather obfuscates the ideas of human rights, freedom, justice, and equality.² In democratic societies ‘our rights are constrained by respect for the rights of others. My rights correlate with your duties; your rights correlate with my duties. So when rights are equal, each person has duties in regard to the rights of others.’³ This correlation of rights and duties among members of modern society is an important insight. But all we need to state and justify it are the ideas of freedom, justice, and equality, but not, however, the ‘Reappraisal of an Ancient Legal Concept’ such as human dignity.⁴ We can do without it; and we should.

However, the history of human rights discourse in the 20th century tells a different story. Respect for human dignity is a central idea in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It plays a foundational role in a growing number of national constitutions, most notably in Article 1 (1) of the German Basic Law. It lies at the center of many contemporary debates in bioethics, the ethics of war, or the ethics of care. It plays the key role ‘in the emerging international biomedical law.’⁵ And it is invoked by human rights groups and networks across the world who ‘wish to stimulate systemic change, globally and locally, to open space for dignity and mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow, thus ending humiliating practices and breaking cycles of humiliation throughout the world.’⁶ The history of the idea reaches back through the enlightenment (Immanuel Kant) and renaissance humanism (Pico della Mirandola) to Roman antiquity (*dignitas*, *honor*, *potestas*, *maiestas*, *decus*). It

¹ Cf. David Dyzenhaus, ‘Dignity in Administrative Law: Judicial Deference in a Culture of Justification’ (October 1, 2011). 23rd McDonald Lecture (2011) [<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2029818>, 2].

² Ruth Macklin, ‘Dignity is a useless concept. It means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy,’ in *British Medical Journal* 327 (2003) 1419–1420; Steven Pinker, ‘The Stupidity of Dignity,’ [<http://richarddawkins.net/articles/2567>].

³ Jeremy Waldron, ‘Dignity, Rights, and Responsibilities,’ Max Weber Lecture EUI: May 2010, [<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1710759>], 4.

⁴ Stéphanie Henneute-Vauchez, ‘A Human *Dignitas*? The Contemporary Principle of Human Dignity as a Mere Reappraisal of an Ancient Legal Concept’ [<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1303427>].

⁵ Roberto Andorno, ‘Human dignity and human rights as a common ground for a global bioethics,’ in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 34 (2009), 223–40, esp. 226.

⁶ Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies [<http://www.humiliationstudies.org>].

did not function centrally in the Christian tradition before the 20th century. But since the Second World War it has won growing public momentum by playing a major role in constitutions and international legal declarations.⁷ This is where we must start if we want to understand the contemporary debates about human dignity. What exactly is the role it plays in those constitutional documents, and what does 'human dignity' mean there?

2. A RIGHT TO DIGNITY VS. RIGHTS BASED ON DIGNITY

The answer is not easy. There is no clear legal definition of the term in any of these documents,⁸ and the way they refer to it is ambiguous. In the preamble of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* the 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' is called 'the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.'⁹ Similarly Article 1 states: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'¹⁰ But then we are also told to make every effort to safeguard the inherent dignity of human beings and make it the fundamental right of rights, the right that grounds all others.¹¹ Thus, on the one hand, dignity 'is what some of our rights are rights to,' on the other hand, 'dignity is also what grounds all of our rights.'¹² Human rights are said to, 'derive from the inherent dignity of the human person,'¹³ but people are also held to have a right to be protected against 'degrading treatment' and 'outrages on personal dignity.'¹⁴

⁷ Cf. the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (October 19, 2005) [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31058&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html].

⁸ Bartha Maria Knoppers, *Human Dignity and Genetic Heritage: Study Paper* (Law Reform Commission of Canada, 1991) 2: 'Those provisions concerning human dignity have not been authoritatively interpreted or applied by any of the competent, independent, international institutions.'

⁹ *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Preamble [<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>] (accessed September 7, 2012).

¹⁰ Ibid. Article 1.

¹¹ According to Klaus Dicke, 'The Founding Function of Human Dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' in: David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein (eds.) *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse* (Leiden 2002), 111, 'dignity' conveys 'a formal, transcendental norm to legitimize human rights claims': it is the right to have rights and as such grounds (all) other rights.

¹² Jeremy Waldron, 'Dignity, Rank, and Rights: The 2009 Tanner Lectures at UC Berkeley' [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1461220, 5]

¹³ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Preamble

¹⁴ Geneva Conventions, Common Article 3.

To some this ‘blurring of the distinction between content (“a right to dignity”) and justification (“rights based on dignity”)’¹⁵ looks like an equivocation similar to the one Jeremy Bentham made fun of with respect to ‘liberty.’ To quote a recent commentator:

Defenders of natural rights would say that men are born free, Bentham observed, but then complain in the name of rights that so many of them were born into slavery. If challenged to justify their demands for liberty, they would cite human liberty as the ground of these demands. But liberty, which they were citing as an existent justification for rights, was also what they were demanding, and because they thought they had to demand it, they were acknowledging that men were not free. So what became of the alleged justification for their claim? ‘Men ought to be free because they are free, even though they are not’ – was that the claim? Such reasoning, which Bentham called ‘absurd and miserable nonsense,’¹⁶ seemed to veer between the incoherent and the tautological. And the dual usage of ‘dignity’ appears to partake of this logic ... As Bentham said (not specifically about dignity but in an analogous context): ‘It is from beginning to end so much flat assertion: it neither has anything to do with reason nor will endure the mention of it. It lays down as a fundamental and inviolable principle whatever is in dispute.’¹⁷

But this dispute is spurious. It is perfectly possible to understand human dignity as a fundamental right (the right of rights) on which other rights are based without falling into inconsistency, but whether one can or should claim that *all* other rights are based on dignity is a different matter. But rights can only function as rights if they are clearly defined: Unclear formulations and vague terms make an alleged right pointless. If we do not know what the statement of an alleged right means or involves, we cannot use it in legal practice or in deciding cases. However, the term ‘dignity’ or ‘human dignity’ is not defined in the legal documents cited nor does there seem to exist a canonical definition of the term in the law.¹⁸

¹⁵ Waldron, ‘Dignity, Rank, and Rights,’ 4.

¹⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *Anarchical Fallacies*, in: Jeremy Waldron (ed.) *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke and Marx on the Rights of Man* (London 1987), 50.

¹⁷ Waldron, ‘Dignity, Rank, and Rights,’ 4–5, quoting Bentham, *Anarchical Fallacies*, 74.

¹⁸ Oscar Schachter, ‘Human Dignity as a Normative Concept,’ *American Journal of International Law*, 77 (1983) 849: ‘We do not find an explicit definition of the expression “dignity of the human person” in international instruments or (as far as I know) in national law. Its intrinsic meaning has been left to intuitive understanding, conditioned in large measure by cultural factors.’

3. HUMAN DIGNITY VS. THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN BEINGS

This has been lamented as a highly problematic deficiency (especially by criminal lawyers and judges who have to decide cases), or defended as an important feature of the functioning of the term in a constitutional context (especially by constitutional lawyers who look at the moral foundation and political role of constitutions in state and society). The German *Grundgesetz*,¹⁹ one of the first and most influential constitutions using the term ‘human dignity,’ states without much ado in Article 1 Paragraph 1: ‘Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.’²⁰ The German version puts it even more categorically by using indicative language: ‘Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar . Sie zu achten und zu schützen ist Verpflichtung aller staatlichen Gewalt’: ‘Human dignity [the dignity of the human being] is inviolable [or ‘untouchable’ or ‘non-negotiable’]. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority.’ It is clear that the first sentence states an absolute principle in a categorical way. However, we are not told what ‘human dignity’ means.

There was conflict about this from the beginning. Carlo Schmid, one of the most influential members of the Parliamentary Council that drafted the Constitution, insisted that the term ‘should be defined.’²¹ Theodor Heuss, on the other hand, the first president of the republic, defended the first sentence as a ‘non-interpreted thesis.’²² The term, he insisted, should not be defined. He declared that ‘Human dignity must rest in itself. It must not be derived from any governmental position.’²³

This opened the door to an ongoing dispute in German constitutional scholarship and jurisprudence.²⁴ In 1952 Günter Dürig argued that ‘Having

¹⁹ For the following cf. Christoph Groos, *Innere Freiheit. Eine Rekonstruktion des grundgesetzlichen Würdebegriffs* (Göttingen 2011).

²⁰ I follow the official translation of the *Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany* published by the Bundestag in October 2010 (80201000.pdf).

²¹ He understood it to be ‘a quality, an attribute that determines the human and that distinguishes humans from other creatures.’

²² Theodor Heuss in: *Parlamentarischer Rat, Akten und Protokolle*, vol. 5, 72. Cf. Christoph Goos, ‘Wie die Würde des Menschen zum bedeutungslosen Rechtsbegriff wurde – und wie sie eigentlich gemeint war ...’ [http://www.jura.unibonn.de/.../Goos_Thesenpapier_Menschenwuerde_Goettingen_1._Juni_2011.pdf] (accessed February 15, 2012).

²³ Heuss, *Parlamentarischer Rat*, vol. 5, 72: ‘No one in power should have the prerogative to define it. Definitions are ruled or governed by interests, and it is better to leave the term “human dignity” undefined than to tailor it to the interests of a government.’

²⁴ Max Schreiter, ‘Gehorsam für automatische Farbzeichen . Ein Beitrag zum Roboterproblem,’ *Die Öffentliche Verwaltung* 1956, 692–694; Josef Wintrich, ‘Die Bedeutung der “Menschenwürde” für die

dignity means: being a personality,' and a person becomes a personality by affirming and serving the basic values of being related to the eternal 'you' of God, the 'you' of others, and the 'we' of the community.²⁵ Ten years later, in 1964, Peter Badura criticized this interpretation because it did not see human beings as they are but as they should be according to the ideal of an autonomous personality.²⁶ This had the unfortunate effect that one had to give reasons for somebody being an autonomous person in this sense in order to be a subject of dignity, and this made it difficult for precisely those who were most in need of it to claim the protection of Article 1 of the Basic Law (little children, the mentally disabled, people suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the unborn and the deceased). Badura therefore suggested what came to be

Anwendung des Rechts,' *Bayerische Verwaltungsblätter* 1957, 137–140; Bernhard Giese, Das Würde-Konzept. Eine normfunktionale Explikation des Begriffes Würde in Art. 1 Abs. 1 GG, 1975; Christian Starck, 'Menschenwürde als Verfassungsgarantie im modernen Staat,' *Juristische Zeitung* 1981, 457–464; Norbert Hoerster, 'Zur Bedeutung des Prinzips der Menschenwürde,' *Juristische Schulung* 82/2 (1983), 93–96; Wolfgang Graf Vitzthum, 'Die Menschenwürde als Verfassungsbegriff,' *Juristische Zeitung* 1985, 201–209; 'Die Spur zu verfolgen, wo er seinen Weg nahm,' in: *Zum Gedenken an Professor Dr. iur. Günter Dürig 1920–1996*, Tübinger Universitätsreden N.F. Bd. 27, 1999, 37ff.; Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde/Robert Spaemann (ed.), *Menschenrechte und Menschenwürde. Historische Voraussetzungen – säkularer Gestalt – christliches Verständnis*, 1987; Klaus Stern, 'Die Menschenwürde als Fundament der Grundrechte,' in: *Staatsrecht*, Vol. III/1, 1988, § 58; Werner Holzhüter, *Konkretisierung und Bedeutungswandel der Menschenwürdenorm des Artikels 1, Absatz 1 des Grundgesetzes*, 1989; Tatjana Geddert-Steinacher, *Menschenwürde als Verfassungsbegriff* (Berlin 1990); Hasso Hofmann, 'Die versprochene Menschenwürde,' *Archiv des öffentlichen Rechts* 118 (1993) 353–377; Ralph Alexander Lorz, *Modernes Grund- und Menschenrechtsverständnis und die Philosophie der Freiheit Kants* (Stuttgart 1993); Peter Häberle, 'Die Menschenwürde als Grundlage der staatlichen Gemeinschaft,' in: *Handbuch des Staatsrechts I*, 2. A. 1995, § 20; Wolfram Höfling, 'Die Unantastbarkeit der Menschenwürde,' *Juristische Schulung* 1995, 857–862; Kurt Bayertz, 'Die Idee der Menschenwürde: Probleme und Paradoxien,' *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 81 (1995) 465–481; Christoph Enders, 'Die Menschenwürde in der Verfassungsordnung, Zur Dogmatik des Art. 1 GG,' Tübingen 1997; Horst Dreier, Art. 1, *GG-Kommentar*, 1998; Michael Kloepfer, 'Leben und Würde des Menschen,' in: Peter Badura & Horst Dreier (eds.), *Festschrift 50 Jahre Bundesverfassungsgericht*, Bd. II, 2001, 77–104; Thomas Veit, 'Würde als absoluter und relationaler Begriff,' *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 87 (2001) 299–310; Franz Josef Wetz, 'Die Würde des Menschen – Ein Phantom?,' *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 87 (2001), 311–327; Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, 'Menschenwürde als normatives Prinzip,' *Juristische Zeitung* 2003, 809–815; Dunja Jaber, *Über den mehrfachen Sinn von Menschenwürdegarantien* (Frankfurt/London 2003); Horst Dreier, 'Menschenwürde in der Rechtsprechung des Bundesverwaltungsgerichts,' in: Eberhard Schmidt-Aßmann u.a. (ed.), *Festschrift 50 Jahre Bundesverwaltungsgericht*, 2003, 201–222; Kurt Seelmann (ed.), *Menschenwürde als Rechtsbegriff* (Stuttgart 2004); Martin Nettesheim, 'Die Garantie der Menschenwürde zwischen metaphysischer Überhöhung und bloßem Abwägungstopos,' *Archiv des öffentlichen Rechts* 130 (2005), 71–113.

²⁵ Günter Dürig, 'Die Menschauffassung des Grundgesetzes,' *Juristische Rundschau* 1952 259–263; 'Der Grundrechtssatz von der Menschenwürde,' *Archiv des öffentlichen Rechts* 81 (1956), 117–157; Christoph Groos, 'Human dignity and the German Basic Law: A Historical Perspective' (unpublished paper at Berlin, Wissenschaftskolleg, November 17, 2011).

²⁶ Peter Badura, 'Generalprävention und Menschenwürde,' *Juristische Zeitung* (1964), 336–344.

called “the negative interpretation method”: One should concentrate on injuries of human dignity and clear violations but not try to define it positively. It is easier to agree on what the principle of human dignity excludes and prohibits than on what it states or defends. For to agree on violations of human dignity is possible even where we differ in our positive accounts of it.

However, the debate is confused because it does not distinguish between two different readings of the term ‘human dignity’ (*Würde des Menschen*). One is to take it to mean a complex property *human dignity* that can truly be predicated of everything that fulfills the conditions summarized in its definition: ‘human dignity’ =_{def.} XYZ. The other is to construe it as referring to the *dignity of human beings*, i.e. to a particular aspect of human beings called ‘dignity.’ In the first case we talk about a complex property (human dignity), in the second case about a particular aspect or characteristic of human beings²⁷ (the dignity of human beings). However, the property *human dignity* can be meaningfully defined whether or not there is somebody of whom it can truly be predicated, and so can *dignity*. But to speak affirmatively of the *dignity of human beings* is to assume that there are human beings who have dignity or to claim that if there are human beings, then they have dignity. The claim is not that they have *human dignity*: *For every x, if x is a human being, then it has human dignity*, but rather: *For every x, if x is a human being, then it has dignity*.

The first sentence of Article 1 of the Basic Law is not about a property *human dignity* that is said to be inviolable. Rather it starts from the fact that there are human beings, it ascribes dignity to them, and it strictly prohibits any violation of it to anybody, not only to the state. The dignity of human beings is non-negotiable for anyone in any situation and under any circumstances. The point of this principle is not the mistaken claim that bearers of this dignity (i.e. persons) cannot be harmed (they can), nor the highly ambiguous claim that a person’s dignity cannot be violated whatever one may do to a person (even if human dignity cannot be violated directly or *per se*, it is violated indirectly by harming the bearers of it). However, the first sentence of the Basic Law does not speak of human beings (the bearers of dignity) but of their dignity (an essential characteristic which they cannot lose). It

²⁷ As I shall argue below, it is not a property in the sense of a defining characteristic of human beings but rather an indicator of how we ought to relate to them, that is, how we ought to determine ourselves to behave towards human beings: in a way that is not in conflict with our common humanity. Because human beings qua human beings have dignity, we ought to determine ourselves to treat them (and us) with dignity.

is not stated that *only* human beings have or can have dignity.²⁸ But the term 'dignity' is not defined. It cannot be used to identify those to whom it is rightly applied but rather presupposes that those to whom it is applied are rightly identified as human beings – whatever this may mean. Human beings are bearers of a dignity which is said to be inviolable. Thus, in an important sense the principle is not about *human dignity* but about *human beings* who have dignity: What is at stake is not a property but the bearer of it. And the property human beings are said to have in an inviolable way is not *human dignity* but *dignity* – the dignity that is characteristic of human beings *as* human beings.

4. PREDICATE VS. DESIGNATION

Thus, the descriptive phrase 'die Würde des Menschen' (the dignity of the human being) must not be confused with the predicate phrase 'Menschenwürde' (human dignity). The second is a predicate that can (in principle) be defined by enumerating the features that together characterize the property *human dignity*; and this property can be predicated of something (wrongly) or somebody (truly) in propositions such as 'Peter has human dignity' or 'There is an x and x possesses human dignity.' The first, on the contrary, is not a predicate but a condensed predication or proposition 'Human beings have dignity' or 'Human beings *qua* human beings possess dignity' which cannot be predicated of something else because it is not a property but a proposition used as a designation²⁹ to refer to those who are said to have this dignity: human beings.³⁰ It is true to say that human beings have this

²⁸ Kant used it not for human beings but for the moral law or morality: 'Morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which alone has dignity.' I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Andrea Diem/David Lane (Walnut 2008), 58. And Pope Benedikt XVI has used it recently not merely for human beings but for the earth when he spoke of 'the dignity of the earth.'

²⁹ Cf. Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting,' *Mind* 14 (1905) 479–493; M. Devitt, *Designation* (New York 1981).

³⁰ Whereas it is meaningful but false to say 'Chimps possess human dignity' (i.e. that which we mean by the predicate 'human dignity') because Chimps may possess dignity, but not human dignity, it is meaningless to say 'Chimps possess that which we mean by the proposition 'Human beings have dignity.' *Human dignity* is a property that can be predicated of someone, and so is *dignity*, but *the dignity of the human being* is an abbreviated proposition used as a designation that cannot be predicated of something else. It does not refer to a specific *human dignity* (that can only be ascribed to humans) but to a *dignity* (not necessarily only of human beings) ascribed to human beings; and it is stated that the truth that humans possess this dignity is seen and accepted as a principle that must never be violated by anybody.

dignity, whatever may happen to them or whatever they may do. Hence, whatever we may do to other human beings or to ourselves must not conflict with the fact that we all possess this dignity – not because of what makes us different from other beings (being human) or from other human beings (being a particular human being) but by the sheer fact of existing as human beings.

But what exactly does this mean? Are we said to have this dignity because we are *human beings* or because we *exist* as human beings? Is the ascription of dignity tied to *what* or *who* we are (our essence³¹) or to the fact *that* we are (our existence)? In the first case even a merely possible human being would possess dignity: To possess dignity would be analytically true of anybody who is human. In the second case the possession of dignity would be contingent on actually existing as a human being: To possess dignity would be synthetically true only of those human beings who exist (have existed or will exist).

The latter understanding seems to be closer to our actual practice. Existence seems to be an essential requirement for ascribing dignity to human beings. Someone who doesn't exist cannot claim a right to have rights. The claim is not that if *x* is a human being, then *x* possesses dignity, but rather that if *x* is a human being *and exists*, then *x* possesses dignity. The ascription of dignity does not depend on being human, but on existing as a human being.³² That is to say, the dignity of human beings is not a particular human dignity which they have insofar as they are *humans* ('If *x* is a human being, then *x* has human dignity') but rather the dignity they have insofar as they *exist* as humans ('If *x* is a human being *and exists*, then *x* has dignity' or 'If *x* is a human being, then *x* has dignity, if *x* exists'). It is not an analytic truth that humans have this dignity but a synthetic truth that if they exist, then they have it: their dignity comes with their existence, not with their essence.

³¹ I use the term in a broad sense to signify everything that provides a defensible answer to the question 'What are human beings?'

³² If we construe *dignity* as an essential property of human beings (i.e. as *human dignity*) then it belongs to the set of determinations of what humans are so that it is impossible for anyone to be human and not to possess human dignity – whether he or she exists or not. If, on the other hand, we construe *dignity* not as a property of what humans are but of the fact that they are (if they are), then it is impossible for any human being to exist and not to have this dignity. Possible human beings do not possess any dignity but at best possible dignity: If they exist, then they have dignity, if they don't, then they don't. Actual beings, on the other hand, are not human beings because they possess human dignity but rather they possess *dignity* (not human dignity) because they are *human beings who exist*.

Merely possible human beings have at best a possible dignity. Only actual human beings, i.e. human beings who exist, have dignity.

5. WHO WE ARE VS. THAT WE ARE

This allows for a different way of distinguishing between *human dignity* and *the dignity* we have as human beings: If the dignity of human beings comes with their existence (the fact that they are), not with their essence (that which they are), then their dignity should not be construed as a necessary property of their essence (human dignity) but as a contingent property of their existence (the dignity of humans). This dignity (whatever it is) need not be restricted to humans (the dignity only of humans). Rather, the term ‘human dignity’ – and this is a different reading from the one discussed above – may be an abbreviation of the *human way or mode* in which human beings have dignity: They do not possess a special human dignity but they have the dignity they have in a special human way. The decisive point of this special way is that humans have this dignity not simply by being human but by being human beings *who exist*. Dignity is not a feature of their humanity *per se* (their essence) but rather of their *existence* as human beings (their actual presence with others in situations of communication and interaction). That is to say, it is impossible for human beings to be and not possess this dignity but not because their *being human* analytically implies this property but because it is impossible for them *to be* and not to have this dignity. We do not need to know what this dignity involves, nor what exactly we mean by ‘human being,’ but we can say that human beings (whatever that may mean) have dignity (whatever that may mean) not because of *who or what* they are (human beings) but because of the fact *that* they are: ‘For every x, if x is a human being, then it has dignity *if it exists*.’

6. DENIALS OF HUMANITY, DENIALS OF EXISTENCE, AND DENIALS OF PERSONHOOD

If we start from here, then we must distinguish not merely between *human dignity* and *the dignity of humans* but also between three ways of denying the dignity of humans: denials of their humanity, denials of their existence, and denials of their personhood. If we construe *human dignity* as an essential property of human beings, then to be human is a necessary and sufficient condition for having this property: To be human is to have human

dignity, and to deny it of someone is to deny that she or he is human. We may still see them as something interesting or useful for us, but we would not treat them as humans, i.e. as one of us. On the other hand, if we construe *dignity* as a property tied to the existence of human beings, then to be human is neither necessary nor sufficient for having it: Other beings may have dignity as well, and humans have it only if they exist (have existed or will exist). However, if they exist, then they exist *as human persons*, i.e. as beings who deserve to be treated in the same way as we and all other persons want to be treated. A person is a being that exists as a member of a community of persons, i.e. by communicating and interacting with other persons as persons, and a human person is a being that lives his or her humanity in communicating with and interacting with other human persons, i.e. as a member of the community of those with whom we interact as persons. Thus, to be a person is to put a demand on other persons to be treated as a person, and it involves a commitment, obligation, or duty to treat other persons as persons. We cannot see someone as a person and deny the demand on us to treat him or her as a person. And we cannot see ourselves as persons and deny the duty to relate to other persons as persons. We may fail to do so, but this failure is not merely a failure with respect to the other, but also with respect to ourselves: We fail to be true to who we are as persons.

A denial of dignity is then not merely or always a denial of being human (at least not necessarily so) but a refusal to see someone as a human being that actually exists together with us or to refuse to relate to somebody as a person who lives as a person among us: It is not his or her humanity that is ignored but the fact that he or she exists as a member of our community of persons. We deny their existence and personhood, not necessarily that they are humans. Just as in the first case we do not take them to be humans but mistake them for something else, so in the second case we ignore that they exist at all (existence) or that they are present to us as one of us (person): We treat them like the dead, i.e. someone who is no longer with us, or like fictional characters, i.e. someone who was never with us, or like a thing or object that we use, but we do not relate to them as partners with whom we may or should or could communicate and interact as persons among persons.

All these are ways of mistreating the other. But it is one thing to be mistaken for something else (not a human being), another to be simply ignored (a non-existing entity) or to be excluded from the community of persons by being treated as an unperson or non-person. If we construe violations of hu-

man dignity as an offense against the humanity of a person, then we treat him or her not as a human being: We de-humanize the other by ignoring his or her humanity. If we construe violations of human dignity as a denial of the existence of a person, then we treat him or her as a non-existent entity, or as a non-person: We de-personalize the other by excluding him or her from the community of those who exist and with whom we communicate as persons. In the first case we act as if there were not a human being but only something else. In the second we act as if there were nobody or nothing at all or no person with whom we would and ought to interact as a person. All these are inhumane ways of relating to others: to deny what they are (their humanity), to ignore that they are (their existence), or to disregard who they are (persons). All this is incompatible with the dignity of human beings. However, none of this can do away with the fact (if it is a fact) that the other is a human being, that he or she exists, and that he or she is present to us as a person. We may deny the one, ignore the other, and disregard the third. We may behave in ways that flatly contradict them. But we cannot do away with them.

7. VIOLATING PERSONS VS. VIOLATING DIGNITY

Is this the meaning of the first sentence of the German Basic Law ‘The dignity of the human being is inviolable’? Hardly. It is true: Nobody ceases to be human by being treated in inhumane ways or by living under inhumane conditions. Human beings do not stop being human by being treated in ways that contradict their dignity or by being forced to live under conditions that are inhumane. But these ways and conditions are incompatible with their irrevocable dignity as human persons. A state that prides itself on serving and protecting the welfare of its citizens cannot put up with this.

Thus, although the first sentence in German uses the grammatical indicative, i.e. *is* rather than *shall*, it states a norm, not merely a fact – or perhaps one could say: it states a norm with respect to human beings and a fact with respect to their dignity: You can violate the first (human beings) but not the second (their dignity), yet you ought not to violate the first because of the second. Dignity is indeed not something that can be ‘touched;’ only things, bodies, animals or human beings can. And whereas you can touch a human being, you cannot, at least not in the same sense, touch his or her dignity. But this is not to say that Article 1 allows us to do what we want to human beings because their dignity will stay untouched. On the contrary, just because the

human bearers of dignity are violable, the principle of the inviolability of the dignity of human beings states that this shall not be the case: The *human bearers of dignity* – not the *bearers of human dignity* – must not be touched in a way that conflicts with their dignity as human persons. The principle is not about *human dignity* (Menschenwürde) but about the *dignity* human beings have in an irrevocable way if and insofar as they exist as persons among persons (Würde des Menschen), and their dignity defines the scope and limit of what is acceptable, or not acceptable, in our dealings with human beings. Just because human beings are violable, and indeed are violated often to a shocking degree, the principle states that everybody must respect the dignity of human beings in dealing with them. Not only must the state do so, but also each individual must respect the dignity not only of others but also of him- or herself.

Therefore, the German constitution commits the German people axiomatically to the absolute principle of not violating the dignity of human beings, i.e. of not treating human bearers of dignity in ways that are incompatible with their dignity as human persons. This implies negatively not to allow, or put up with, any violation of those who are human bearers of dignity that conflicts with their dignity as human persons. And it implies positively to do everything to create conditions for humans to live their lives among and together with others as bearers of this dignity. This is clear from the second paragraph of Article 1: 'The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world.' The dignity of human beings is not the same as human rights. But as the 'therefore' indicates, human rights are guaranteed because of the dignity of human beings, and they are necessary to protect human beings against violations that conflict with and are contrary to their dignity. The right to have rights is restricted to human bearers of this dignity, i.e. to human persons. Human beings who exist cannot lose their dignity even when they are treated in inhumane ways. Since they cannot lose it as long as they live, and even beyond (because if they have been persons, it will always be true that they have been persons), they will always be bearers of the fundamental human rights that unfold the normative content and point of their dignity. This dignity is said to be inviolable just because its bearers can be, and often are, violated.

In this sense the first sentence of Article 1 states an absolute principle not to be violated by anybody. To torture anybody is strictly prohibited, even if it may help to save the lives of many. Torture of whatever sort harms not merely the body but contradicts the dignity of a person. The same principle has been invoked in decisions of the German Federal Constitutional Court against life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, the shooting down of aircrafts that are used as weapons by terrorists, abortion of embryos, peep shows where the performer cannot see those who are watching, or horror movies and video games such as the Mortal Kombat series. Actions of this sort are strictly forbidden not only to the state but to anyone.

The second sentence addresses the state explicitly and states two public duties that require action: The state has to respect the dignity of human persons, i.e. has to design the entire legal system in a manner that does not conflict with the dignity of persons. And it also has to protect this dignity, i.e. has to take appropriate measures if other people or poor living conditions endanger or undermine the dignity of persons. Whereas the prohibition of violations of the dignity of human persons in the first sentence of Paragraph 1 Article 1 is strict and without exception, the state duties mentioned in the second sentence are such that they require consideration of all interests affected, all parties concerned, and even of political preferences. Here balancing is not merely a possibility but a duty, whereas all balancing of principles is excluded in the first sentence.³³ The dignity of human persons is not something that can be relativized in any way. It is not a relative but an absolute value.

8. VALUE VS. DIGNITY

But is it? If it is a value it cannot be absolute because all value or worth (*Wert*) is the polar opposite of worthlessness or non-value (*Unwert*) and thus can come by degrees: it has more or less value as its price indicates. But this is not so with dignity as Kant emphasized:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either value or dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else which is equivalent; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity.

³³ Cf. Nils Tiefke, *Das Prinzip Menschenwürde: Zur Abwägungsfähigkeit des Höchststrangigen* (Tübingen 2011).

Whatever has reference to the general inclinations and wants of mankind has a market value; whatever, without presupposing a want, corresponds to a certain taste, that is to a satisfaction in the mere purposeless play of our faculties, has a fancy value; but that which constitutes the condition under which alone anything can be an end in itself, this has not merely a relative worth, i.e., value, but an intrinsic worth, that is, dignity.

Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in himself, since by this alone is it possible that he should be a legislating member in the kingdom of ends. Thus morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which alone has dignity... This estimation therefore shows that the worth of such a disposition is dignity, and places it infinitely above all value, with which it cannot for a moment be brought into comparison or competition without as it were violating its sanctity.³⁴

Dignity is here explicitly contrasted to and distinguished from all value discourse. Something may be more or less valuable, and no value can be absolute because it is always positioned on a scale between 0 and 1. Values are necessarily relative because the value of something depends on comparison and a particular judgment of that thing. Not so with dignity. Dignity is absolute, its ascription is not based on comparison, and it does not come by degrees. Either one has it, or one doesn't, and if one has it, one has it in exactly the same way and to the same extent as everybody else who has it. Dignity is not a relative value but an absolute, exclusive and complete distinction: If any human being has it, every human being has it. But human beings have it not because of any empirical trait or biological characteristic but only in so far as they are moral beings, i.e. capable of autonomy – of determining their own will (i.e. themselves) independent of any actual context according to the maxim of the good will. For to be autonomous in the Kantian sense is not merely to be able to choose between available options or courses of action in terms of what is more pleasant, or more useful, or more conducive to a greater happiness of many. Rather it is to be able to determine oneself to will only that which is willed by anybody who determines herself or himself to will only that which is willed by anybody who determines herself or himself to will only that which ... – in short, to be one who wills nothing that cannot be willed by anyone who puts not his own interests but the requirements of our

³⁴ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Andrea Diem/David Lane (Walnut 2008), 57–8.; cf. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge 1996), 42–43.

common humanity first. Kantian autonomy does not hinge on the capacity for deciding or choosing between options – this is something we find in one way or other everywhere among living beings. Nor is it to be identified with the specifically human capacity for rational decision, that is, for deciding between options motivated by reasons and not merely by desires, interests, or conventions – this distinguishes humans from other beings only by degree. Rather, it hinges on the moral capacity for deciding *how* to decide, or willing *how* to will, or choosing *how* to choose, *in terms of the good*, that is, by orienting the way one decides how to decide to the (morally) good, which is not defined by the individual interests of those who choose but which is the same for everyone. I am autonomous not because I can choose between options for reasons but because I can choose *how* to choose and determine the *how* of my choosing by orienting it to the good which is universally valid for everyone (the moral law). In choosing how to choose I am not determined by the actual options at hand, or by what I think or perceive to be the options in a given situation, or by reasons that appeal to some end that I desire. Rather, I can determine my way of choosing how to choose independently of the contingent (causal) actualities of a given situation and subjective interests in a situation by orienting it to the (morally) good. For the morally good does not vary with different situations or subjective interests but is the same, and motivates *per se* in the same way, in all possible situations of human choosing, deciding, and acting.³⁵

9. THE DIGNITY OF MORALITY

Therefore – and this is perhaps the most important point which Kant makes about dignity – dignity is not ascribed to human beings *qua* rational animals, at least not primarily and directly, but to *morality*, and through morality to *humanity*: ‘morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which alone has dignity.’ Morality has dignity in an absolute sense: There is not morality without dignity, and no dignity that is not tied to morality. Humanity, on the other hand, has dignity in a relative sense *in so far as* it is capable of being informed by morality: Humanity, i.e. that which characterizes human beings and distinguishes them from all other beings, can be viewed and thematized in many different ways: from empirical, biological, psychological,

³⁵ There is nothing in the much-discussed Libet experiments that comes close to the complexity of Kantian autonomy or could be construed as an objection to it.

sociological, historical, philosophical or theological perspectives. But only if we regard humanity from a moral perspective as something capable of morality can we ascribe dignity to it. Morality has dignity under any description, humanity only when viewed from a moral perspective.

For Kant this is not the only perspective for understanding human beings but it is an indispensable one if we really want to be true to the way we experience our lives and ourselves. From the moral perspective, to be human is to be capable of orienting one's life to the good, that is to say, to be able to live in a morally good or morally evil way. However, we are not merely capable of living a moral life but we cannot avoid doing so: A morally neutral life is not one of our options. As human beings it is possible for us to choose between good and evil (we can determine our willing or choosing by orienting it to the good, or by not doing so) but we also *must* do so and hence always in fact do: It is not possible for us *not* to choose between good and evil. If we can choose, we must choose, and there is nobody, as Kant elaborates in his doctrine of radical evil, who will not have to admit upon careful examination that he or she has in fact chosen not to live in a morally good but rather in a morally evil way.

Without going into detail, we may summarize Kant's account of human personhood as follows: Human beings are *persons*. As *persons* they are moral beings capable of orienting their willing how to will to the good, or of not doing so, and as *human* persons they are not capable of not orienting their willing in either of these two ways: It is impossible for humans to live in a morally neutral way. To be *human* is to be capable of morality: It is impossible to be human and not to be able to live a moral life. And to be a human *person* is necessarily to actualize this capability: It is impossible to live as a human person and not to live in either a morally good or a morally evil way. As it happens, all of us in fact actualize our human capacity for morality in a way that misses the possibility of the good. We all live in fact by not orienting our lives to the good, or to the good only, or primarily to the good. We all live in fact in a way that is morally problematic, far from perfect, or outright evil.

10. THE DIGNITY OF BEING CAPABLE OF MORALITY

However, this does not infringe on our dignity. We do not possess dignity because we live a morally good life but because we have the potential and capacity to do so. The *capability* of morality, not the actuality of a morally

good life is Kant's basis for ascribing unrestricted dignity to human persons. The ascription of dignity is not restricted to those who live a morally good life, or denied to those who live in a morally evil way. It is tied to our capacity to live morally, and since every human person necessarily actualizes this capacity in a positive or negative way, there is no human being who cannot rightly be viewed and judged from a moral perspective.

Thus, Kant's account of dignity has two important implications. First, since dignity is ascribed to human beings in terms of the moral capacity of our common humanity, it does not allow us to distinguish between human beings or to classify human beings into groups, sets or classes of those who have or don't have dignity: Dignity is not a concept that defines a class of human beings but a general feature of human beings as such. Human beings *qua* human beings have dignity, i.e. the right to be treated with dignity by everybody because every human being is capable of morality and in fact lives a morally good or evil life. Recourse to dignity does not allow us to draw a distinction between different sorts, groups, ranks, or classes of human beings (one group of humans vs. another group of humans) but only to distinguish humans from non-human beings in terms of the capacity for morality that humans share with all other moral beings.

However, and this is the second point, dignity is not a property that together with others defines our common humanity. Whatever we take to be the essence of humanity, i.e. the set of properties that together constitutes our common humanity, it will not include dignity but only our capacity for morality. This capacity is the basis for ascribing dignity to us, but dignity is not identical with it. Dignity is not a defining feature of humanity but rather humanity is capable of manifesting morality that alone has dignity. It does so because we cannot enact our humanity concretely without in fact living in a moral way, whether good or evil. However, our dignity does not depend on *how* we live in fact, but on the fact *that* we can live in a morally good or evil way and cannot live without in fact living in the one way or the other. Since we can orient our lives to the morally good we ought to do so, but even if we fail to do so and miss our end as moral beings we still have dignity because, as humans, we are *capable* of morality. Whereas morality *has* dignity, we partake in it by living a morally good or a morally evil life. As humans we can do this because we, and we alone among all living animals, are capable of morality and thus can live in a humane (morally good) or inhumane (morally evil) way. We are moral ends in ourselves, and this is true of us even if we fail to live in a humane way. The dignity of humans as moral beings is that they are

faced with the challenge and task of existing as persons, that is, not merely as means to an end but as moral ends in themselves. Kant makes the point explicitly: 'Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being *exists* not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions always be regarded *at the same time as an end*.'³⁶

In short, dignity is not a feature of what we are (humans) but of the way in which we live as human beings who can and must determine ourselves morally (moral beings or persons). Not our actual moral self-determination (how we in fact orient our lives) but the possibility and necessity of such a determination is decisive for our dignity: As finite moral beings (human persons) we are capable of orienting our lives to the good or of not doing so, and at the same time we are not capable of not orienting our lives either to the good or not to the good. In this sense, dignity hinges not on our actual moral character but on the possibility of having a moral character (as *humans*) and on the impossibility of not actually having a positive or negative moral character (as *persons*). Here as elsewhere Kant puts the emphasis on our real possibility (we are capable of morality) and not on our concrete actuality as moral beings (we in fact live in a morally evil or in a morally good way). Thus for Kant, to be human is, from an empirical perspective, not to be a rational animal (*animal rationale*) but an animal *capable* of rationality (*animal rationabile*) and, from a moral perspective, not *to be* morally good or *to be* morally evil but to be *capable* of morality. Human beings manifest the dignity of morality by living as moral beings, ends in themselves, or persons. They may fail to live up to their full potential as persons in their actual way of living by not orienting themselves to the good, and in one way or other we all in fact fail to do so. But this does not stop us from being persons who manifest the dignity of morality. If we can live in a morally good way, then we ought to do so. And we know that we can precisely because the moral law tells us that we ought to exist in this way by orienting our life to the good.

³⁶ Ibid. 79 (*Grundlegung* 4, 429) Not humanity *per se* (i.e. that which makes us human beings) nor any other essential determination (such as the one of rational beings) but only the inescapably moral way of existing or living our common humanity as persons among persons is the basis for ascribing dignity to us: Dignity is true of us not because of our common humanity (essence) but only because we are able to live our common humanity in a moral way (mode of existence).

11. RATIONAL VS. ACCOUNTABLE BEING

It is obvious that Kant does not argue within the parameters of the classical definition of the human being as *rational animal* (*animal rationale*) or *embodied rationality*.³⁷ He does not merely discriminate between our *animality*, which we share as our *genus proximum* with other living beings, and our *rationality*, which is the *differentia specifica* that marks us off from other living beings; nor does he merely discriminate from a reverse perspective between our *rationality*, which is the *genus proximum* that we share with all rational beings, and our *animality*, which is the *differentia specifica* that makes us embodied creatures in the realm of rational beings. Rather, Kant operates with a threefold distinction with respect to what we are between our biological (animality), rational (humanity) and moral dimensions (personality) which corresponds to his distinctions between *sensuality* (*Sinnlichkeit*), *understanding* (*Verstand*), and *reason* (*Vernunft*): We are not merely *living beings* (our 'predisposition to animality'), nor merely living and *rational beings* (our 'predisposition to humanity') but rational and *at the same time accountable beings* (our 'predisposition to personality').³⁸ The traditional duality between our animal and rational natures is thus incorporated into a new duality between our phenomenal (animality and rationality) and noumenal side (accountability or personality). We are individuals as organisms (biological animality) and rational agents (rationality), but we are necessarily members of a moral society as persons (moral accountability). Persons are not particulars of a shared commonality or general nature (humanity or rationality) but singular beings in a society of singular moral beings.³⁹ As *living beings* we belong to the system of nature or, more precisely, to the physical realm of animals. However, compared with other animals we are not excellent and outstanding but rather a weak, vulnerable and endangered kind of animal. On the scale of physical values we do not figure very high: 'Man in the system

³⁷ Cf. I. U. Dalferth, *Umsonst: Eine Erinnerung an die kreative Passivität des Menschen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011).

³⁸ I. Kant, *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, book 1.

³⁹ This also enlarges and deepens the notion of human embodiment' (the metaphor is problematic because it wrongly suggests that 'we' – whoever we may be – live *in* our bodies, that is, are distinct from our bodies in such a way that our bodies are only the contingent temporal manifestation of our true eternal reality). But we are bodies, not merely in a biological sense but also, and in many contexts more importantly, in a social, cultural, moral, religious or political sense. To be part of a moral (religious, cultural, social, political, ecclesial) community is to be a body of a particular sort, and as human persons we cannot be who we are without being such a body. In this sense, we do not merely have a body but *are* bodies – in more than one respect.

of nature (*homo phaenomenon*, *animal rationale*) is a being of slight importance and shares with the rest of the animals, as offsprings of the earth, a common value (*pretium vulgare*).⁴⁰

This is not much different when we turn to our much-praised rationality. As *rational agents* we can set ends for ourselves and rationally choose between options because of our capacities of understanding and will. However, as such we are still part of the animal world and only relatively but not in principle different from other living beings. 'Although man has, in his reason, something more than they and can set his own ends, even this gives him only an *extrinsic* value in terms of his usefulness (*pretium usus*). This extrinsic value is the value of one man above another – that is, his *price* as a ware that can be exchanged for these other animals, as things. But, so conceived, man still has a lower value than the universal medium of exchange, the value of which can therefore be called pre-eminent (*pretium eminens*).'⁴¹ Only in the third respect, i.e. as *persons*, we radically differ from other animals: 'But man regarded as a *person* – that is, as the subject of morally practical reason – is exalted above any price; for as such (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued as a mere means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself. He possesses, in other words, a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world: he can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them.'⁴²

That is to say, *persons* are not just rational agents who can set ends for themselves. Humans are not merely rational deciders and individual agents but persons who are *accountable* to others, i.e. who can be held responsible by others for what they do or fail to do or, even more importantly, how they do what they do and how they will what they will and do. As rational deciders and agents we can be compared with other animals or other humans according to the degree of efficiency in which we achieve our ends. Humans are generally more efficient than most other animals, and some humans are more efficient than others. As persons, however, we cannot be compared with others, whether animals or humans. With regard to personhood, we are not 'higher animals' than others (speciesism) and some of us do not rank 'higher' than others (elitism). Accountability is not a matter of degree, and it is not

⁴⁰ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 186.

⁴¹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 186.

⁴² Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 186.

ascribed on the basis of comparing our effectiveness as rational deciders with that of other species (great apes, chimps, rats, dolphins) or other members of our own species (the educated vs. the uneducated, the rich vs. the poor, those in power vs. those without power, the aristocrats vs. the herd-people). Its ascription is based on a simple and absolute alternative: Are we able to live a moral life, or aren't we? We, and we alone among all living beings, have the capacity to do so, and since we can, we must because we cannot live in a morally neutral way. For Kant, morality is not a system of values based on gut feelings but on our capacity for autonomy, i.e. our potential to determine ourselves independently from any stimuli in our actual environment or state of our feelings by the maxim of the good will alone; and this capacity is such that we cannot live without in fact exercising it by either living, or failing to live, a moral life.

This potential for autonomy is the basis for the absolute respect we owe each other – a respect that does not depend on our rationality, physical strength, attractiveness, sociability or anything else that comes in degrees, i.e. can be increased or decreased, but on the mere capacity to live as moral beings according to the practical law. We are not merely rational animals (*Verstandeswesen*) but *persons* (*Vernunftwesen*). As such we are intrinsically related to a community of persons (rational spirits) who can hold us accountable for how we determine ourselves and live our lives, and who therefore owe us the same respect which we owe them. As *Vernunftwesen* we are not merely rational individuals but singular members of a moral society of persons or spirits. This moral society of free spirits does not coincide with anything in the physical world of animal life or the rational world of human knowers, deciders, and agents. As rational beings we differ from other animals only by degree. But as moral beings or *persons* we differ from them absolutely or qualitatively.

12. ELITIST VS. UNIVERSAL CONCEPTIONS OF DIGNITY

For Kant, dignity can only be predicated of moral beings, i.e. of beings capable of autonomy, and no moral being, whether finite or infinite, can be excluded from having it. Thus, with respect to humans the concept of dignity is intrinsically universal: If it is true of any person, then it is true of every per-

son. You cannot be a person and not have dignity.⁴³ Moreover, dignity does not come in degrees: Either one has it or one doesn't. Either you are a person, or you are not. Dignity is an absolute, exclusive and complete distinction of persons. The concept of dignity does not allow us to draw distinctions between human beings or classify humans into groups, sets or classes (those who have dignity and those who don't). Kant's conception of dignity is *strictly universal*.

The contrary is true for Nietzsche. Following ancient elitist conceptions he sees an 'order of rank between man and man,'⁴⁴ and a gap between those few human beings who have true worth (rulers) and the average human being (slaves). For him, dignity is not the highest human value shared by all human beings. His understanding derives from the ancient notions of *dignitas*, *auctoritas*, *maiestas* or *nobilitas*. Dignity is not an intrinsic human value but rather an earned nobility. In the past one had it by being born into the right social class, and today one gets it by breaking away from the democratic egalitarianism of modern resentment driven herd culture through radical self-making, i.e. the willingness to stand in solitude over against the corrupt moral majority of the many. 'Morality is the *herd*-instinct in the individual,'⁴⁵ not that which distinguished persons from all other beings. 'We, "the few and true ones" want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.'⁴⁶ In short, dignity is not a universal character-trait of human beings but rather an indicator of social class (nobility vs. herd culture) that is not applicable to everybody.

It is easy to see how this can be found in religious and cultural traditions as well, especially where questions of religion and questions of national identity are so closely intertwined as in the Jewish tradition. As Susannah Heschel has pointed out, where human dignity is seen as a distinction or an honor of a particular group or nation (such as Israel) or of a particular group of people within a nation (such as male Jews) it is used in fact as an elitist concept that is not applicable to women and gentiles. 'In Judaism, as in most religious traditions ..., dignity, like religion itself, is not universal.'⁴⁷

⁴³ This is not restricted to *human* persons but true of each and every person, whether human or other.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, § 228.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* trans. Walter Kaufmann (Random House 1974), § 116.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 266.

⁴⁷ Susanna Heschel, unpublished paper at Berlin, Wissenschaftskolleg, November 17 (2011), 1.

This is Nietzsche's view, not Christianity's – at least not in an ideal world. It is precisely because it can be (mis)understood in this elitist way that Protestant theologians in the 19th century have shied away from using this category.⁴⁸ 'Image of God' was their term for expressing the universal characteristic of human persons, whereas 'dignity' was used only, if at all, when addressing a general non-Christian audience, as in Schleiermacher. Only against the backdrop of such an elitist conception of dignity does it make sense to say that 'claims that base human dignity on God and divine creation or imago Dei make human rights derivative, rather than primary.'⁴⁹ And only then does it make sense to denounce dignity discourse as 'a religious foundation clothed in secular garb,' by insisting that 'What must be primary is the human being as such, period.'⁵⁰ The point of modern dignity discourse is precisely to make the human being primary – the very fact of being human and not the possession of a particular quality or the belonging to a particular religious, political, or social group, class or orientation.

But then, what exactly is this universal distinction of human beings called dignity?

13. THE FAILURE OF THE FACTOR X APPROACH

1. In 2002, Francis Fukuyama searched for that 'Factor X' which makes us human, without which, he believes, human dignity can't have a foundation.⁵¹ In 'the political realm we are required to respect people equally on the basis of their possession of Factor X.'⁵² He is not satisfied with either the religious answer that all souls are equal before God,⁵³ nor with Kant's answer that right is based on our capacity to make rational choices,⁵⁴ (which isn't Kant's answer) nor with the Darwinian position 'that species do not have essences' as a species is merely a snapshot at the moment between what came before and what will come afterwards.⁵⁵ Rather, he argues, 'Factor X cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice, or reason, or language, or sociability, or

⁴⁸ Cf. Stephan Schaede, unpublished paper at Berlin, Wissenschaftskolleg, November 17 (2011).

⁴⁹ Heschel, 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York 2002), 149.

⁵² Fukuyama, *Posthuman Future*, 152.

⁵³ Fukuyama, *Posthuman Future*, 150.

⁵⁴ Fukuyama, *Posthuman Future*, 151 – which isn't Kant's answer as we have seen.

⁵⁵ Fukuyama, *Posthuman Future*, 152.

sentience, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality that has been put forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all these qualities coming together in a human whole that make up factor X.⁵⁶ It is not clear whether he uses the term 'human dignity' as a short formula of this complex set of features, or whether he understands the set of features to be the necessary (and/or sufficient?) condition for applying the term 'human dignity' to a being. But it is clear, that for him there must be a set of features that mark off humans from other beings if the ascription of dignity is to have a legitimate foundation.

2. A year later, in 2003, Ruth Macklin, professor of medical ethics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, argued that 'Dignity is a useless concept. It means no more than respect for persons or their autonomy.'⁵⁷ 'Why,' she asked, 'do so many articles and reports appeal to human dignity, as if it means something over and above respect for persons or for their autonomy?'⁵⁸ And she concludes: 'Although the aetiology may remain a mystery, the diagnosis is clear. Dignity is a useless concept in medical ethics and can be eliminated without any loss of content.'⁵⁹

3. Another 5 years later, in 2008, the President's Council on Bioethics tried to put dignity on firmer conceptual ground in a 555-page report, titled *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. The report came under heavy fire, especially from the *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science*. Steven Pinker attacked it in a paper on 'The Stupidity of Dignity' as 'conservative bioethics' latest, most dangerous ploy.⁶⁰ 'The problem is that "dignity" is a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it.'⁶¹ He criticizes that many of the 28 essays are written by 'vociferous advocates of a central role for religion in morality and public life,'⁶² and that some 'align their arguments with Judeo-Christian doctrine' which he finds shocking in a secular context.⁶³

⁵⁶ Fukuyama, *Posthuman Future*, 171.

⁵⁷ Ruth Macklin, 'Dignity is a useless concept,' *British Medical Journal* (2003); 327(7429): 1419–1420. [<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC300789/>] (accessed 11/12/2011).

⁵⁸ Macklin, 'Dignity.'

⁵⁹ Macklin, 'Dignity.'

⁶⁰ Steven Pinker, 'The Stupidity of Dignity,' [<http://richarddawkins.net/articles/2567>] (accessed 11/12/2011), 1.

⁶¹ Pinker, 'Stupidity,' 2.

⁶² Pinker, 'Stupidity,' 2.

⁶³ Pinker, 'Stupidity,' 2–3.

It comes as little surprise when Pinker concludes that ‘the concept of dignity remains a mess.’⁶⁴ For him, dignity

has three features that undermine any possibility of using it as a foundation for bioethics. First, *dignity is relative*. One doesn't have to be a scientific or moral relativist to notice that ascriptions of dignity vary radically with the time, place, and beholder. Second, *dignity is fungible*. The Council and Vatican treat dignity as a sacred value, never to be compromised. In fact, every one of us voluntarily and repeatedly relinquishes dignity for other goods in life. ... Third, *dignity can be harmful*. ... Indeed, totalitarianism is often the imposition of a leader's conception of dignity on a population, such as the identical uniforms in Maoist China or the burqas of the Taliban ... **So is dignity a useless concept?** Almost. The word does have an identifiable sense, which gives it a claim, though a limited one, on our moral consideration. Dignity is a phenomenon of human perception ... certain features in another human being trigger ascriptions of worth. These features include signs of composure, cleanliness, maturity, attractiveness, and control of the body. The perception of dignity in turn elicits a response in the perceiver. Just as the smell of baking bread triggers a desire to eat it, and the sight of a baby's face triggers a desire to protect it, the appearance of dignity triggers a desire to esteem and respect the dignified person.⁶⁵

Dignity is clearly seen here as a descriptive concept, and an elitist one.

This explains why dignity is morally significant: We should not ignore a phenomenon that causes one person to respect the rights and interests of another. But it also explains why dignity is relative, fungible, and often harmful. Dignity is skin-deep: it's the sizzle, not the steak; the cover, not the book. What ultimately matters is respect for the person, not the perceptual signals that typically trigger it. Indeed, the gap between perception and reality makes us vulnerable to dignity illusions. We may be impressed by signs of dignity without underlying merit, as in the tin-pot dictator, and fail to recognize merit in a person who has been stripped of the signs of dignity, such as a pauper or refugee.⁶⁶

‘Exactly what aspects of dignity should we respect?’⁶⁷ Pinker gives two answers, one positive, the other negative.

For one thing, people generally want to be seen as dignified. Dignity is thus one of the interests of a person, alongside bodily integrity and personal property, that other people are obligated to respect. We don't want anyone to stomp

⁶⁴ Pinker, ‘Stupidity,’ 5.

⁶⁵ Pinker, ‘Stupidity,’ 5–6.

⁶⁶ Pinker, ‘Stupidity,’ 6.

⁶⁷ Pinker, ‘Stupidity,’ 6.

on our toes; we don't want anyone to steal our hubcaps; and we don't want anyone to open the bathroom door when we're sitting on the john ... There is a second reason to give dignity a measure of cautious respect. Reductions in dignity may harden the perceiver's heart and loosen his inhibitions against mistreating the person. When people are degraded and humiliated, such as Jews in Nazi Germany being forced to wear yellow armbands or dissidents in the Cultural Revolution being forced to wear grotesque haircuts and costumes, onlookers find it easier to despise them. ... Note, though, that all these cases involve coercion, so once again they are ruled out by autonomy and respect for persons. So, even when breaches of dignity lead to an identifiable harm, it's ultimately autonomy and respect for persons that gives us the grounds for condemning it.⁶⁸

Thus, according to Steven Pinker, dignity is a psychologically (or scientifically) useless concept: everything we want to say can be expressed by autonomy talk; it is a category of religious fanatics; and it is a phenomenon of human perception (what we conceive as 'dignified') that can bar us from seeing what is really important about persons. For all those reasons we should not continue dignity-discourse but rather decry this neoconservative idea as a scientifically useless notion.

4. In 2010, Peter Augustine Lawler, a member of the President's Council on Bioethics attacked by Pinker, replied in his *Modern and American Dignity: Who We Are as Persons, and What That Means for our Future*⁶⁹ by drawing a sharp distinction between the 'modern' and the 'American' view of dignity. The 'modern' view of dignity, as he calls it, denies what's good about who we are by nature, understanding human dignity to mean moral autonomy (freedom *from* nature) or productivity (asserting our mastery over nature by devising ingenious transformations). This new understanding of dignity stands at odds with the 'American' view, which depends on the self-evidence of the truth that we are all created equally unique and irreplaceable. The American view, which is indebted to classical, Christian, and modern sources, understands that free persons are more than merely autonomous or productive beings—or, for that matter, clever chimps. It sees what's good in our personal freedom and our technical mastery over nature, but only in balance with the rest of what makes us whole persons—our dignified performance of our 'relational' duties as familial, political, and religious beings.

⁶⁸Pinker, 'Stupidity,' 6–7.

⁶⁹ Peter Augustine Lawler, *Modern and American Dignity: Who We Are as Persons, and what that Means for our Future* (Wilmington: ISI Books: Intercollegiate Studies Institute 2010).

The modern view, as Lawler calls it, is based on a problematic methodological prejudice.

It seems clear enough that human dignity must consist in what is unique about man as compared with other beings. That is to say, we must *compare* human beings with something else. Now, in a culture which has little or no conception of the supernatural, man cannot avoid comparing himself primarily with other visible beings (as opposed to invisible or spiritual beings) in determining where his uniqueness lies. Especially in a scientific culture, preoccupied as it is with natural studies and the alleviation of natural problems, it is not hard to see why many would reasonably conclude that what is unique about us humans is our ability to reflect on and alter our own nature. Animals cannot do this. You will never find even the noblest ape attempting to do things that it cannot do given its natural (or material) constitution (to fly, for example, or to develop electronic means of communication), nor will an ape attempt to make itself something other than it is by nature. Yet because of our unique abilities for intellection and self-reflection, we humans do extend our abilities beyond what nature has equipped us to do (that is, our physical limitations), and we also dream of improving ourselves in other ways, including overcoming our own mortality. Human persons, in other words, have a strong tendency to find their uniqueness precisely in their *autonomy* with respect to nature, including their own nature.⁷⁰

Thus, for all his differences from Pinker, Lawler also agrees that dignity is a descriptive notion whose ascription is to be based on comparison. Not, however, on the comparison with other animals but on the comparison with supernatural beings. Since our culture has lost touch with this tradition, we look for dignity where it cannot be found (in our freedom from nature) instead of concentrating on what is good about who we are by nature. We need to be more Aristotelian and less modernist in our understanding of dignity if we want to defend it against the attack and criticism of empiricist and naturalist philosophers.

14. DESCRIPTIVE VS. ORIENTING CONCEPTIONS

However, Lawler shares too much common ground with the views he repudiates. He construes dignity as a descriptive concept based on comparison just as his opponents do, and he criticizes his critics only for arguing

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Mirus, 'Human Dignity?' [<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=819>].

from a wrong naturalist comparison with animals instead of from a comparison with supernatural beings. But this ties the problem to the problematic distinction between naturalism and theism and forgoes the opportunity to benefit from the Kantian insight that is neither naturalistic nor theistic. For Kant, 'dignity' is not a descriptive but an *orienting concept*. What does this mean?

Descriptive concepts can be predicated of subjects, defined, and used to classify phenomena into sets on the basis of particular features, traits, or characteristics. The traditional definition of 'human being' as 'rational animal' (*animal rationale*) is a case in point: It describes humans as animals, and it marks them off from other animals by their rationality as their distinguishing characteristic.⁷¹

Orienting concepts, on the other hand, cannot be defined because they have no semantically fixed meaning but only a pragmatic use whose rules or grammar can be described. They provide a *scheme of orientation* in terms of a set of distinctions and a *means of locating ourselves and others by using that scheme* that allow us to orient ourselves and others in real or symbolic spaces. Thus, we use *schemes of spatial distinctions* (left/right; above/ below; in front/behind etc.) to orient ourselves in space; or *schemes of temporal distinctions* (past/present/ future; earlier/later than etc.) to orient ourselves in time; or *schemes of communication* (personal pronouns) to orient ourselves in communicative contexts; or *schemes of salutary distinctions* (healthy/unhealthy; good/bad; medicine/ poison; etc.) to orient ourselves in health situations; or *schemes of emotional distinctions* to orient ourselves in bodily situations (pleasant/unpleasant; frightening/reassuring; etc.); or *schemes of moral distinctions* (good/evil) to orient ourselves in moral contexts; or *schemes of interpersonal behavior* (dignity/value) to orient ourselves in the mode of relating to others. These schemes are different and each has its own internal logic. For example, the spatial distinction between left and right can only be applied from a neutral position that is neither left nor right, whereas the temporal distinctions between past, present, and future can only be applied by being places in the present and not in the past or the future. But for all these differences, they have a common set of pragmatic functions that can be summarized as follows:

1. These distinctions are not descriptive distinctions 'in the world' but orienting distinctions in how we relate to the world: There is no 'here'

⁷¹ Cf. Dalferth, *Umsonst*, chap. 1.

and 'now,' 'left' or 'right,' 'present' or 'past,' 'good' or 'evil' in the world, but only with respect to us as we relate to the world around us in these ways.

2. These distinctions orient by not allowing for degrees or exceptions: If anything is present, past, or future in a given discourse, everything is present, past, or future.
3. These distinctions are only relevant, i.e. effective, by being used: Unless we orient ourselves in space in terms of left and right, there is no 'left' or 'right.'
4. One cannot use any one of these distinctions without using the whole scheme: Nobody can say 'I' or 'you' without being able to say 'he,' 'she,' 'it,' 'we,' 'you' and 'they' as well. Take one element of the scheme away and the whole scheme stops functioning.
5. One cannot use these distinctions without at the same time applying them to oneself, i.e. to locate oneself and others within the scheme: We cannot say 'you' without using (implicitly or in fact) 'I' or 'we' for us; and we cannot use 'dignity' for us without using it of others, and vice versa.

Thus, whereas elitist conceptions of dignity are either rank- or hierarchy-relative (as in Nietzsche or – in a different and more complex way – in Thomas) or description based, i.e. require a particular set of features to be instantiated by someone to whom they are applied legitimately, dignity used in a Kantian sense is *not* a generalized description or universalized elitist conception (i.e. an elitist conception with unrestricted scope) but an orienting device for a particular practice of human life, i.e. the practice of relating to others in moral contexts, in communication, and in other forms of social interaction. The basis for a legitimate ascription of dignity is not a 'Factor X,' whether understood as a single feature or a complex set of features, but a practice of (moral) communication. We ascribe dignity to those with whom we communicate as human beings: If they are human persons, we treat them with dignity. This we do not because of any particular feature or set of features in them, but solely because *we commit ourselves* in principle to view and relate to anyone who is a human person in such a way that certain types of behavior are not acceptable (negative notions of dignity), whereas others are appropriate, desirable, required, or imperative (positive notions of dignity). How we conceptualize dignity changes over time and from culture to culture, but to use dignity as a basic device or idea for orienting our ways of re-

lating to those who communicate with us in human interactions and practices is or can be (relatively) stable over time.

What is important here is that practice comes first, not dignity. Without a humane practice of living together with other persons, there is no dignity. We destroy or harm this practice if we ascribe dignity only to us and not to others as well, or only to some humans, and not to all, or only sometimes, and not always, or not only to humans but also to other animals. Conversely, we further this practice if we commit ourselves to viewing and treating every human being, not merely family and friends but also strangers and enemies, as human persons with an untouchable dignity. In this sense, dignity is an orienting concept of a particular human practice – the practice of living a humane rather than an inhumane life together with others (before God – as Christians, Jews, or Moslems will add). The rule of dignity defines a practice that encompasses all human beings to whom we can or could relate in communicative interactions as persons, it comprises all dimensions of our lives from the biological and corporeal through the social and political to the moral and religious,⁷² and it states that we commit ourselves to relate to other persons in the same way as we relate to ourselves as persons. To be a human person is enough for sharing this dignity – not to be human in a particular way, or to be genetically close or very similar to humans. The ascription of dignity is not based on comparison, and it is not relative to or dependent on a set of features in a human being, but merely on the fact that we see and identify the other as a human person⁷³ with whom we interact in a common practice with other human persons.

⁷² We are bodies not merely in a narrow biological sense but in a rich and complex sense that comprises all dimensions of human life, biological and physical as well as social, cultural, economic, political, moral and religious. In all these dimensions we can suffer and be hurt, and in all these dimensions we can live in humane or inhumane ways by the way we and others orient our lives.

⁷³ Pinker is right in understanding dignity as a phenomenon of human perception: how we see others and ourselves determines how we relate to others and ourselves. But he misconstrues this insight in a narrowly empiricist way as an occasion that triggers certain ascriptions of worth instead of conceiving it as indicating a human practice based on an ethics of seeing as Arne Grøn has developed it. Cf. Arne Grøn, 'Ethics of Vision,' in: I.U. Dalferth (ed.), *Ethik der Liebe. Studien zu Kierkegaard's 'Taten der Liebe'* (Tübingen 2002), 111–122.

15. THREE DIMENSIONS OF DIGNITY DISCOURSE

Thus, if we construe dignity discourse as orienting discourse, then the basic problem is not how to define dignity (in a naturalistic or theistic, a modern or an American way), but rather who is to count as a human person so that he or she is a potential partner of human dignity practice. For empiricists this seems to be primarily a biological problem, but it is not. Throughout Western history the character and identity of human beings has been explored by drawing on three basic contrasts or comparisons: the biological contrast between humans and non-humans (humans vs. other animals); the theological contrast between humans and super-humans (humans vs. gods); and the anthropological contrast between humans and humans (inhumane vs. humane ways of living).

Against the backdrop of these approaches three distinct sets of differences have been used to determine the content and function of the concept of dignity. For many it 'seems clear enough that human dignity must consist in what is unique about man as compared with other beings.'⁷⁴ However, this can be spelled out in naturalistic, theistic or anthropological terms.

- Naturalists understand dignity to be a relative distinction based on a set of biological features that can be found more or less clearly in (some) humans and to some degree also in (some) other great apes; and sometimes more clearly in apes than in humans. Dignity can legitimately be ascribed to those who manifest these features, whether human or not.
- Theists, on the other hand, base their account of dignity on a comparison of humans with deities or the divine. Whereas humans are deficient with respect to perfect being, they are more perfect than any other non-divine beings because of their sense of the divine – a sense allegedly unique to them (*sensus divinitatis*).⁷⁵
- Anthropological accounts of dignity, finally, compare humans with other humans and understand dignity as a distinct mode of living a human life – a mode that differentiates between inhumane and humane ways of living. The ascription of dignity here depends on a conception of the good life

⁷⁴ Mirus.

⁷⁵ Cf. G.E. Lessing, 'Die Religion. Fragment (1753),' in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Berlin 1968): 'Der Mensch? Wo ist er her? / Zu schlecht für einen Gott; zu gut fürs Ungefähr.' Humans are betwixt and between the divine and non-human creatures and hence in a dangerous if not impossible and paradoxical position: too good to be merely a product of blind chance, as Lessing put it, and not good enough to be divine or angelic. Thus, dignity is ascribed to all and only humans because and insofar as they differ from all other creatures in possessing a sense of the divine.

that serves as the touchstone for judging the actual life of humans if they live up to this standard or fail to do so. Those, and only those, who live their lives in a humane way, however this may be defined, manifest dignity.

Thus, whereas naturalistic accounts ascribe dignity to some humans and some other apes, theistic accounts ascribe it to all humans and only to humans, and anthropological accounts ascribe it to those humans who live their lives in a particular way.

16. DIGNITY AS A DISTINCTION OF PERSONS

In the anthropological sense, dignity is not a natural property or trait, nor a set of natural properties or traits that can be identified in an organism (naturalism), but a moral category: It is a short formula for the human self-determination to treat other persons with the respect they deserve because of our common humanity.

However, what is this common humanity? Answers differ widely. Biological accounts elaborate the differences between humans and other animals. But this by itself will never be enough. It will always result in identifying merely gradual differences, and this is not enough for the absolute ascription of dignity because it misses the moral point and orienting function of dignity discourse.

In order to avoid the naturalistic fallacy of searching for a Factor X in Fukuyama's sense, moral answers understand our being human not simply as a natural fact but as a way of basing our lives on a normative decision about what we want to be and how we want to live as humans. We can live, or fail to live, our lives in a humane (as opposed to an inhumane) way, and if we can, then we should. From a moral perspective the decisive feature of being human is not to be what one is, but rather to have the potential, the duty and the obligation to *become* what one can be as a human being by living a humane rather than an inhumane life.

The religious answer goes beyond the moral answer by defining a humane way of life in a specific way, i.e. by viewing, placing, or locating human life in relation to God. The theological argument behind this can briefly be summarized as follows: We are all different, but as the different individuals we are, we are all equal before the law. However, the set of those who are equal before the law comprises those, and only those, who are equal before

God. Equality before God is the non-natural distinction we all share as persons, and this is the basis for the ascription of dignity to us. Personhood and equality are not something that can be ascribed to humans on the basis of a comparison, but rather are presupposed in comparing humans with others. The logic of comparing requires reference to a third in order to compare two: to compare A with B is to compare A to B with respect to C. From a religious perspective, humans are equal with respect to the law *because* they are equal with respect to the presence of God; and they are equal with respect to God not because they chose to live in the presence of God but rather because God freely becomes their loving neighbor and in doing so opens the space and time for humans to live their lives in a humane way – or to fail to do so.

That is to say, dignity is not ascribed to us *tout court* but to us *as persons*, and not just in any sense of ‘person’ but *in so far as we as persons manifest or express the presence of God*. As persons we are more than we appear to be: We are signs that point beyond ourselves to the presence of the one without whom we would not be, and we can become signs that manifest the presence of God to others, not necessarily by intentionally trying to do so but rather, and normally, without knowing it, or learning about it only retrospectively. To be able to signify God’s presence to others is what distinguishes us from other beings. As persons we are *personae* of God’s presence.

Thus, to respect the dignity of persons is to respect the presence of God in the other and myself. This is more than the Kantian principle that human beings should never be treated merely as a means, but always as ends in themselves. It is to insist that we – each and every one of us – are more than we appear to be because we are *personae dei*, i.e. somebody in and through whom God makes his presence manifest to others. Persons in this sense are not only the powerful and rich, as a misconceived doctrine of analogy might suggest, but even more so the poor and oppressed, those without rights and possession, those whom we don’t like, even our enemies: They are all potential occasions of the manifestation of God’s presence to us, and hence should be treated with the respect those deserve who are dignified by God to become occasions for manifesting his presence.

That is to say, everybody, *simply by being a human person*, is dignified to become an occasion of manifesting God’s presence to others. This is the Christian origin and foundation of the universalist idea of human dignity *with respect to humans*, which is based on an elitist understanding of dignity *with respect to God*: Dignity is first and foremost the dignity of God the creator, maker of heaven and earth. God’s dignity is transferred and extended to

the creature when and in so far as God makes them bearers and revealers of his presence to others. It is a dignity in which creatures participate by receiving it as a gift of God without ever possessing it. And since they do not possess it, they cannot lose or be robbed of it. This is why the dignity of human persons is universal and untouchable, and yet they can be treated in ways that ignore and contradict it. Their dignity can be offended by treating them in inhumane ways. But this offends the dignity of the source and origin of all dignity, i.e. the one who has chosen to make human beings his representatives and to manifest his presence to us in and through each and every human person, not merely, as the elitist notion has it, through some of us but not others.

17. PROPERTY ESSENTIALISM VS. DYNAMIC PERSONALISM

The three basic contrasts for comparing human beings result in three different approaches to human dignity. The first concentrates on comparing humans and non-humans (animals), and seeks to explicate dignity as an indicator of biological excellence. But this approach is a failure. Naturalism is no help in understanding dignity.

The third concentrates on comparing humans with humans and sees the real difference at stake not in the biological difference between humans and other animals but rather in the anthropological difference between humane and inhumane ways of living a human life. Dignity here indicates a *mode* of human living – a *humane* as distinct from an *inhumane mode* of living. This is the proper locus of dignity discourse as developed in the 20th century.

The central question then becomes what we mean by a ‘humane way of living a human life.’ Here the second approach as worked out in the Christian tradition offers two importantly different answers.

The first is property essentialism: Dignity is a property that distinguishes humans (and angels) from other creatures or distinguishes a religious view of the world as creation (Pope Benedict XVI: ‘dignity of the earth’) from secular views. Thus humans have dignity because they are rational beings or at least beings who have the potential of being rational beings. They are rational souls in a body, and whereas the latter signifies their commonality with other creatures, the former signifies their (analogical) commonality with their Creator. The problem of this approach is that it collapses two distinctions into one: the distinction between God and creature, and the distinction be-

tween human and other creatures. *Reason* or *rationality* are taken to constitute the decisive difference between humans and other creatures on earth, and they are at the same time taken to be that which show us, and only us, to be related to God. The feature or property that singles humans out among creatures is at the same time that which singles humans out in their relationship to God. But this is in no way obvious and results in an overdetermined notion of reason: Reason is what distinguishes us from other animals (animal *rationale*) and as such constitutes our (relative) sameness with God according to the analogical difference between God as the source of reason and dignity and humans as the created occasions of reason and dignity. However, why should that which distinguishes us from other animals be at the same time that which manifests our special relationship with God? Property essentialism uses the theological comparison between the human and the divine to interpret or elucidate the biological difference between humans and other animals. It gives a theological answer to a biological problem, and in doing so it fails to locate the problem of dignity where it ought to be located: in the difference between humane and inhumane ways of living a human life.

The second and very different answer is given by a dynamic personalism: Dignity is seen as divine gift that empowers us to become what we can be because of the gift given to us. It is a distinction that enables us to become the persons we can be by living up to who we are as persons: God's freely chosen neighbors. We are all born as humans who can live as persons, and we do this in the fullest sense open to us if we orient our lives to the way God relates to us. By relating to us as our neighbor, God gives us the potential to become what we cannot become from our own powers: humans who live a humane life as persons among persons before God. The theological contrast between human and divine is used here not to elucidate the contrast between humans and animals but rather the anthropological or ethical contrast between humane and inhumane ways of living our life. The point of departure is not what humans are, do, or have but rather what God does to and for them. From a human perspective this means emphasizing the basic passivity, dependency or (in more positive terms) enrichment and empowerment of human life by the way God relates to and becomes present in it. Dignity is and remains God's property and hence cannot be taken away from us who participate in it as a divine gift. This gift can be spelled out without reference to dignity. Indeed, this category may explicitly be avoided because it lends itself to naturalist or essentialist misunderstandings, i.e. as signifying some-

thing in our biological, natural or cultural make-up that marks us off from other creatures. But the point of the dynamic personalist understanding of dignity is that we are unique not in what we are but in what we become *empowered to show or indicate about God* (creator) – i.e. that God is present to his creation in a particular way, a way spelled out as *love* in the Christian tradition. Thus, the criterion of a properly humane humanity is to accept one's basic passivity, i.e. our empowerment to mediate and manifest the presence of God to others. This empowerment is something beyond our control: we cannot give it to anyone nor can we take it away from anyone: It is a pre-given of all our acting and doing. This in turn grounds our respect for each other – a respect that is always a respect for the respect of God for others. That is to say, we respect others because we respect that God respects everyone as his neighbor, not merely those who belong to a particular nation, group, or tradition, but unrestrictedly everyone: God is the *neighbor of everybody*. This constitutes the *dignity of human persons* as the *humane mode of living a human life in the presence of God*. Humans acknowledge and respect this, as Christians say, by living according to the rule of love: To live in this way is to see God (or God's presence) in everybody and hence tailor what we do not merely to our own interests or the requirements of the other but also, and even more so, to the gift that he or she represents as much as we do: to be those whom God has chosen to be his neighbors.

Dignity, Autonomy and Embodiment

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ABSTRACT

The inalienable dignity of all human beings is independent of circumstances, capacities, or qualifications. Kantian autonomy (construed as the rational will, or the ability to exercise it) cannot ground such a notion. The roots of universal human dignity are more plausibly traced to the Judaeo-Christian worldview in which God loves all his children equally, despite their vulnerability and weakness. To mature morally is to come to realize that we gain nothing by insisting on our status, or 'standing on our dignity'; we should recognize instead the dependency we share with all our neighbours.

KEYWORDS

dignity, autonomy, Kant, embodiment, love, God, location, neighbour, vulnerability

1. THE PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT OF DIGNITY

In his fascinating paper, 'Religion, Morality and Being Human,' Ingolf Dalferth reminds us of the Kantian conception of a person. In qualifying as persons, we are something very special.¹ We are not just animals, which

¹ See above, 158–159. I am grateful to Professor Dalferth, and the other participants at the ESPR Conference on 'Embodied Religion' held in Soesterberg, Netherlands, September 2012 for stimulating discussion and comments.

would give us only a common value shared by any natural living being or ‘offspring of the earth.’ We are not even just animals with the distinctive feature of rationality; for this, though entailing that we can choose between options, and set goals for ourselves, sets us apart only in degree, not in kind, from the manifold animal species that manifest purposive activity. What makes us ‘exalted above any price’ is the fact that we are *persons*, that is to say, subjects who engage in moral reasoning (or ‘morally practical reason’). This alone, says Kant, gives us *dignity* – in German *Würde* – an ‘absolute inner worth.’² And Professor Dalferth glosses this by saying that ascribing personhood to someone is not a matter of degree, but a matter of a simple yes/no question: are we able to live a moral life or aren’t we?

It follows, on Dalferth’s analysis, that this Kantian notion of dignity is a ‘strictly universal’ notion: it can never be a matter of classifying humans into groups or classes. And he contrasts this universality with more elitist conceptions, such as that of Nietzsche, which ascribes a certain greatness or nobility to those capable of extraordinary acts of self-overcoming, and also with more recent accounts which make dignity depend on the instantiation of certain descriptive features. He suggests that dignity should better be understood as an ‘orienting concept’: it fosters, or encapsulates, a humane way of living with others, one in which ‘we commit ourselves to viewing and treating every human being, not merely family and friends, but also strangers and enemies, as human persons with untouchable dignity.’ Or expressed theologically, ‘we – each and every one of us – are more than we appear to be, because we are *persons* in and whom God makes his presence manifest to others.’³

Clearly the conception being articulated here is to some extent prescriptive. It does not merely purport to describe how the notion of dignity is in fact commonly used in ordinary moral and political discourse, but instead puts forward a kind of ideal regulative or normative principle: that we should be committed to living in a moral community – a community of self-respecting human agents who accord respect to every one of their fellows simply in virtue of their humanity.

One of the interesting things about this conception is that it leads us in a rather different direction from the one we should take if we were explicat-

² Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* [*Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1797], trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge 1996), 186 (Akademie edition, VI, 435). Quoted in Ingolf Dalferth, ‘Religion, Morality and Being Human: The Controversial Status of Human Dignity,’ 163.

³ Dalferth, ‘Religion, Morality and Being Human,’ 176.

ing dignity by focusing directly on the central Kantian notion of autonomy. Autonomy, for Kant, is ‘the basis of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature’ [*Autonomie ist der Grund der Würde der menschlichen und jeder vernünftigen Natur*], as that aspect of our will whereby it must be considered as *selbstgesetzgebend* (‘giving the law to itself’).⁴ What this suggests is that the independent power of exercising the rational will is what gives us our human dignity. To have human dignity is to be able to make decisions independently of the arbitrary will of another, acting in the full light of reason, free from internal or external interference with one’s rational processes. Hence, to be autonomous I must be free from external tyranny (my status as a rational agent must be respected) and also from internal interference, such as arises from the contingencies of appetite and mere inclination.⁵ I must be a fully rational, self-legislating being.

The Swiss euthanasia clinic *Dignitas*, which offers, for a fee, to terminate the lives of those with incurable and irreversible medical conditions, appears to focus above all on this aspect of autonomy. The ‘dignity’ that the clinic purports to promote and respect is above all the dignity of exercising the rational will; and this explains the elaborate procedures designed to make sure that the patient is rationally choosing to end his or her life, without confusion or external pressure. Clients are carefully interviewed on arrival at the clinic to ascertain that they are there of their own volition, and understand what they are doing. They are then interviewed again, after a ‘cooling off’ period of one day, to check that they are steadfast in their resolve to end their lives. And finally, on the day of the killing, they are again questioned about whether they know what is about to happen, what will be the effect of the drugs administered, and so on.⁶ Now of course there are good legal reasons why an organisation involved in the business of killing⁷ should want to make

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], ch. 2, ed. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Arnulf Zweig, (Oxford 2003), 236, 232 (Akademie edition, IV 436; 431).

⁵ Thus, for Kant, moral imperatives cannot be construed as conditional on whatever contingent desires one happens to have, for ‘in these cases the will never determines itself directly by the thought of an action, but only by the motivations which the anticipated effect of the action exercises on the will – *I ought to do something because I want something else.*’ (*Groundwork*, ed. Hill and Zweig, 244; Akademie edn IV 444). Because of its dependency on the contingencies of inclination, action of this kind is always for Kant heteronomous.

⁶ James Ross, ‘One Last Helping Hand,’ *The Independent* (London), 24 April 2012, 44–5.

⁷ The use of the term ‘killing’ may strike some readers as hostile or critical, but there is no such necessary implication. It is a matter of simple factual accuracy to describe the clinic’s work as that of

sure that those who use its services are doing so in full knowledge and of their own volition. But the relevant point for the purposes of the present discussion is that the qualifications the patient has to display in order to pass these tests are very far from being a matter of simply belonging to the community of human beings. Something much more active is required – articulacy, moral responsibility, ability to respond to searching questions at interview, and so on. And these are not ‘all or nothing’ matters: they are matters of degree. One can clearly imagine many confused, distressed or disabled terminally ill patients failing the tests. So the ‘dignity’ that is the focus of attention in the Clinic’s operations is by implication a property pertaining only to a qualified subset of human beings.

If we are to make acceptable use of the concept of human dignity, it seems clear that it needs to be a more ‘universalist’ notion than this (here I would wholeheartedly agree with what I take to be the conclusions of Dalferth’s paper). It needs to be something that is possessed by all of us, *qua* human, and which should be recognized as an inalienable and absolute human attribute, independent of our circumstances, capacities, group-membership, qualifications or faculties. It is notorious that the principal forms of modern secular consequentialism cannot ground such a universal notion of dignity (Peter Singer’s ‘preference utilitarianism,’ in its attitude to the unborn and to infants, makes this abundantly clear);⁸ and as the *Dignitas* example illustrates, it also seems that Kantian autonomy (construed as the rational will, or the ability to exercise it) cannot ground it either. Even Dalferth’s heroic attempts to ground dignity in a universalist Kantian notion of membership of the moral community do not quite seem to work; for membership of the moral community presumably requires certain abilities. Dalferth bases his argument on the idea that Kantian dignity is ‘ascribed not to the individual human being directly but to morality, and through morality to humanity’;⁹ but this ‘indirect’ Kantian strategy seems to me to be problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is the individual who needs the protections of dignity, not humanity in general (it would hardly be comforting to be told: ‘don’t worry that we are sacrificing you – we are protecting the dignity of the

killing people, or, perhaps, helping them to kill themselves. The euphemistic (not to say Orwellian) term ‘assisted dying,’ used for example by Mary Warnock, should cause disquiet precisely because it attempts to divert attention from what is actually being done in such cases. See Warnock, *Easeful Death: Is There a Case for Assisted Dying?* (Oxford 2008).

⁸ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge 1979, 3rd edn. 2011).

⁹ Dalferth, ‘Religion, Morality and Being Human,’ 158.

human race in general!'). And second, ascribing dignity to the institution of morality seems to gloss over the fact that we participate in the institution to differing degrees (young children, for example, clearly participate less, since they are involved merely as recipients of moral action but not as fully fledged agents). So on the 'dignity-as-belonging-to-morality-in-general' argument, we seem to need a further reason why the protecting embrace of dignity should extend to all humans, independent of their capacities, their rational will, and their degree of participation in the moral domain.

2. HOW IS WORTH CONFERRED?

The Latin word *dignitas* has connotations which partly overlap with those of the German term *Würde*. In its Classical usage, it most frequently refers to some exalted or honoured status that attached to someone in virtue of their rank or position – the dignity of a consul, for example, or of a patrician as opposed to a plebeian. This usage spills over into English term 'dignity,' so that when Prince Florizel in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* leaves the royal palace in disguise to woo the humble Perdita, a courtier describes him as one 'who has his Dignity and Duty both cast off, Fled from his Father, from his hopes, and with a Shepherd's daughter.'¹⁰ (Of course it eventually turns out that Perdita, unbeknownst to anyone, is actually herself a King's daughter, so the threat to Florizel's dignity which would have been occasioned by his marrying someone of low birth is happily avoided.)

In this conception, status is conferred by birth or high office. But as so often in Shakespeare, the idea is no sooner developed than it is subverted. When the lovers are discovered, and Florizel is subjected to the furious wrath of his royal father for having risked his dignity, Perdita refuses to be cowed:

I was not much afeard; for once or twice
I was about to speak and tell him plainly,
The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage but
Looks on alike.¹¹

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* [c. 1610], Act V, scene 1, line 182.

¹¹ *Winter's Tale*, Act IV, scene 4, lines 434–7.

Just as the sun shines on all, high and lowly alike, so, she seems to be saying, distinctions of rank and status are irrelevant to someone's true worth. This conception comes not from the Classical or pagan world, where considerations of 'dignity' as rank were all-important, but from the Judaeo-Christian worldview. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'the dignity of the human person is rooted in his or her creation in the image and likeness of God.'¹² Or again, 'All human beings, in as much as they are created in the image of God, have the dignity of a person.'¹³

Nicolas Wolterstorff, in an impressive recent study, has underlined the roots of this idea in the Hebrew Bible, where he argues, with a wealth of supporting evidence, that there is a clear recognition of the equal value of all in the sight of God. Throughout the Old Testament, what Wolterstorff aptly calls the 'quartet of the vulnerable' – widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the impoverished – make repeated appearances. And in the injunctions of the law and the prophets, and the poetry of the Psalms, God is seen as calling on his people to 'loose the bonds of injustice' by rescuing these vulnerable groups who have been wronged: to 'raise the poor from the dust, and lift the needy from the ash-heap' (Psalm 113 [112]). Injustice is seen both as wronging God and as wronging the victims of injustice by failing to recognize their inherent human worth.¹⁴

The New Testament continues the same message, though Wolterstorff argues that it often comes to our ears in distorted or diluted form, owing to difficulties of translation. Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (5:6) says 'Blessed are those who hunger for *dikaïosune*.' The latter term is often translated 'righteousness,' which today may suggest some sort of personal rectitude, whereas the Greek stem (*dik-*) has a much more interpersonal and social flavour and connects directly with justice. The 'kingdom' which Jesus was to inaugurate was to be a kingdom of 'justice and righteousness' – the very combination that so frequently occurs in the Old Testament (in the Hebrew terms *mishpat* and *tsedeqa*). And the righteous king or Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures was to be one who (in the words of Psalm 72 [71]), 'judges the poor with justice and ... saves the lives of the needy.' On Wolterstorff's reading, Jesus' words and actions (consorting with outcasts, touching and curing those who were ritually unclean, explaining why it was right to heal on the

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [1997], Part III, section 1, Ch. 1; §1700.

¹³ Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church [2005], §66.

¹⁴ Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, 2008).

Sabbath) were designed to ‘appeal to our worth as human beings to explain God’s care for each and every one of us.’¹⁵

Not only does Wolterstorff trace the origins of the idea of universal human dignity back to early Jewish and Christian moral thinking, but he also makes the striking and controversial claim that without such theistic resources we will be left without any satisfactory grounding for dignity: no secular worldview can do the job. Now while it is impossible to deny the decisive influence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition on the development of Western moral thought, the majority of contemporary moral philosophers would nevertheless strongly resist the suggestion that our modern conceptions of justice, human dignity and rights require a theistic underpinning. Many would regard Kant’s principle of respect for persons (referred to many times in Dalferth’s paper) as providing a fully secularized basis for the modern conception of inherent human dignity – the right of each of us to be treated as an end in him or her self, never merely as a means. And this in turn is often seen as the origin of the modern idea, found in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity ...’ (Article 1). Wolterstorff is adamant, however, that ‘it is impossible to develop a secular account of human dignity adequate for grounding human rights.’¹⁶ This is because Kantian respect hinges on the capacity for rational action; yet if human worth depends on this, then those who lack that capacity (infants, those born with severe mental impairment, Alzheimer’s patients) risk being excluded from the domain of right-holders. The point is a familiar one in the debates over Kantian ethics, and Wolterstorff makes repeated use of it to pose a powerful challenge to a variety of secular moral theorists (including Alan Gewirth and Ronald Dworkin): if rational choice (Gewirth) or mental creativity (Dworkin) is the criterion, how can this explain why every human, *qua* human, should be regarded as having inherent worth?¹⁷

In the Christian worldview, by contrast, ‘God loves ... each and every human being equally and permanently’; and if this is true, then ‘natural human rights are grounded in that love,’ since they ‘inhere in the bestowed worth that supervenes on being thus loved.’¹⁸ The idea has a certain intuitive

¹⁵ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 131.

¹⁶ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 325.

¹⁷ See Ronald Dworkin, *Life’s Dominion* (New York 1993); Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights* (Chicago 1982).

¹⁸ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 360.

plausibility, since our experience of human parental and conjugal love does seem to give some support to the idea that attachment or commitment to someone can endow that person with a certain moral status. Nevertheless, philosophical critics are sure here to raise the question of how exactly love can ‘bestow worth.’ The question is related to the vexed issue of the Euthyphro problem (which, perhaps disappointingly, is not directly addressed by Wolterstorff); the crucial worry is whether love in itself can make something valuable.

One is reminded here of the arguments of Harry Frankfurt that by loving something, or caring about it, we imbue it with worth or value.¹⁹ Value, on Frankfurt’s picture is a matter of our exercising our will, our choice, to care about something or someone. The resulting picture is one where, in a certain sense, it is we who *create* values by our own authentic choices. By deciding what we care about we bring value into the world. But there is a serious problem with this view, together with many other ‘internalist’ views (compare Bernard Williams’s idea that value is generated by my commitments to certain ‘projects’ that I make my own)²⁰ – namely that they seem to put the cart before the horse. I cannot, surely, create value or worth merely by caring about something (or else I could bestow worth on a pile of worthless rubbish merely by choosing to care about it); on the contrary, it seems that my caring about something is only justified if that thing is *already* worth caring about. Caring, in other words, *depends* on worth, rather than creating it.

Perhaps, however, the status of the person caring makes a difference. Wolterstorff uses the analogy of a great monarch bestowing her friendship on a courtier: the courtier is now ‘honoured and envied in ways she was not before.’²¹ Unfortunately for this argument, it still leaves open the question of whether the courtier *ought* to be so honoured. Has genuine worth been bestowed – is the courtier now genuinely fit to be honoured – or is any resulting ‘honouring’ that may occur merely a prudently deferential recognition of the monarch’s arbitrary power? (Analogies here abound with the Euthyphro problem: the mere arbitrary commands of a God, however powerful, cannot

¹⁹ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton 2004), 40ff.

²⁰ See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley 1993), Ch. 5. For more discussion of the positions of Frankfurt and Williams, see J. Cottingham, ‘Integrity and Fragmentation,’ *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 27/1 (2010), 2–14.

²¹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 259.

create moral obligation). If, however, we add the premise that the aforesaid Queen is supremely good and wise and just, then her bestowing of her friendship will make not just a causal but a normative difference: there will now be genuine reason to honour the courtier, namely that in the eyes of one who is wholly good and wise and just the courtier in question is an object of affection and delight.

I conclude that there is reason to think that the impartial love of a supremely good and just God for all his creatures does indeed give us reason to honour them all alike. In the eyes of a supremely loving, good and wise heavenly father, each of us, as Wolterstorff puts it, is 'irreducibly precious.' As for whether there can be viable alternative secular groundings for the idea of universal dignity and worth, in the light of Wolterstorff's arguments that seems doubtful but still open. He has made a strong case for thinking the standard Kantian-derived attempts to provide such grounding are not promising, but this evidently leaves open the logical possibility that a better secular alternative might be round the corner.

3. DIGNITY AND EMBODIMENT

In the final section of this paper, I should like to connect some of the ideas so far broached to the question of embodiment, bearing in mind the theme outlined in the general rubric for this conference, that 'religion is always embodied in various ways.' The contrast, discussed at various points in Ingolf Dalferth's paper, between secular and religious approaches to human dignity leaves it open how far either conception might be understood as irreducibly body-involving. Certainly, the Kantian approaches seem to lay stress on rather abstract notions – dignity as attaching to an abstract human institution (morality), rather than to individual embodied creatures; dignity as a function of purely 'noumenal' properties, such as the exercise of rational choice, rather than as depending on our situatedness in the embodied biological world. What of the religion-based approaches? The one that Dalferth adumbrates at the close of his paper again seems to abstract somewhat from the context of our embodied human existence. We are born as humans, he suggests, but we have the power to become something more – to become *persons* 'capable of living a humane life as persons among persons before God.' The focus of attention is not on our similarities with (or differences from)

other animals, but on ‘the ... ethical contrast between humane or inhumane ways of living.’²² (The latter contrast is actually described by Dalferth as ‘anthropological or ethical,’ but the former term does not seem to play any role, at any rate if one understands ‘anthropology’ to involve an irreducible reference to our biological and embodied nature as a species.)

The concluding sentences of Dalferth’s paper, however, point directly to the importance, in elucidating the theistic ground for dignity, of a *relationship* – the relationship of being a neighbour. ‘We respect others because we respect that God respects everyone as his neighbour... God is the neighbour of everyone.’ Now this relationship, it seems to me, is one that has to be primarily understood in terms of embodiment, and indeed in terms of physical location. A neighbour in the most basic sense is someone who lives next-door – in physical proximity to you.

When talking of God, we may be inclined to ‘spiritualize’ all this, on the grounds that God is supposed to be incorporeal, and so to have no physical relationship with anyone. But that, I think, would be too swift. In the first place, the fact that God cannot be comprehended in physical terms does not licence the inference that we can comprehend him better as a ‘non-physical’ kind of Cartesian ghost. It is surely better to admit, with Nicolas Malebranche, that the deity must wholly transcend any anthropomorphic conceptions: just as we should not imagine God to be corporeal, Malebranche observed, so we should not really describe him as a Mind or Spirit, since that invites comparison with a human mind. Rather, Malebranche suggested, we should think that ‘just as He includes the perfections of matter without being material, so He includes the perfections of created spirits without being spirit – at least in the manner we conceive spirit.’²³ All we can really say of the ‘neighbour’ relation between God and his creatures – the only analogy we have for it – is that of physical proximity: God is somehow *close* to us: close to us in the closest possible way – closer within me than I am to my inner self, as St Augustine put it.²⁴

In the second place, in speaking of the relationship between God and human beings as ‘personal,’ we should not be too swift to ‘spiritualize’ the central feature of personhood which is ascribed both to God and to human-kind made in his image. On the contrary, both modern philosophy (one

²² Dalferth, ‘Religion, Morality and Being Human,’ 177.

²³ Nicolas Malebranche, *Recherche de la Vérité* [1674], Bk. 3, Ch. 9.

²⁴ *Interior intimo meo*; Augustine, *Confessiones* [397–8], III, 6, 11.

thinks here particularly of Wittgenstein) and traditional Christian doctrine (the conception of God as supremely revealed in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth) concur in supposing that personal attributes are to be understood primarily in term of the embodied beings who manifest them. In general, our handle on personhood, despite perennial philosophical tendencies to abstractify it, is an irreducibly corporeal one, and we need to beware of following John Locke down a long road of philosophical errors and confusions, in trying to define a 'person' in terms of something abstract called 'consciousness.' As Anthony Kenny has persuasively argued, 'the concept of a human being – an animal of a particular species with particular capacities – provides us with the only concept of a person that we can really understand.'²⁵ The latter claim might seem something of an exaggeration if it were taken to mean that only a human being could count as a person (we can certainly make sense of the idea of a Martian being a person); but it remains true, as Kenny implies, that it the concept of a person is most fundamentally at home in the context of our human, biological status as a certain kind of embodied species, and that it is from here that any possible understanding of the concept must begin.

We need to keep these points in mind when reflecting further on the concept of a neighbour. The story in Luke (10: 29–37) of the Good Samaritan, told in response to the question 'But who is my neighbour?', shows that my neighbour need not be understood simply as the guy next door. But the story nonetheless depends crucially on the idea of a physical, locatable encounter, on the road going up from Jerusalem to Jericho – as the Samaritan comes upon someone who had fallen among thieves, tends to him physically, binding up his wounds, takes him to the inn, and arranges for him to be cared for. To be a neighbour to someone is to be *there* for him, not to simply wish him well in some disembodied haze of general benevolence.

The importance of physicality and location in religious thought has been brought out recently in Mark Wynn's illuminating study *Faith and Place*. Many theologians and philosophers in the past have been very wary of conceptions that seem to 'localize' God and his action – something that is connected with the so-called 'scandal of particularity.' Why should the eternal creator of the universe have a preference for a particular tribe on an insignificant planet revolving round a very average star? Why should he manifest himself as a human being in an unprepossessing town in a remote corner of

²⁵ Anthony Kenny, *What I Believe* (London 2006), 73.

the early Roman empire? In Catholic Christianity, with its traditional emphasis on relics and pilgrimage sites, the problem has seemed to many people to be particularly acute: why should an omnibenevolent creator dispense favours specifically to those who travel to Lourdes or to Santiago de Compostela?

An uncompromisingly ‘metaphysical’ answer offered by the hard-line traditionalist believer would be that God miraculously exercises his power precisely by intervening, or by being present in an especially immediate way, in particular locations. At the other end of the spectrum would be a psychological or pragmatic answer of the kind that might be offered by theologians of a more ‘progressive’ stripe: it just so happens that some places put people in a beneficial frame of mind, perhaps because of their natural beauty, or moving architecture, or historical associations. But the latter view might seem to smack of reductionism – the attempt to purge theology of reference to anything not readily explicable in natural terms; while the former position could leave one wondering at the theological coherence of the idea that the activity of an omnipresent, omnipotent God is ‘localised’ in this way.

Wynn ingeniously steers a middle course between these two extremes. To explain how particular places can be religiously significant, we neither have to venture into the murky realms of metaphysical speculation about God’s mode of intervention in the natural world, nor do we have to reduce the value of a sacred space to no more than its subjective effects in the minds of those who visit it. How might such an intermediate strategy work? In the case of pilgrimage, rather than grounding its meaning in miraculous or supernatural events on the one hand, or just in the interior life of the believer on the other, Wynn suggests that we need to take note of the *physicality* of the practice: it is the ‘relations of physical continuity and proximity that explain the sense of pilgrimage practice.’²⁶

These features certainly seem important in many religious contexts. A highly successful exhibition at the British Museum in Summer of 2011 explored what the curators described as ‘the spiritual and artistic significance of Christian relics and reliquaries in medieval Europe.’ The ‘artistic’ element was clear enough: many of the reliquaries are extraordinarily beautiful, their craftsmanship exquisite. But the religious significance, for many of those visiting the exhibition, surely had something to do with the ‘physical continui-

²⁶ Mark Wynn, *Faith and Place* (Oxford 2009), 152.

ty and proximity' underlined by Wynn. You are now, at this moment., standing in front of the very casket that contains the remains of the revered man or woman who so many centuries ago suffered and died for their faith. Mere superstition, or (its even more degenerate cousin) mere touristic gawping? No doubt there can be elements of both, but it would take a very cynical critic, faced with the extraordinary devotion manifested in these lovingly wrought works of art, to suppose this to be the whole story.

The point has application beyond the purely religious sphere. Wynn points out that in visiting the grave of a loved one 'it matters to us ... that we should be physically alongside the remains of the dead person.' And describing some crucial episodes in his own friendship with the poet Edmund Cusick, who died in 2007, he argues that the development of human relationships is often rooted in a shared sensibility for place – a sensibility which, in turn, is closely bound up with 'bodily movement and affectively informed perception.'²⁷ Part of Wynn's agenda here is to counter, or at least supplement, the highly abstract and intellectualistic framework within which much philosophy, especially the philosophy of religion, is typically carried on. When friends revisit a favourite place where they have often walked and talked together, the place itself may have a distinctive character, a *genius loci*, which allows them to interact and converse in a distinctive way, and to 'affirm ... their commitment to certain values, by means of embodied interaction with the [place], rather than by way of explicit articulation.'²⁸ This is an argument that needs a specific personal narrative, such as Wynn provides, to make it vivid. But the case for such an 'embodied epistemology' seems very persuasive. Wynn does not mention Thomas Hardy's poetry, but anyone who has responded to masterpieces like 'At Castle Boterel' (1913) will understand something of what is meant. Everything hinges on a physical, locatable encounter:

Myself and a girlish form benighted
 In dry March weather. We climbed the road
 Beside a chaise. We had just alighted
 To ease the sturdy pony's load
 When he sighed and slowed ...

 Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,

²⁷ Wynn, *Faith and Place*, 42–3.

²⁸ Wynn, *Faith and Place*, 28–9

And much have they faced there, first and last,
 Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
 But what they record in colour and cast
 Is – that we two passed ...

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
 I look back at it amid the rain
 For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
 And I shall traverse old love's domain
 Never again ...

The poet's grasp of the significance of his relationship with his former love is intimately bound up with his knowledge of the *place* where they once alighted from the pony cart, their *physical orientation* as they climbed the steep hill together, flanked by the 'primeval rocks' that have witnessed so much of 'the transitory in Earth's long order,' and which now see the poet *physically present* at the scene in old age, knowing that he will 'traverse old love's domain never again.'

I would submit that there are important lessons to be learned here about the general structure of human relationships. Love for friends is not an abstractified flowing of benevolence or even of individuated commitment, but a dynamic process that unfolds in corporeally and physically mediated ways, through what we do together, how we walk and talk together, where we go, and the trajectory of embodied memories of shared dwellings and journeys. To be a friend or neighbour with someone is to go with them along these paths, and to be prepared to have one's own space encroached on by them, as they will reciprocally be prepared to receive us. If we were purely rational disembodied agents or mere 'persons,' in some quasi-Cartesian sense of mere 'thinking things' or 'conscious beings,' true relationships as we understand them would be inconceivable: they would be reduced to detached interchanges of information, interactive exercises of intellection and volition, but without all the vulnerabilities of embodied particularity that make love and friendship truly precious. For in true relations of neighbourliness, friendship and love, we abandon our austere self-sufficient autonomy, and accept our 'passivity' (to use a term aptly deployed by Dalferth at the close of his paper): we know our need, our dependency, and need it to be recognized by others. And once we know this, we can see at once that our dignity and worth cannot depend on our rational powers and capacities, nor our ability to determine our choices as moral lawgivers, nor any other intellectual endowment, even that of consciousness (which may of course be dormant, or de-

activated, as in a coma), but simply and solely on our need for others to reach out to us, as we need to reach out to them. This is a need that applies to every single human being on the planet. To mature morally is to come to realize that we gain nothing by insisting on our status, or ‘standing on our dignity’ (as the English idiom has it), but that we gain everything by recognizing the dependency we share with all our neighbours.

Finally to the issue which has been involved, explicitly or implicitly, throughout this paper, and which I take to be central to Ingolf Dalferth’s concerns also, namely the relative merits of religious versus secular accounts of dignity. The focus on passivity and vulnerability that has just emerged seems to me to be a clear point in favour of the religious account; for it is not clear that our human weakness and dependency provides any purely secular reason why dignity or worth should attach to us all qua human. If anything, the reverse seems true. For on a standard Darwinian view of human nature, our nature is simply a set of contingent features that have emerged out of a blind nexus of forces, shaped by random mutation and the struggle for survival. So selecting any one of these features, such as our frailty and dependency, as the basis for according inherent worth to us, seems pretty arbitrary, or at any rate no more or less warranted than ascribing true dignity on the basis of strength, following Nietzsche, or ‘great-souledness,’ following Aristotle.²⁹

On the Judaeo-Christian view, by contrast, human beings, despite their frailty (formed of the ‘dust of the earth’) are, as the Hebrew Bible has it, made in the image and likeness of God.³⁰ So simply in virtue of our human status we participate in some way in that infinite worth that is God. (Again, we should beware of ‘spiritualizing’ this – the creation language of Genesis is robustly corporeal.) And building on this foundation, the Christian vision takes the extraordinary further step of declaring that our corporeal human nature is actually ‘divinised’ – raised up to the fullest dignity by Christ’s humbling himself to take our bodily nature upon him. As the poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins so vividly puts it:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

²⁹ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [*Also Sprach Zarathustra* 1883]; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk. IV.

³⁰ Genesis, 2:7 (dust) and 1:26 (image).

Is immortal diamond.³¹

Nothing, on the face of it, could be more undignified than this ‘Jack’ – a common, ordinary fellow, of undistinguished worth; this ‘patch,’ a mere fool or ninny; this potsherd, a broken fragment, like that with which the wretched Job, reduced to the utmost indignity, scraped his sores (Job 2:8); weak and feeble, as perishable as matchwood. Yet all at once, by Christ’s sharing in our bodily nature, this paltry individual becomes ‘immortal diamond’ – of infinite worth and dignity.

None of this, of course, counts as a philosophically watertight theistic grounding of the concept of human dignity, since it depends on the revealed truth of the Incarnation. But for those who accept that truth, it does indeed, as Hopkins beautifully expresses it, raise every human being, ‘all at once,’ to infinite, Christlike, worth. The secularist can, to be sure, resolve to treat every human being *as if* they were of such infinite worth; but it is entirely unclear what might ground that resolve, since there is nothing in the way things are, on the naturalist worldview, that underwrites it; there is only a plurality of diverse specimens of a certain species of featherless biped, some stronger, some weaker, some outstanding and splendid, some defective and wretched, all subject to infirmity and eventual decrepitude. The universal dignity of humankind is the pearl of great price in our ethical culture. But torn out of the religious seabed that nurtured it, it may not take very long to be swept away on the advancing tide of secularism.

³¹ G.M. Hopkins, ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire’; *Poems* (1876–1889), no 49, final stanza.

Section V:

SELECTED SHORT PAPERS

I Think Therefore I Am Not *Mystical Desire and the Dispossession of the Cogito*

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to question the understanding of religion as a purely spiritual relationship with God by focusing on the mystical experience of ecstasy, an experience that has often been described as leaving the body behind in a moment of spiritual rapture. Using psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's work, this article will set out to show that it is not the body that is left behind in mystical ecstasy, but rather a certain understanding of selfhood constituted by autonomous reason that will come to be conceptualized as the Cartesian *cogito*. The body figures as the site of an unknown that accepts having been constituted by another unknown, a God that cannot be sublated or grasped by reason alone. In this sense, the goal of psychoanalysis will be shown to overlap with an apophatic and embodied relation to the divine.

KEYWORDS

embodiment; mysticism; psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan; the Cartesian cogito; desire; jouissance.

‘The psyche is extended.’
Freud¹

The opening paragraph of the ESPR call for papers for the Embodied Religion Conference spoke indiscriminately of all religions as, and I quote, ‘belonging to the sphere of the spiritual, since for most religious traditions (Christian as well as non-Christian) God is a spiritual being and relates to humankind spiritually.’ By positing such a separation between the spiritual and the material, the soul and the body, this description reiterates a longstanding dualist tradition that separates the spiritual and the material, the transcendent and the immanent, placing religion on the side of the spirit, where it has traditionally been accompanied by God, man, reason and heaven, thereby relegating the immanent and embodied to a lesser sphere where it has found the company of women, the passions and hell.² The conference description then goes on to describe the ways in which these religious traditions nonetheless come down to earth to deal with embodied issues. Here, a list of a variety of these embodied religious practices are given, dealing with rituals related to sexuality and reproduction, eating, propitiation and sacrifice, birth and death, art and liturgy, sacraments and asceticism. Yet one wonders, after reading the list of embodied practices of religion, what a list of ‘spiritual practices’ might look like?³ Though Christianity is an orthodox religion, giving central importance to creed, both of the other monotheisms, to name just those, are orthopraxes, giving central importance to ritual practice. But even in the case of Christianity, is not belief, is not faith, always instantiated in a way of life (in certain political and ethical choices, in a gaze, a way of speaking) and inseparable from that embodied life? Are not prayer, rituals, sacrifices and forms of asceticism also spiritual practices?

In fact, notwithstanding its orthodoxy, embodiment is perhaps the most defining characteristic of Christianity, the very trait that sets it apart from all other religions. Christianity differs from other monotheisms by believing in a

¹ This phrase was published as a posthumous note. Cited in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris 2006), 22.

² For a detailed description of how women used their association with the lesser part, that of embodiment, frailty, humanity, to identify with Christ, see Caroline Walker Bynum’s wonderful book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley 1988).

³ It is easier to understand the role of the spiritual in certain Indian traditions, notably Advaita Vedanta, which posits consciousness as outside the individual, and outside the mind. Consciousness is thus disembodied.

God who is at the same time man, who suffered, ate and slept, in a body, who was born, died, and resurrected in and as a body. Though many traditions believe in anthropomorphic gods, who live embodied lives, they are normally endowed with immortality, and placed in a realm outside of human contingency. Hence, amongst all religions, Christianity is set apart precisely due to its embodied God, who did not escape from human contingency, who was misunderstood and left to die at a particular time, as one among many prisoners in the Roman colony of Jerusalem in the first century. Jesus Christ thus places Christianity in a special relationship to embodiment, one that has a unique claim to the suffering and joys of the flesh, setting it apart from the Greek condemnation of the flesh, as well as from the many rival forms of Christianity that attempted to interpret Christ's body as an illusion, or to place Christ lower than God the Father in the divine hierarchy, precisely because he was born into time and hence not understood as being eternal.⁴ Showing that the transcendent is embodied in the here and now of contingent existence, the being here of what is beyond, the Incarnation is certainly Christianity's most distinctive trait. The novelty of this event in the history of religions is brought home by Jesuit historian of religions Michel de Certeau in an interview he gave to France Culture. I quote:

Something, in my opinion, can be found at the center of a Christian faith, which can be called, in Christian jargon, the incarnation, in other words, the fact that God is man. I would say that with this idea there is a fundamental rupture in relation to the ways in which God was represented as a sun, as something or someone somewhere who escaped from contingency, from history, from death, from the avatars of circumstance. What Christianity brought with this idea that God is man, is the fact that he is but a person in history named Jesus, it is the bursting of the sun. This sun is stained and dispersed in a thousand pieces in the accident of daily life [le quotidien]. At bottom, God is the stained sun, is the stain in the sun. If we can look for God somewhere, it is not in a paradise, in a cloud or in an exteriority in respect to history, but on the contrary in everyday human relations.⁵

So, to come back to our question, what might a purely spiritual event look like in the Christian tradition? Mystical experiences immediately come to mind, as a place where we might find a means of bypassing the mediated word of Scripture for an immediate and direct spiritual communication with

⁴ I am thinking here of Arianism, Docetism and Monophysitism in particular.

⁵ France Inter, 19 December, 1975, in: F. Dosse, *Michel de Certeau: Le marcheur blessé* (Paris 2002), 462 (translations here and in the rest of the text are my own unless otherwise noted).

a risen Christ. This is indeed the way mystical experience is described by many mystics themselves, and one of the primary reasons for the persecution of many of these mystics by the Church, as they stood directly under God's authority, rather than that of the Pope and his interpretation of Scripture.

During the phase of apologetic, perennial philosophy of religion epitomized by Rudolf Otto, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Underhill, William James and Mircea Eliade, this is often the interpretation given to mystical experience, and particularly mystical ecstasy (from *ec-stasis*, to stand outside) which came to be seen as a universal and direct experience of transpersonal union with the divine that transcended religious differences and particular embodied practices.⁶ Though this approach is still defended, especially among professors schooled by Eliade, much scholarship has been done deflating such a universal and disembodied interpretation of mystical experience.⁷ But if recent interpretations of mysticism convincingly refute these perennial claims, what, we might ask, does the mystic transcend, when she speaks of herself as outside herself in ecstasy, if it is not her body?

Examples of Christian mystics describing ecstasy as an event at which they were absent abound. Mechthild Von Magdeburg gives an excellent example of becoming absent to herself by describing her soul in union with Christ in the third person voice: 'Then a blessed stillness/ That both desire comes over them./ He surrenders himself to her,/ And she surrenders herself to him./ What happens to her then – she knows –/ And that is fine with me.'⁸ Who is this knowing 'she,' and this unknowing 'me?' Hadewijch similarly writes: 'It weighs me down that I cannot obtain/ knowledge of Love without renouncing self'; and again: 'After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself.'⁹ John of the Cross similarly describes abandoning himself in order to experience his Beloved: 'I abandoned and forgot myself/ laying my face on my beloved; All things ceased; I went out from myself, / Leaving my cares Forgotten among the lilies.'¹⁰ All of these passages describe the experience of a divided self, where a knowing narrative self is abandoned by an unknowing self who melts away in God. The 'I' who narrates the expe-

⁶ More recent scholars who defend this position include Walter Stace, and Robert Forman.

⁷ Steven J. Katz, Wayne Proudfoot, Richard King and Russell McCutcheon are good examples here.

⁸ Cited in Mechthild von Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (NY 1997), 61–62.

⁹ Cited in Hadewijch, *The Complete Works* (NY 1981), 187 and 280–282.

¹⁰ Cited in John of the Cross, *Selected Writings* (NY 1988), 55–56.

rience remains behind, below, and is not able to take part in an experience of which it 'knows nothing.' If the conscious knowing self is left behind, who is the subject of this unknowing ecstasy, and how are we to understand its relationship to the embodied self?

I would like to venture a reply to this question by looking at the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, focusing particularly on his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* and his Seminar XX, 'Encore.' By choosing to call the experience of ecstasy by the French term 'jouissance,' which simultaneously connotes both joy and intense physical pleasure, Lacan stands firmly in the postmodern camp, understanding mystical ecstasy as an embodied and contingent spatio-temporal experience. As he puts it in Seminar XX, 'Encore,' 'for jouissance to occur, there has to be a body.'¹¹ I will use the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* to provide an interpretation of his Seminar XX on mysticism, interpreting Lacan as showing that it is a form of reason, which sees itself as autonomous and self-supporting, that is transcended during moments of mystical *jouissance*, when the mystic accepts having been constituted by an Other beyond her understanding, and beyond her control. Identifying the self with a vulnerable and embodied desire for a vulnerable and embodied God, the mystic abandons the inviolability of the ego and its sublation of the other, and opens herself to an encounter with the other in its own terms. Lacan, this paper will argue, uses mystical subjectivity as a tool in order to reveal the untenability of Descartes' *cogito*,¹² thereby undermining the modern construction of an autonomous subject. It is thus in the mystical tradition that Lacan will find the model for an embodied subject who, by abandoning the 'all,' the 'whole,' for what he calls the 'not all,' opens herself to an Other, who, instead of mirroring and thereby reinforcing the ego, un-

¹¹ Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore* (NY 1998), 26.

¹² Although the modern subject, characterized by autonomous and rational self-representation, can be traced to a visual source in the mechanization of vision and Brunelleschi's invention of artificial perspective, it remains the case that many postmodern thinkers, including Heidegger and Jacques Lacan, used Descartes as a foundational example of this modern and reflexive subject, though he is of course merely emblematic of a shift that can be attributed to no single person. As Charles Winquist puts it in his article 'Person': 'There is no one event or thinker that can be definitively identified with an epochal epistemic shift in a culture. However, it is convenient to read Descartes' *Meditations on the First Philosophy* as synechdochially emblematic of the epistemic shift initiating the Age of Reason. The heuristic use of radical doubt to clear away any uncertainties was, as Descartes suggested, a removal from below of the foundation of the whole edifice of thinking and believing.' Cited in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago 1998), 227. One of the unfortunate results of this shift, most evident in Descartes, is the Manichaeian divide between mind and body that has plagued the Christian West.

ravels it. Mirroring the unknowability of God, the body will be understood as the site of the unconscious, a site that remains always alien, always unknown.¹³

By placing Lacan's critique of Descartes in his *Four Fundamental Concepts* alongside his celebration of mystical *jouissance* in 'Encore,' I am not making an ahistorical claim that the *cogito* was somehow already constitutive of medieval subjectivity. Rather I am using Lacan to show how Descartes' *cogito* can be understood as a defence mechanism, which actually resembles in interesting ways the foundation of the ego in the psychological development of the child. In this sense, the experience of ecstasy as described by medieval mystics coincides with Lacan's understanding of the Real, as an experience of ex-istence, beyond language and the symbolic constitution of the self as subject. The *cogito*, one might say, develops as a natural defence of the subject against this Real, which is beyond our cognitive understanding, and hence a source of anxiety. According to Lacan's analysis, only certain apophatic mystics, then and now (and Lacan would include himself here), can accept this unknown as the very nature of the embodied self.

1. THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

Descartes has become emblematic of a certain reflexive subject who is constituted through his own rational thought and hence understood as somehow independent of the world and the people in it.¹⁴ And like Descartes, many of us choose to understand ourselves as somehow whole and independent, self-created through the activity of our own autonomous reason. As phenomenologist and Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion has pointed out, this hubris can lead to the positing of an Other who comes to function as an idolatrous mirror, guaranteeing our individuality, our fictive wholeness and

¹³ It is important here to differentiate Lacan's analysis of the body as constituted in the imaginary and symbolic phase, where it is a cultural construction, rather than something we are born with, from the body as the Real, the organism that is the site of *jouissance*, separate from the subject and its constructed identity.

¹⁴ In his third meditation, Descartes expresses himself as follows: 'I am a thinking (conscious) thing, that is, a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and is ignorant of many, – [who loves, hates], wills, refuses, – who imagines likewise, and perceives; for, as I before remarked, although the things which I perceive or imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me, I am nevertheless assured that those modes of consciousness which I call perceptions and imaginations, in as far only as they are modes of consciousness, exist in me.' Descartes, (Meditations, III, pg. 119) cited in *The Rationalists* (NY, 1960), 128.

autonomy as real. Marion describes this mirror as a prison, locking the subject in a world inhabited exclusively by his own reflection:

Man becomes obsessed when he can see only images modelled on himself; from constantly seeing without being seen he can finally only see images that mirror his unique gaze. The obsidian obscenity of a universe of idols can tolerate no exit, since the gaze will always and only reproduce its idols.¹⁵

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has explained how the function of this invisible mirror develops during childhood when an actual and visible mirror leads the subject to identify itself with its mirror image, thereby limiting its identity to a visible appearance which saturates the gaze with an illusory unity. Lacan calls this reflection the ego. This interface between seeing oneself seeing and ego formation is described by Lacan as constituting the subject. He describes what he calls a mirror stage, when a young child (between six and eighteen months) first recognizes a mirror reflection as representing itself. When this recognition occurs, a disjointed identity, characterized by undisciplined motor functions, is replaced by a 'proper body,' a *gestalt*, a whole that the gaze appropriates as itself in its encounter with its mirror reflection. Because the mirror reflection lies outside the self, the 'I' as well is alien or other, constituting the subject as self-different, split. Michel de Certeau comments as follows:

Though the child has only dispersed, successive and mobile corporeal experiences, he receives from the mirror the image that makes him *one*, but according to a *fiction*. With a 'jubilatory activity' [affairement], he discovers that he is *one* (primordial form of the *I*), but by means of an alienation that identifies him with this thing that is *other* than him (a mirror image). The experience could be called: *I am that*. The *I* is formed only at the price of alienation. Its capture begins with its birth... From the start, it installs the *I* as 'discordance of the subject with its own reality,' and it calls forth the work of the negative ('It is not that') by means of which the subject closes itself within the lie of its identity ('I am that').¹⁶

The mirror closes the subject within the lie of its unicity. Seeing itself as other to itself, the subject effaces its own self-difference, its own relationality. This identification with the fiction of the mirror thus creates an alienated subject, who arms himself with the specter of unity, thereby giving rise to the

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, 'Le prototype de l'image,' in François Boesflug & Nicolas Lossky (eds.), *Nicée II 787-1987: Douze siècles d'images religieuses* (Paris 1987), 465.

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse: entre science et fiction*, (Paris 1987), 223-224.

unconscious as the memory of its fragmented embodied nature, its lack of singularity. Lacan writes:

The mirror stage is a drama... that machinates the phantasms that replace [se succèdent] a fragmented image of the body with a form that we will call orthopedic of its totality, and with the finally assumed armor of an alienating identity...¹⁷

In the mirror reflection, the 'I' is thus already constituted as 'ideal I' and thus already as ego:

This form situates the instance of the *ego* [moi], even before its social determination, in a line of fiction that is forever irreducible for the individual alone.¹⁸

It is the ego as an illusion or fiction of undivided totality that experiences a solitary exultation in recognizing itself as the independent object it has cathected. Caught in the mise-en-abyme of the mirror, self-consciousness is imprisoned in an identity that is 'whole,' 'one,' and 'autonomously constituted,' forcing it to suppress its own lived experience of embodiment as unknowable, vulnerable and constituted by alterity. The unconscious, we could say, is the lived experience of the body, both intimate and alien, one's own, yet constantly eluding the conscious mind and its constitution of itself as subject, as ego. This Real is lost to consciousness when the child enters into the symbolic, but returns in moments of trauma and moments of *jouissance*, experiences that exist in the realm of non-meaning, where they remain stranded, outside of language and cognition.

This need to be 'all,' to enframe the self as a controllable image attests to what Lacan calls, in psychoanalytic jargon, 'the phallic function,' understood as the need to appropriate, label and hence control 'that obscure object of desire' to ensure that it reflects back to us our autonomous and inflated ego. This other who is transformed into a mirror, can be God (and more often than not the signifier 'God' seems to take on this function), just as it can be Woman, who reflects his maleness back to man, his self-esteem. Phallic *jouissance* thus reduces the other to an object that is imputed with causation, with having caused our desire (Lacan calls this object *objet petit a*).¹⁹

As Bernard of Clairvaux told us long ago in his sermon 'On Loving God,' because our desire is infinite, it can never find satisfaction in a finite object of desire. Similarly, for psychoanalysis, and I quote, 'phallic *jouissance* is the

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris 1966), 96.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, *ibidem*.

¹⁹ According to metonymy, *objet petit a* can be cathected as a breast or penis for instance.

jouissance that fails us, that disappoints us... it always leaves something more to be desired...²⁰ Moving beyond phallic jouissance, then, would leave the subject facing an infinite unknown that cannot be reified or sublated.²¹ The name that Lacan gives to this unknown is 'the obscure God,' thereby identifying an apophatic experience of the divine with the end of the subject's alienation from her own embodied nature.

2. THE OBSCURE GOD

In his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan provides his critique of the autonomous Cartesian *cogito* in order to elucidate his central claim that the self is constituted by and as this unknown alterity. Just as Eckhart calls for God to think in and for man, so Descartes, according to Lacan, founded his thought outside himself by turning to a *malin génie*. Thus his *I think therefore I am* cannot fulfill its intended self-sufficient autonomy, for its negation of the world, of the body and of others is at the mercy of his *malin génie*'s whim. Even the fact that he is certain, that is, that he has a clear and distinct idea that he is doubting and therefore that he is a thinking thing, has a cause exterior to his thought.²² This cause, because it cannot be overridden, fulfills Descartes' idea of God, and as such destroys it, for as infinite and perfect signifier of truth, its role can no longer be distinguished from that of the *malin génie*, for both can manipulate the real. According to this reading, Descartes' other is neither clear nor distinct, and though he cannot think it, it necessarily thinks him. In letting the *génie* possess his interiority, Descartes is unwittingly saying that only the other can think for him, and thus that he doesn't think ('je ne pense pas'). Jean-Luc Marion's extensive exegesis of Descartes is in fundamental agreement with Lacan, leading him to refer to the *cogito* as being constituted *a-posteriori*, as a *res cogitans cogitate*. Using Descartes' thought experiment, which begins with the *cogito* being thought

²⁰ Bruce Fink, 'Knowledge and Jouissance,' in: Bruce Fink & Suzanne Bernard (eds.), *Reading Seminar XX* (NJ 2002), 37.

²¹ Roland Barthes describes this unknown other quite well in the secular context of love: '...That the other is not to be known; his opacity is not a screen around a secret, but instead, reality and appearance is done away with. I am then seized with that exaltation of loving *someone unknown*, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse.' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris 1977), 42.

²² 'For how could I know that I doubt, desire or that something is wanting to me, and I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison of which I know the deficiencies of my nature?' Descartes (*Meditations* III) cited in *The Rationalists*, 137.

(whether by the evil genius or by God changes little), and thinking only as a response, Marion describes the subject as fundamentally delayed, always arriving late to the event of its own constitution.²³ Descartes' supposedly solitary and self-sufficient subject is thus able to think itself only relationally, to a transcendent Other.²⁴ Thus for Lacan, Descartes' *I think therefore I am* deconstructs itself in two important ways. Since the two I's it cites cannot be grounded in a united subject, Lacan dissociates the infamous conjunctive 'therefore' from the ontological clause that follows it, replacing it with what he calls the *vel*, the 'or' that separates the two clauses and reveals the subject to be fundamentally split (subject = \$).²⁵ 'I think or I am,' we could say, or 'I think therefore I am not,' or even '*I am because the other thinks me.*' According to psychoanalyst Gerard Miller, the Lacanian question thus becomes 'what am I in the desire of the Other?'²⁶ The answer, for Lacan, is given in his famous and oft-repeated phrase '*le désir de l'homme c'est le désir de l'autre,*' which can be rendered: 'Man's desire is the desire of/for the other [...] which is to say that it is as the Other that he desires.'²⁷ Saint Francis could not have agreed more, for it was what Bonaventure called his 'burning desire' that led him to an identification with Christ such that Christ desired and suffered in him, as him.

In infinitely desiring an infinite Other, the mystic desires an apophatic God from the site of its own apophatic unknowing: the body. Lacan calls this unknown other who cannot be reduced to a mirror image, 'the obscure God,' thereby using the apophatic tradition to illustrate a relation to the Other be-

²³ 'I am insofar as originally thought by another thought [pensé par une autre pensée] that always already thinks me, even if I cannot yet identify its essence or prove its existence. I am already a *res cogitans*, but only understood as a thought that someone else thinks, a thinking thought thought by another thinking thought – *res cogitans cogitata*... The first thought of the *ego* is, in fact, not about an object (certain or false), nor about itself, but about the thought by means of which another (or even an alterity [voire un autrui]) thinks it (persuades or fools it). The *ego* is thus instituted as originally a *posteriori*.' Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris 2005), 378–379. Marion discusses this more specifically in his article 'The Original Otherness of the *Ego*: A Rereading of Descartes's *Meditatio II*,' in: E. Wyschogrod & G. McKenny (eds.), *The Ethical* (Oxford 2003), 33–53.

²⁴ 'We can say that if we ignore God, we can have certain knowledge of no other thing.' Descartes, *Principes* I, 13, cited in Jean-Marie Beyssade, 'Descartes,' in: François Châtelet (ed.), *La philosophie du monde nouveau* (Paris 1972), 108.

²⁵ This split subject, according to psychoanalyst Bruce Fink, 'consists entirely in the fact a speaking being's two 'parts' or avatars share no common ground: they are radically separated (the *ego* requiring a refusal of unconscious thoughts, unconscious thought having no concern whatsoever for the *ego*'s fine opinion of itself).' Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton 1995), 45.

²⁶ Gerard Miller, *Lacan* (Paris 1987), 29.

²⁷ Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Bruxelles 1977), 261.

yond the caption of the thinking self. I quote from his *Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: ‘...in the object of our desires, we try to find the witness of the presence of the desire of that Other that I will here call the obscure God.’²⁸

In seminar XX, ‘Encore,’ Lacan clarifies how the subject is constituted by the desire of this obscure God, explicitly placing his own work among the classics of the mystical canon, and thereby equating the goal of psychoanalysis and mysticism. He writes:

These mystical ejaculations are neither idle gossip nor mere verbiage, in fact they are the best thing you can read – note right at the bottom of the page, add the *Ecrits* of Jacques Lacan, which is of the same order.²⁹

Lacan’s argument centers on replacing phallic *jouissance* with what he calls a ‘supplementary jouissance,’ which can be experienced only when one stands on the side of the ‘not all.’³⁰ He identifies this ‘supplementary jouissance’ as the goal of psychoanalysis, in that it acknowledges that we are founded by an Other that we cannot possess and know. The mystico-psychoanalytic cure can occur only when, rather than obscuring this obscure origin, we can achieve *jouissance* by means of it, accept it as our origin and our destination. We, frail, needy, immanent creatures experience life and its joys only in relation to, and thanks to, others. The subject (\$) thus comes to experience *jouissance* not through controlling and possessing, but by accepting embodied finitude by means of dispossession, surrender and unknowing. This, for Lacan, is what the mystics were able to achieve, for the most part women, but

²⁸ *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, 306.

²⁹ ‘God and the Jouissance of The (barred) Woman,’ in: Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, (NY 1985), 147. This discourse places Lacan in a quandary that draws him even closer to the mystics, for the radical unknowing of the *cogito* is undermined by his own position as ‘sujet supposé savoir.’ The difficulty of reading Lacan, then, is precisely analogous to that of mystical texts, for he is constantly using both kataphasis and apophasis to gain and then cross out his own authority. Jacqueline Rose thus writes:

‘Much of the difficulty of Lacan’s work stemmed from his attempt to subvert that position from within his own utterance, to rejoin the place of ‘non-knowledge’ which he designated the unconscious, by the constant slippage or escape of his speech, and thereby to undercut the very mastery which his own position as speaker (master and analyst) necessarily constructs. In fact one can carry out the same operation on the statement ‘I do not know’ as Lacan performed on the utterance ‘I am lying’... – for, if I do not know, then how come I know enough to know that I do not know and if I do know that I do not know, then it is not true that I do not know. Lacan was undoubtedly trapped in this paradox of his own utterance.’ Jacqueline Rose ‘Introduction II,’ in: *Feminine Sexuality*, 50.

³⁰ He develops this idea using the cultural distinction between man and woman, a distinction that has historically placed the (barred) woman on the side of the ‘not all’ because she has been understood by man as lacking the wholeness that is symbolized by the phallic function.

also men, for just as women can identify with the phallic function, so can men identify with the 'not all.' He writes:

There is a *jouissance*... of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, *beyond the phallus*... There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it – that much she does know... The mystical is by no means that which is not political. It is something serious, which a few people teach us about, and most often women or highly gifted people like Saint John of the Cross – since, when you are male, you don't have to put yourself on the side of the phallus. You can also put yourself on the side of not-all. There are men who are just as good as women. It does happen... Despite, I won't say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense that there must be a *jouissance* which goes beyond. That is what we call a mystic...³¹

Lacan characterizes a mystic as experiencing *jouissance* not from the totality and presence of the *cogito*, but from the detachment from this grasping, the acknowledgment that desire is always desire for what is beyond our grasp as 'I,' as 'ego.'³² In this sense, the Other, whether human or divine, will play the role of the apophatic God, remaining transcendent and ever beyond our caption. If the mystic does not know, it follows that she must be experiencing *jouissance* from a place that is necessarily other to the *cogito*, the *cogito's* other, which is to say, the body.

Should we then consider Lacan an apophatic mystic of sorts? The prophet of a postmodern apophatic theology? The relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Christian phenomenology is not as tenuous as it might at first appear.³³ In a certain reading, both seek to rehabilitate fallen man: Christianity by means of a transcendent God, with the help of Scripture which relates a revelation; psychoanalysis by means of the transcendent (or subscendent) unconscious, with the help of language which betrays a memory of Adam before his Fall into the symbolic. Instead of Christ, psychoanalysis offers humanity the psychoanalyst, who is, like Christ, a present absence,

³¹ Jacques Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality*, 146–147.

³² I quote from Lacan once more: 'As regards the Hadewijch in question, it is the same for Saint Teresa, – you only have to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.' Jacques Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.

³³ Michel de Certeau noticed this correlation, and comments extensively on the monotheistic religion that 'haunts the house' of psychoanalysis in his work *Histoire et psychoanalyse: Entre science et fiction* (Paris 1987). See especially pages 258–260.

and like Christ the instigator of a revelation that his invisible gaze (the patient is seen but does not see) helps to disclose. After stating that his own book should be treated as a mystical text, Lacan clarifies what it is that he believes in:

...naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God. I believe in the *jouissance* of the woman in so far as it is something more... Might not this *jouissance*, which one experiences and knows nothing of, be that which puts us on the path of ex-istence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as supported by feminine *jouissance*?³⁴

The psychoanalytic cure then, involves the ability to identify with the site of *jouissance*, the body as organism, which is to say the unconscious, before it has been transformed into an 'ideal I,' by means of language. As Bruce Fink explains, 'The I is not already in the unconscious. It may be everywhere pre-supposed there, but it has to be made to appear.'³⁵ Lacan can thus be seen as using a mystical technique to show that the subject *is* precisely where it cannot constitute itself as a thinking thing. The 'I' must associate with this unthinkable site and learn to speak in the first person *in 'its' name*. The 'I' that is to say, can only find itself where thinking does not go. 'The real is here that which always returns to the same place – to the place where the subject in so far as it thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it.'³⁶ The real, then, as the certainty that the 'I' will always find itself where thinking does not go. In this experience of *jouissance*, where the subject ex-ists, the mystic finds herself before that 'essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.'³⁷ To accept this experience as the moment of truth is what the mystic and the cured psychoanalytic patient share in common.

We are now in a position to answer the question with which we began. If we are to take seriously Lacan's analysis of ecstasy as an embodied *jouissance* that is an opening to an Other that cannot be utilized by reason as one more object to be understood and mastered, what is left behind by the mystic is not the body, but the *cogito* as set over and against our embodied vulnerabilities, over and against the Other in its radical otherness. If we hope to live

³⁴ Jacques Lacan in: *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.

³⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 68.

³⁶ Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris 1990), 59.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955* (NY 1991), 164.

a life of *jouissance* and intersubjective sharing, perhaps it is time to listen to our ecstatic mystics, and confirm a deeply Christian truth: *Corpus mihi est, ergo sum*.

Experience and Empiricism in Testing the Free Will: *What Phenomenology Offers a Discussion of Embodied Religion*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critique of empirical tests of the free will, aiming at a presupposition underpinning the experiments' methodology. The presupposition is that the artificial reporting of machines is *prima facie* directly congruent with the first-person perspectival report of the participant. A critique of the method reveals the problematic nature of this methodological set-up. The phenomenological critique, however, also carries implications for a theoretical framework dealing with 'embodied' religion; these implications will be discussed via reference to the article by Marcel Sarot.

KEYWORDS

free will, empiricism, phenomenology, methodology, intention,
embodied religion

1. INTRODUCTION

Empirical experiments testing the free will supposedly prove that the human agent is controlled by an unconscious urge to act. Many philosophical

critiques criticize *only* this result, thereby implicitly accepting the methodology itself as unproblematic. I propose, however, that the methodology itself is *seriously problematic* from the start. Therefore, in this paper I pursue a differently aimed critique, one that examines exclusively the methodological set-up of the experiments. It is my hope to show that a *prima facie* presupposition underpins the methodology, which engenders a 1:1 comparison between artificial elements and phenomenological elements. This presupposition posits congruency where, instead, one finds evidence of fundamental, categorical differences, and is *ipso facto* unfounded. Granting this presupposition leads inevitably to a comparison of apples and oranges on the one hand, and pictures or videos or long exposure shots of apples and oranges on the other hand. Moreover, and of pronounced importance in the context of *embodied* religion, these considerations resonate with a modern theoretical account of religious experience at the crossroads of empirical science.

The paper divides into four parts. My attempt to describe the basic methodological structure of the experiments constitutes the first part. In the second part, I unpack the basic presupposition underlying this methodological structure. Then, the third part is the space in which I argue (via phenomenological considerations) against this *prima facie* presupposition of the congruency supporting the experiments' results. Finally, in the fourth part I move the discussion in the direction of philosophy of religion, by focusing on the philosophical-theological position of Marcel Sarot.

2. A BREAKDOWN OF THE EXPERIMENTS' METHODOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

I want to describe the basic structure of the free will experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet¹ and by John Dylan-Haynes.² These experiments used different equipment but utilized the same basic method to arrive at the same general result, namely that the brain 'decides' unconsciously to act before the person does. This result arose out of a comparison of two reports from independent operations. First, a programmed device measured and recorded the participant's relevant brain activity (this is the 'artificial' operation). Second, the participant made a movement and reported *when* she was

¹ Benjamin Libet *et al.*, 'Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential),' *Brain* 106 (1983), 623–642.

² John Dylan-Haynes *et al.*, 'Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain,' *Nature Neuroscience* 11/5 (May 2008), 543–545.

consciously aware of her intention to act (this is the voluntary and, thus, 'intentional' operation). The artificially generated report showed activity in the brain preceding the participant's conscious intention to move spontaneously. The preceding electrical activity in the brain has been dubbed 'readiness potential.'³

Let us examine these operations. The artificial operation of reporting measures brain activity precisely by capturing linear, static moments. In the experiments by Libet, a reading of electrical impulses in the brain occurred via electroencephalography (EEG) readings, which showed brain activity about 500 milliseconds before the participant's reported time of conscious-urge. In Dylan-Haynes' experiments, the investigators used functional magnetic resonance imaging (or, fMRI) to track brain activity, by noting regions of the brain needing more oxygenated blood during the participant's completion of the assigned task. The fMRI readings showed brain activity preceding the time of the conscious urge to act by 7–10 seconds and could be used to predict roughly which hand the participant would move.⁴ Both artificial techniques record the when and the where of activity occurring in the brain by precise measurements of time in a linear (or objective) series of static moments.

The second report (in both experiments) is a self-reported, intentional moment of the participant. The participant should make an intentional movement fulfilling a conscious urge, and then report the time that she was conscious of this 'urge.' In the Libet experiment, the participants reported the time by taking note of the position of a rotating, blinking light. In the Dylan-Haynes experiments, they were asked to remember a projected letter of the alphabet flashing on a screen before their faces. The action and the concomitant operation of reporting is completely embedded in the first-person perspective; the temporal framework is necessarily one of conscious time – the subject must be able to say, that in *her* present, her conscious urge happened *before* her intentional act.

A problematic *prima facie* presupposition, however, underpins the comparison of these operations. To understand this presupposition upon which

³ Libet, 'Time of Conscious Intention to Act,' 623: 'The onset of cerebral activity clearly preceded by at least several hundred milliseconds the reported time of conscious intention to act.'

⁴ Dylan-Haynes, 'Unconscious Determinants of Free Decisions,' 544: 'Indeed, we found that two brain regions encoded with high accuracy whether the subject was about to choose the left or right response prior to the conscious decision.'

the comparison is grounded, let us examine this methodological structure with a philosophical gaze.

3. THE PROBLEMATIC PRESUPPOSITION

Neuroscience of this kind attends the person as both an object and as a subject. As such it assumes necessarily that one's neurological activity correlates in some ordered way to one's thinking. In many instances, this leads to quite pragmatically satisfactory ends. Discovering the source of somatic pain, for example, allows for its alleviation. Noting a lesion in the brain can illuminate the source of mental afflictions. The correlation between the hammer, which I drop on my toe, and the resulting pain is not contingent, rather fills in a conditional proposition. *If* hammer falls on big toe, *then* pain! Such pragmatism, however, can be stretched overzealously to *explaining away* the mental completely. 'Overzealously,' because clear-cut cases of somatic pain cannot justify similar correlative attempts regarding intention. The problematic presupposition of the free will experiments grows out of this basic principle of correlation that bolsters empirical experiments in the natural sciences.

Without intending to simplify the phenomenal experience of 'clear-cut cases' of pain, the case of intentional action does seem to present two good reasons for requiring different treatment when attempting to squeeze it into correlative relations. First, we feel intention to be the movement from a *mental* event to a *physical* event, which contrasts the causal correlation in simple cases of pain. Second, a supposition of an empirical correlation ignores that this mental event arises with ends in mind, instead of pure effects. Ends belong to a contextual web involving one's personal history, one's cultural environment, along with one's interpersonal network – thus, demanding hermeneutic considerations along with empirical descriptions. Intention, therefore, requires attentive unpacking since it is an essential building block of the experiments, i. e., *move when you feel the urge to do so*.

A discussion of intention in the context of the experiments is also of special prevalence because a common critique of the results of the free will experiments claims that the experiments fail to measure *real* intention. Jürgen Habermas, for example, refers to the *free* will as the 'reflected' or 'deli-

berated will',⁵ from which follows that the experiments deal with an insufficient sort of intention since the participant should decide to move spontaneously. Such an insightful argument, however, treats the spontaneous actions as a sort of inferior subspecies under the genus 'intentional action,' as though this concept were clear. I think that these critiques, however, are wrong in not taking the spontaneous actions as serious elements within the sphere of intentional actions, for they beg the question: How can we call deliberated actions intentional, if the physical (spontaneous) actions, which they comprise and which are voluntary, belong to a separate intentional domain? Or put differently: where does 'real' intention begin and end? These questions I think block the progress of the above-mentioned critiques and give reason to hesitate before accepting immediately that the experiments fail to measure 'real' intention, whatever that is.

These questions resonate with G.E.M. Anscombe's thinking in *Intention*.⁶ In her example that runs from §23 through §26, an example of a man pumping well water is offered. Along with the act of pumping – taken as a purely physical motion willed by the pumper – the man may intend to pump to a specific rhythm, intend to resupply water to a house of politicians (with a malevolent agenda), and (simultaneously) intend to do these actions with the knowledge that the water has been poisoned. The series of intentions involved may be 'swallowed up' by that intention 'with which' the man performs the series of connected acts.⁷ In other words, the intention to move his arm, the intention of drawing water from the well, and the intention to resupply the house with water, may be subsumed under the lead intention of poisoning those men. Intention becomes manifold in these considerations; it remains anything but diaphanous and basic. The intention to act is not *found* in any one place or another, rather spread throughout the composite action as a whole. A spontaneous, intended movement makes up a salient moment within the arc of intentional action. It follows that we should take free, spontaneous action seriously for the sake of our deliberative actions, which build upon its substrate.⁸

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main 2005), 160, my translation.

⁶ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1957).

⁷ Anscombe, *Intention*, §26, esp. 46.

⁸ John Bishop, in 'Exercising Control in Practical Reasoning: Problems for Naturalism about Agency,' in *Philosophical Issues*, 22, *Action Theory* (2012), refers to spontaneous, unreflected action as

Let us draw these considerations over into the free will experiments. What do the investigators understand as intentional action? Three basic suppositions form this understanding that leads to the presupposition to be criticized. To begin, the investigators study intention to act in contrast to unintentional action. The spontaneous action of the participant moving her hand should not be a random spasm or carried out under hypnosis, i. e., the experimenters set out to measure action free from all external determinants. The act should be determined by an *internal* intention to do so. Intentional action, however, cannot remain a purely internal factor and at the same time be understandable. An intentional action as such is in some way an amalgam of both internal factors and external factors centered about the person.

Thus, the intention to *act* must secondly extend beyond the internal intention to move one's hand; an intentional action is nothing if not enacted. Beyond the internal intention to move, that which matters is the amalgamation between an internal content and the external realization of this content. This amalgamation might be posited as the keystone to the entire experiments' validity. After all, if no amalgamation existed between an intention and an actual action, then the second report originating from the first-person perspective would become absolutely superfluous. One could say, in other words, 'These actions are mysterious. Let us look in the brain to see where they come from,' without needing to ask the participant at all. On the contrary, the experiment seeks to explore the connection between the activity of the brain and the everyday thoughts in which we posit intentions.

Finally, the correlation of the temporal awareness of the intention to act and the action itself cannot be supposed as separate or isolatable. This proposition also finds resonance in the thinking of Anscombe. Whatever intention is, it must remain a member of a 'class of things known without observation.'⁹ Intention must be something *directly* knowable. If an intention to act were only realizable through observation, then two absurd consequences would follow. First, if the movement of one's hand does not correlate to a specific intention to do so, then one must search for a separate cause, e. g., a

consisting in 'sub-agential' components that 'belong to *what realizes* the action' (12). Here, as above, the argument grants naturalistic accounts those actions requiring little-to-no reflection, while seeking higher ground by attending truer, or more paradigmatic cases of intention, or as Bishop puts it, 'real agency' (13). Although insightful and differentiated, I cannot see how one can successfully draw a line between intentional actions of a sub-agential kind, and those of a real kind, *and* avoid falling into some sort of dualistic picture.

⁹ Anscombe, *Intention*, §8, esp. 14.

hypnotist or mind-controlling genius à la Dr. Mabuse. ‘I *moved* my hand,’ requires a direct relation – an *intimate* relation, one might say, with the correlating action. Without something extra to fill this descriptive gap, everyone would be in danger of falling under the term ‘moved things.’¹⁰ Second, an infinite regress would force itself into discourse. If only indirectly aware of her movement, the mover would need a separate vantage point within herself from which she observed the movement, which would continue *ad infinitum*. Both of these consequences derail theoretical-explicative attempts completely.

To summarize, we must take the spontaneous action tested in the experiments seriously since deliberative intentions interweave with the substrate of spontaneous intentions. Also, we can succinctly synthesize the three characteristics that an intention to act comprises within the context of the experiments. First, an intention to act involves an internal aspect basic to experience. Second, this internal aspect must essentially complete itself in external realization to count at all. These first two characteristics represent two necessary, inseparable halves of the intentional whole. Third, the amalgamation between the internal aspect and the external realization should be *directly* known without recourse to observation.

Without knowing more about intention as such, we can posit a greater understanding of that which the experiments must suppose as occurring during the reporting of the participant. The participant, in contrast to feeling pain, should affect, instead of being affected. Due to the assumption that this movement is (i) a unified amalgam of a basic kind between one internal and one external aspect that constitute a singular moment, and (ii) an amalgam *about which the participant should be directly conscious*, the presupposition is that a comparison with other basic, and directly knowable information is unproblematic. The artificially recorded information represents information, which may also be individuated into basic, comparable elements. Thus, the experimenters presume that a comparison between a person’s self-reported intention to act and measurements from machines poses no inherent contradiction.

¹⁰ Or, consider if you move and then were asked, ‘How did you know you really moved?’ The movement is mine without needing to refer to some mediating relation – no degree of separation exists between my pushing the button now and my intending to do so.

The presupposition, *phenomenologically speaking*, is that the only salient moment to be considered in a person's first-person perspective is this internal moment of intention, which is directly attached to the actual action without requiring observation. This presupposition trivializes the rest of the first-person perspective, treating it as irrelevant to the precipitant moment of action. Yet, even if we were to grant the investigators the point and forget all overarching phenomenological complexity, the presupposition would still remain problematic. For when considered in a phenomenological light, even the ostensibly basic moment of willed (and, thus, intentionally) spontaneous action embedded within the first-person perspective consists of at least two acts, where the presupposition posits only *one*.

4. IN A PHENOMENOLOGICAL LIGHT

Let us now consider specifically those operations of reporting that are at play in the experiments testing the free will. First, both operations of reporting focus on the same trigger-event. A movement occurs, which the subject (necessarily) intends. Second, two operations should report the occurrence of this movement. The first operation of reporting is the measurements by the artificial, mechanical devices involved, which react automatically; they consist in a chain of *single actions*. We must suppose a pure cause-effect relation with regards to the recording actions of the devices. If our artificial means for recording information consisted of the same layering found in embodied perceptual consciousness, then they could hardly offer accurate measurements. Furthermore, the reports created by these operations are static in the sense that the data remain intransigent to external manipulation. As much as one may like to rearrange a bad photograph of oneself, the pixels remain (*sans* technical manipulation) fixed upon the paper; just so, a major tenet of empirical natural science, is that the data are static pieces of information, which remain the same regardless of one's point (and time) of view. The data are fixed – because the operation fixing them is designed to do just that – freeze and capture that which comes before it, and only that which it is designed to freeze and capture.

The other operation of reporting is the intentional self-reporting embedded in the first-person perspective of the participant. When considered in a phenomenological light, even the so-called basic or direct moment of spontaneous action (as discussed in the second part) consists in at least two ac-

tions. First, the urge or decision to act occurs and one is simultaneously aware of this. Second, the participant must combine this initial act₁ with the perceptual and cognitive act₂ of marking this felt urge by remembering the position of an external timepiece. These two acts, albeit banal when compared with more complex activities and tasks, reveal the implicit complexity of our experiences. If asked, a participant could not locate the interval between the two acts because the two acts occur as if they were one more complex act. Pointing out that in fact two acts fill the space *where an elementally simple action is postulated* provides enough potency for revealing a basic asymmetry – especially, when one considers that these two acts interweave with the ever-unfolding history of the participant in affective embodiment. Where empiricism posits a simple datum, we actually find a multi-faceted action, which cannot be boiled down to a single, basic element.¹¹

But are they truly *two* acts? The basic considerations of the experiment postulate that this moment of intention, at least in theory, should be just as immediate as any other immediate action. We should be able to move spontaneously in some way no matter how confined the space. The investigators, however, want *consciously* considered, spontaneous freedom, indicated by an awareness of the time that one was *conscious* of the urge to act. Thus, two acts do occur, and necessarily so for the sake of the experiment, which wants not just arbitrary pressing of buttons, rather decidedly *timed* pushing of buttons. The person does not simply move. The person moves and at the same time makes conscious note of the position of an external timepiece. Although not requiring any grandiose physical movement, a second act coinciding with the pressing of the experimental button should indeed occur via the conscious attention given *to* a moving, external object. The two acts are not *only* logically present in the executed action; they are, in fact, implicit in the instructions given to the participants by the investigators. The experiment requires that both acts occur. It simply forgets to take into account the precondition for such multi-faceted actions occurring in the first place: namely, an unfolding presence of mind permanently constituting such multi-faceted moments.

¹¹ For an account of the impossibility of reducing the experiential experience of time down to basic, singular elements, cf. Henri Bergson, *Zeit und Freiheit* [*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris 1889] (Jena 1911), esp. 134ff.

Drawing attention to this complexity does not require technical language of the classic phenomenological sort (although such language would be easy to find). Instead, the complexity is so unmistakably evident from our everyday experience that we mistake it as constituting data, which may be compared without question to the information measured by automated machines and manipulated immediately by algorithms of computer programs. This presupposition, which supports the methodology of the experiment, fails. For, *if forced to compare the two processes, then the asymmetry of the (i.) statically preprogrammed, next to the (ii.) dynamically (i.e., lived) multifaceted, necessarily refutes prima facie claims of congruency.*

Yet, is it not possible to deny this claim of inherent incongruence between the operations evidentially? It is precisely the insight (quite literally, *in-sight*) offered by fMRI readings, which is cited as the final nail in the coffin of free will. How can it be that readings from the machine allow (albeit with some margin of error) predictions of which hand the participant will move 7 – 10 seconds before the actual ‘conscious’ act?

To such a rebuttal, one must again turn to the methodological presupposition of the experiment. When brain activity in the frontopolar and parietal regions of the brain is being detected 10 seconds prior to the action, the key question goes unasked: namely, what is going on within the thoughts of the participant prior to and during those 10 seconds? The reason that this question goes unasked is due to the basic presupposition of the experiments, which is that the free will we want to measure is of a basic, directly knowable kind. It is *solely* the pushing of buttons, which counts as an immediate and directly knowable moment. The problem with such a presupposition is that the simplification of the self-reporting operation whittles the enlivened participation down to a flash of intentional action.¹²

When looking to the 10 seconds intervening between the onset of cerebral activity and the actual action, one understands why investigators forget the phenomenological context. After all, the participant is remaining as still as possible in those seconds for the sake of accuracy. Further, she is not in those moments supposed to be ‘planning’ her act, rather waiting to feel the conscious ‘urge’ to act. Thus, if complacent with the instructions, she should

¹² See Fuchs, ‘Verkörperte Freiheit – personale Freiheit,’ in: *Marsilius-Kolleg 2008–2009* (Heidelberg 2010), 43, in which he refers to this simplification of the free will as one that presents it as being ‘isolated’ and ‘lightning-like’ (*blitzartig*), which further focuses the consideration at hand – the free will is set off in a vacuum (isolated) and so simple that it is practically elemental (lightning-like).

not be filling this temporal span with a mental countdown. And yet, in a phenomenological light, there is one more facet worth mentioning, which (as with the acts above) is required by the context of the experiment. This facet represents a sort of background tacit awareness: The participant, while fulfilling the assigned tasks, *should* be simultaneously conscious of her role in the experiment. In other words, the experiment demands that the participant maintains in those 10 seconds the constant and tacit knowledge that she is in an experiment with a pre-determined role to play. Thus, in those ten seconds she is, for the experiment's sake, conscious of her predicament and not day-dreaming instead about lying in a hammock. By ignoring this tacit, but necessary consciousness, the investigators forget to be consistent regarding their presupposition. They forget that, even in the absence of visible movement, phenomenological acts and contents are definitely occurring just below the surface.

In our phenomenological analysis, no supernatural material is necessary to explain these contents. A purely descriptive attentiveness finds the supposedly basic action to be multi-faceted. Empirical investigations are important, but must also respect the inherent complexity of the first-person perspective. Instead of rushing through presuppositions towards the coveted results, one must first honor the context.

5. WHAT PHENOMENOLOGY OFFERS A DISCUSSION OF 'EMBODIED RELIGION'¹³

With 'honoring the context' in mind, here are a few caveats regarding the following subsections. First, my *personal* background, along with the background of the discussed author, is a Christian monotheistic one. Second, the jump from the above critique into philosophy of religion may seem quite jolting. Yet, I think it is, in truth, quite logical. Finally, my considerations build upon only a fragment of theoretical considerations from a philosopher who has written a substantial corpus. Thus, the following points cannot do justice to the thinker at hand, nor can it offer a positive theory; instead it looks to implications arising out of the above considerations, which offer food for further thought.

¹³ The notion of 'embodied religion' arises from the conference title of this year's European Society for the Philosophy of Religion (ESPR) Conference in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Why is the transition logical? It is logical, because free will is the *sine qua non* of moral responsibility. From the conception of 'moral responsibility' follows (necessarily) the notion of good and evil. It is then a short jump to religion, in which discourse abounds about an all-good God and our freedom to try and emulate this paragon of goodness. Thus, philosophers of religion must take seriously a free will experiment claiming that human actions are actually predetermined, not by the individual or God, but by an unconscious 'readiness potential.' Since this discourse includes necessarily talk of *experience*, and phenomenology is the investigation of experience, it follows that our transition is well grounded. Moreover, the philosophy of religion cannot help but allow phenomenological considerations into discourse, as long as it welcomes the theme of the individual's religious experience as such.

The discussion that follows resonates with a slightly disharmonic relation to one position maintained by Marcel Sarot in this volume. Principally, Sarot's contribution¹⁴ is insightful in its adumbration of the role that free will plays both in Christian religion and neuroscience. His denial, however, that the experiments *in principle* pose any challenge to our belief in free will finds disharmonic resonance with the above critique.

5.1. THE POINT OF DISHARMONY WITH SAROT

Let us consider that aspect of Sarot's (quite enlightening paper) that fails to harmonize with the above considerations. The critical juncture deals exclusively with his treatment of the limitations of empirical experiments.

First, let us consider the point that he wishes to make. Sarot begins by granting empirical experiments their due. Empirical experiments 'shed some light' on the question of free will.¹⁵ Specifically, he is willing to accept that science sheds light on 'a limited class' of actions, which constitute 'random and pointless bodily movements.'¹⁶ In other words, the results of the experiments should be accepted, as long as one simultaneously grants that the *real* class of free actions, namely, 'acts of moral or religious significance,' remain unaffected. Sarot accepts the experiments to be valid 'in principle,' but 'in practice' claims that they have no bearing on what matters.¹⁷

¹⁴ Marcel Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 115–119.

¹⁵ Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 117.

¹⁶ Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 117.

¹⁷ Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 117.

Reasons abound for doubting *in principle* such a claim of methodological validity. Briefly, one could first show that such a presupposition overlooks the inherent incongruence of the compared operations. Yet, even circumventing this source of doubt leaves a serious problem, namely, the question of differentiation. *How* does one differentiate acts of fake intention from real intention, if the acts of fake intention, in the end, constitute the real ones? One can attempt, like Anscombe, to argue for a sort of ‘swallowing up’ of the micro-intentions within the macro-intention ‘under which’ the micro ones are executed. Such an attempt, however, maintains *one form* of intention expressed multifariously, rather than *two* distinct species. Thus, we would conclude the opposite of what Sarot concludes, namely, that the experiments are limited not only in practice, but also in principle, because intention makes no sense if reduced to a lightning strike of intention (i. e., extricated of all context). Intention, even in ‘pointless’ acts, remains principally opposed to complete reduction.

Trying to answer the question of where ‘real’ intention begins and ends poses a serious problem because such a division leads inevitably to dichotomies. Such dichotomies, however, may be acceptable for Sarot. I think, however, that a dichotomy would remain, which would fail logically and which would be unacceptable even for Sarot.

First, what sort of a free will is it that Sarot believes in? He writes: ‘I defend indeterminism with respect to human choices and actions.’¹⁸ If, however, empirical methods indeed were limited not in terms of ‘principle,’ but in terms of ‘practice’ (as he states), then the empirical methods in question, it follows, could (eventually) explain the ‘real,’ libertarian free will (i. e., the will free of all external determinants). This would, in turn, require that empirical methods could reveal the ‘why’ of our actions more precisely than any first-person account ever could; they would essentially be capable in practice of finding the determining source. An empirical prescience could reach beyond simple predictions as to which hand one will use to press buttons. Accepting empirical research as in principle capable of finding the unconscious determinants of spontaneous acts, would grant the hypothetical possibility of it finding the determinants of libertarian, intentional acts as well. If this were the case, empiricism would reach beyond pure *observation* – it could literally discover within the participant the determinants before the late-working

¹⁸ Sarot, ‘Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,’ 109.

consciousness itself had the faintest idea. The reasons we adduce to defend our 'libertarian free will' would become epiphenomena of a compatibilist sort, which is precisely the position Sarot claims to oppose.¹⁹ In other words, the dichotomy would cut deeper than that of body and spirit; it would cut between (a) the omniscience of our science (and Creator) and (b) our pseudo-knowledge. An empirical discovery would (in practice) undercut our own, direct grasp of our intentions. *The only way of avoiding such a dichotomy is advocating that even 'random and pointless' bodily movements are in principle irreducible when it comes to complete reduction under physical laws.*

5.2. EMBODIED RELIGION?

In summary, the phenomenological complexity of experience revealed the problematic nature of experiments that treat it as basic. Following this thread, Sarot's position was discussed with regard to a critical implication taken from my critique. In contrast to Sarot, I advocated the complexity of intention for even the most 'random and pointless bodily movements,'²⁰ and defended them from *prima facie* reduction.

But can we avoid a dualism between the phenomenological on one side and the physical on the other? Avoiding dualisms is a challenge. Conceptions dealing with embodiment, however, attempt to get around dualisms by treating the person and her environment as a whole. It is impossible to think of a person living outside of an ecological environment, outside a cultural environment, or outside of an interpersonal environment. Thus, embodiment carries with it many dimensions, which carry undetermined weight in developing a person both physically and experientially. Embodiment is a concept used for avoiding dualisms – it introduces instead pluralisms.

Our critique above revealed the essential contextual complexity of even unreflective movements. Now, what does the embodiment hinted at in this critique have to do with religion? At first glance, the connection is nothing *explicit*. The embodied first-person perspective must not involve religion. A religious person, however, is religious within a context. Faith and doubt, piety and sin, these words mean nothing in a vacuum, because they, at least as far as they can be considered *through* experience, also *begin and end in* experience. An embodied religion, then, in contrast to a purely systematic view of

¹⁹ Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 108–112.

²⁰ Sarot, 'Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,' 117.

religion, must incorporate the context of the person's direct experience. Although banal, a look towards religious experience wins much from the above considerations. Rather than revealing the complexity of simply moral, deliberative acts, a more fundamental sphere was detailed, in which the discourse defended the entire, saturated first-person perspective from reduction. Thus, a religious experience wins from an embodied conception because value is placed on the experiential stream as such. Or put differently, embodied religious experience may play out on a physical stage, but referring to physical laws alone fails to elucidate such an experience's meaning.

God's World – God's Body

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ABSTRACT

If the majority of process theologians and some feminist theologians are right, then God's world can be understood as God's body. A view that reveals environmental degradation in a different light. The essay 'God's World – God's Body' first of all presents Charles Hartshorne's as well as Sallie McFague's panentheistic conception of God. Both concepts stress the idea of God's corporeality. In a second step the author hints at the concepts' environmental implications; she explains what the consequences are, if Hartshorne and McFague are to be correct. Finally, the previously said opens out into showing in how far a movement 'back-to-religion' implies a 'back-to-nature-' movement.

KEYWORDS

world, body, environment, environmental degradation, panentheism,
feminist theology, process theology

'As each of us is the supercellular individual of the cellular society called a human body, so God is the super-creaturely individual of the inclusive creaturely society. Yet God is superior to all these in a manner of which the person-to-cell analogy gives only a faint idea.'¹

¹ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY 1984), 59.

28 ... 28 is the number of hectares of rainforest that were deforested within the last one minute. 28 hectares: that approximates 40 football pitches – in one minute!²

More than seven billion living humans on earth,³ more than five billion mobile phones worldwide,⁴ 1 billion cars.⁵ 126 liters a day is the approximate consumption of water of a German.⁶ 88.2 kilograms meat is consumed in industrialized countries per person in one year.⁷ More than 50,000 species per year are driven to extinction due to rainforest destruction.⁸ Glaciers are melting; coral reefs are dying and ecosystems changing because of fatal heat waves....⁹

If the majority of process theologians¹⁰ and some feminist theologians¹¹ are right, then God's world¹² can be understood as God's body.¹³ A view that reveals environmental degradation in a different light.¹⁴

In the following, I will *first* of all present Charles Hartshorne's as well as Sallie McFague's panentheistic conception of God. Both concepts stress the idea of God's corporeality. In a *second* step I hint at the concepts' environmental implications, that is, I aim to explain what the consequences are, if

² Cf. Deutsche Welthungerhilfe e.V., 'Weltweite Abholzungen gehen weiter' [<http://www.welthungerhilfe.de/abholzung-weltweit.html>] (Status: 8/2/2012 (9:30 a.m.)).

³ Cf. United States Census Bureau, World POPClock Project [<http://www.census.gov/population/popclockworld.html>] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:00 p.m.)).

⁴ Cf. BCC News, 'Over five million mobile phone connections worldwide' (9 July 2010) [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10569081>] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:57 p.m.)).

⁵ Cf. Huff Post, 'Number of Cars Worldwide Surpasses 1 Billion' (9/7/2012) [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2011/08/23/car-population_n_934291.html].

⁶ Cf. Universität Oldenburg, 'Entwicklung des Trinkwasserverbrauchs in Deutschland' [<http://www.hydrologie.uni-oldenburg.de/ein-bit/12045.html>] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:08 p.m.)).

⁷ Cf. World Health Organization, 'Global and regional food consumption patterns and trends: Availability and changes in consumption of animal products' [http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/3_foodconsumption/en/index4.html] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:23 p.m.)).

⁸ Cf. Yann Arthus-Bertrand (director), *Home* (2009) [<http://www.homethemovie.org/>] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:53 p.m.)).

⁹ Cf. International Union for Conservation of Nature [<http://www.iucnredlist.org/>] (Status: 9/7/2012 (3:47 p.m.)).

¹⁰ E.g. Charles Hartshorne, Daniel Dombrowski.

¹¹ E.g. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London 1993); Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia, PA 1984). See also: Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology* (London 2008), 146–163, esp. 150–153. I recommend Deane-Drummond's postscript, which delivers a helpful explication of the interconnectedness of theology and eco-ethics. Cf. 179–185.

¹² While I usually adopt McFague's usage of the earth as 'the world' (cf. McFague, *The Body of God*), it is more precise to talk about 'the universe' – in the sense of 'God's whole creation' – being God's body (as Jantzen points out: cf. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body*, 122f.).

¹³ However – in a panentheistic view – God is more than God's body.

¹⁴ Cf. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body*, 156.

Hartshorne and McFague are to be correct. *Finally*, the previously said opens out into showing in how far a movement 'back-to-religion' implies a 'back-to-nature' movement.

1. CHARLES HARTSHORNE'S AND SALLIE MCFAGUE'S CONCEPTS OF GOD¹⁵

In Charles Hartshorne's point of view, God lives in a real, close, reciprocal and bilateral relationship with each and every one of us. This God-creature-relationship is actually the center of Hartshorne's religious philosophy. Unlike classical theism, Hartshorne's neoclassical theism refuses to adopt Thomas Aquinas' idea of God being the 'unmoved mover.'¹⁶ In Hartshorne's process theism, God is viewed as the cosmic power, which permanently interacts with the local powers, thus with God's creatures. God is considered to be dipolar, meaning that the *one* God has an absolute, unchanging and abstract pole on one side. Divine attributes like God's love, benevolence, God's essence and status as the highest, can be considered as eternally unchanging. However, on the other side, God also interacts with God's creatures. Thus, the relative and changing pole refers to those attributes that are the concretion of God's abstract attributes. Therefore, the relative pole is the one existing in relation to God's creatures. This interacting and flexible part of God influences God's creatures just like God is influenced by God's creatures.¹⁷ For Hartshorne, 'to be' means – in the platonic sense of 'dynamis' – 'to

¹⁵ For an analysis of Hartshorne's concept of God, see also: Julia Enxing, *Gott im Werden: Die Religionsphilosophie Charles Hartshornes* (Regensburg 2013 (forthcoming)).

¹⁶ Cf. Thomas von Aquin, *Summa Theologiae* / *Die deutsche Thomas-Ausgabe: Vollständige, ungekürzte deutsch-lateinische Ausgabe der Summa theologiae* (Salzburg et al. 1982), I, q.8, art.1 ad2; q.28, art.1 ad3; q. 105, art.2 ad1.; Klaus Müller, *Glauben–Fragen–Denken: Selbstbeziehung und Gottesfrage* (III) (Münster 2010), 756f.; Klaus Müller, 'Paradigmenwechsel zum Panentheismus? An den Grenzen des traditionellen Gottesbildes,' in: *Herder Korrespondenz (Spezial)/2* (2011), 33–38, esp. 37. Viney points out that the argument of God's necessary unchangeableness stems from the Platonic tradition. In Plato's *Politeia* each way of changeability is described as a lack of perfection. If one assumes that God is perfect, changeability is thus excluded. Cf. Donald W. Viney, *Reading on Philosophy of Religion* (2007) (unpublished manuscript), 3; Daniel Dombrowski, 'Hartshorne, Platon und die Auffassung von Gott,' in: Julia Enxing & Klaus Müller (eds.), *Perfect Changes: Die Religionsphilosophie Charles Hartshornes* (Regensburg 2012), 53–72, esp. 54; Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, CT 1964), 23; Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven; London 1967), 36, 143.

¹⁷ Cf. Santiago Sia, *Religion, Reason and God: Essays in the Philosophies of Charles Hartshorne and A.N. Whitehead* (Frankfurt am Main; New York 2004), 32. – John B. Cobb & David R. Griffin (eds.), *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia, PA 1976), 47f., 68. – Müller, *Glauben–Fragen–Denken*, 732f, 757. Regarding relative and absolute perfection cf. Hartshorne: God, as personal. – Whitehead also assumes a dipolar nature of God. He describes the poles as 'primordial' and 'conse-

have some kind of power' and further: 'to be is to create.'¹⁸ Consequently, if God calls other entities into 'being' then those entities are God's co-creators, are the local powers. It follows that God cannot be considered as the only one having power, neither as almighty, without saying that God is just 'one of us.'¹⁹ God is superior to us, God cannot be surpassed by any one of us; however, God can and does constantly surpass Godself. This is why Hartshorne refers to the divine as the 'self-surpassing surpasser of all.'²⁰ God has the highest possible power, the greatest influence, without being almighty or all-determining. In the process theistic point of view – as Hartshorne represents it – God's way of interacting with God's creatures is through *persuasion*.²¹ God's goal for the world consists in increasing harmony and in sight of this goal God persuades and guides the local powers. Furthermore, Hartshorne proclaims a panentheistic God-world-view. Panentheism states that the world is in God, in the same way as everything is in God, without saying that God and the world are identical – like the pantheistic position proclaims.²²

quent nature.' The question, in as far as they can be compared to the Hartshornian concept of a concrete and abstract pole is not analysed in this article. – To this, cf. Randall C. Morris, *Process Philosophy and Political Ideology: The Social and Political Thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne* (Albany, NY 1991), 54. – Tobias Müller, *Gott–Welt–Kreativität: Eine Analyse der Philosophie A. N. Whiteheads* (Paderborn 2009), 126–139, esp. 126–132. – Müller, *Glauben–Fragen–Denken*, 727f. In the idealistic concepts (foremost in Schelling), Hartshorne had already seen a modern panentheism with a dipolar conception of God represented. – Cf. Charles Hartshorne & William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago, IL 1953), 233–243.

¹⁸ Cf. Dombrowski, 'Hartshorne, Platon und die Auffassung von Gott,' 58.

¹⁹ Cf. Charles Hartshorne, 'Das metaphysische System Whiteheads,' in: *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 3/4 (spezial print) (1949), 566–575, esp. 575; Dombrowski, 'Hartshorne, Platon und die Auffassung von Gott.'

²⁰ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 20.

²¹ 'This divine method of world control is called "persuasion" by Whitehead and is one of the greatest of all metaphysical discoveries, largely to be credited to Whitehead himself.' Charles Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 142; cf. 135. Cf. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York 1969), 53, 87–109. – Cobb & Griffin, *Process Theology*, 69; Marian Sia & Santiago Sia, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life* (Newcastle 2010), 215, 220. Whitehead speaks of God's lure, whereas Hartshorne speaks of God's *persuasion*. Cf. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York 1969), esp. 103, 105, 107, 214, 216f, 262; Hartshorne, 'Das metaphysische System Whiteheads,' 575; Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Gott: Philosophisch-theologische Denkversuche* (Tübingen 1992), 180.

²² Karl Friedrich Krause (1781–1832) introduced the term *panentheism* (although the panentheistic idea is much older, this is why Brierley talks about a 'quiet revolution' (Michael W. Brierley, 'Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology,' in: Philip Clayton & Arthur Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, MI 2004), 1–15, esp. 4f., cf. 2f, 13.) Cf. Karl C. F. Krause, *Vorlesungen über die Grundwahrheiten der Wissenschaften* (Göttingen 1829), 484; John W. Cooper, *Panentheism. The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI 2006), 121; Klaus Müller, 'Gott – größer als der Monotheismus? Kosmologie, Neurologie und Atheismus als Anamnesen

God is more than the world and cannot be fully identified nor comprehended by any creature. It becomes clear that the classical assumption that God and world are two completely different parameters and that God stands on the one side while the world stands on the other side; while God is able to influence the world without being influenced by it, as Anselm of Canterbury states in his *Proslogion*,²³ is rejected by process theism. Hartshorne himself, but also feminist theologians like Grace Jantzen, Carter Heyward and Sallie McFague express the idea of the world being God's body. However, just like God's creatures have a body – or *are* bodies, as McFague suggests in her book *The Body of God*²⁴ – but are themselves more than pure bodies, God's world is God's body, but in a panentheistic sense, not saying that God and God's body are identical, even though the world can be considered as part of God's identity.²⁵

McFague's *theological cosmology* is based on two pillars: her renewed theology of creation²⁶ and her body-of-God concept. In this concept 'body'

einer verdrängten Denkform,' in: Frank Meier-Hamidi & Klaus Müller (eds.), *Persönlich und alles zugleich: Theorien der All-Einheit und christliche Gottesrede* (Regensburg 2010), 9–46, esp. 43f; Müller, *Glauben-Fragen-Denken*, 744–771, esp. 744f, 747, 753f; Müller, *Paradigmenwechsel zum Panentheismus?*, esp. 36.; 'Dombrowski, Hartshorne, Platon und die Auffassung von Gott,' 56; Benedikt P. Göcke, *Alles in Gott? Zur Aktualität des Panentheismus Karl Christian Friedrich Krauses* (Regensburg 2012). Cf. The definition in the Oxford Dictionary, which Brierley (Brierley, 'Naming a Quiet Revolution,' 5.) describes as the 'classical' one. Cf. Clayton & Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*. This book provides a helpful insight into the diverse panentheistic approaches and positions. Regarding Hartshorne's 'panentheistic turn' cf. Klaus Müller, 'Gott: Totus intra, totus extra: Über Charles Hartshornes Transformation des Theismus,' in: Julia Enxing & Klaus Müller (eds.), *Perfect Changes: Die Religionsphilosophie Charles Hartshornes* (Regensburg 2012), 11–24, esp. 8, 22–24; Roland Faber, *Gott als Poet der Welt: Anliegen und Perspektiven der Prozesstheologie* (Darmstadt 2003), 116–118.

²³ Cf. Anselm von Canterbury, *Proslogion: Lateinisch/Deutsch* (Übersetzt von Robert Theis) (Stuttgart 2005), VIII, 33; Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL 1967), 55.

²⁴ 'We do not *have* bodies, as we like to suppose, distancing ourselves from them as one does from an inferior, a servant, who works for us (the "us" being the mind that inhabits the body but does not really belong there). We *are* bodies, "body and soul."' McFague, *The Body of God*, 16.

²⁵ McFague, *The Body of God*, 141. 'Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally; panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally.' McFague, *The Body of God*, 149f. Cf. Daniel Dombrowski, 'Alston and Hartshorne on the Concept of God,' in: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 36 (1994), 129–146. esp. 133f. Charles Hartshorne, 'God, as personal,' in: Vergilius Ferm (ed.), *An Encyclopedia of Religion: The Philosophical Library* (New York 1945), 302–303; Faber, *Gott als Poet der Welt*, 31, 41. Cooper appropriately points out that the assumption of the world being God's body requires a bilateral God-world-influence. It further comprehends the world as being part of God's identity. Cf. Cooper, *Panentheism*, esp. 178, 180, 184, 193.

²⁶ '[...] God as immanently present in the process of the universe'. Sallie McFague, 'An Earthly Theological Agenda,' in: *The Christian Century* January 2–9 (1991), 12–15 [<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=54> (Status: 9/7/12 (5 p.m.))]. Cf. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology*, 152.

functions as a collective term for all kinds of bodies. Every entity – even atoms – can be understood as a ‘body.’ I assume it being legitimate to use the term ‘creation’ – in the sense of a *creatio ex profundis et continua*²⁷ – as an equivalent for ‘God’s body.’ At this point, I do not consider it helpful nor necessary, to go deeper into McFague’s spiritualization of ‘body,’ although I assume that her idea of uniting spirit and body and comprehending body as ultimately related or entangled with spirit, opens up a new perspective that is especially interesting for her feministic approach as she succeeds to demonstrate.²⁸ However, I would like to stress McFague’s idea of God’s transcendence being immanent in the world respectively in creation. It is through our experience of the world that we experience God’s immanent transcendence and God’s transcendent immanence. Experiencing God’s transcendence in nature is a radicalization of the divine immanence.²⁹ Nevertheless, McFague makes a point by saying that all we can see and all we can experience is God’s back. Thereby, she refers to Exodus 33.23b: ‘...and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.’ (NIV)³⁰ No one has ever or will ever succeed in seeing God’s face. In the consequence, neither theology nor philosophy will find adequate terms to describe God’s face; all we can (and should!) do, is turn our attention to the planet, which is a reflection of God’s back. We are ‘invited to see the creator in the creation, the source of all existence in and through what is bodied forth from that source.’³¹

²⁷ Cf. David R. Griffin, ‘Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism,’ in: John B. Cobb & Clark H. Pinnock (eds.), *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, MI 2000), 1–38, esp. 12. David R. Griffin, ‘In Response to William Hasker,’ in: John B. Cobb & Clark H. Pinnock (eds.), *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids, MI 2000), 246–262, esp. 247–253; Donald W. Viney, ‘The Varieties of Theism and the Openness of God: Charles Hartshorne and Free-Will Theism,’ in: *The Personalist Forum* 14/2 (1998), 199–238 (Viney Discussion: 239–245), esp. 203f. There are diverse concepts respectively terms on creation as process theology understands it. While Viney talks about a *creatio ex hyle* (Viney, *The Varieties of Theism and the Openness of God*, 204.), Keller states a *creatio ex profundis*, cf. Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London; New York 2003), esp. 155–228; Catherine Keller, ‘Ex profundis: Die verlorene Chaostheorie der Schöpfung,’ in: Severin J. Lederhilger (ed.), *Mit Gott rechnen: Die Grenzen von Naturwissenschaft und Theologie* (7. Ökumenische Sommerakademie Kremsmünster 2005) (Frankfurt am Main; New York 2006), 39–57; Catherine Keller, ‘Creatio ex profundis: Chaostheorie und Schöpfungslehre,’ in: *Evangelische Theologie* 69/5 (2009), 356–366. Müller, ‘Gott – größer als der Monotheismus?’ 40.

²⁸ Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, 14f, 22–25; 141–150.

²⁹ Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, 20.

³⁰ McFague, *The Body of God*, 131–136; cf. 144, 150. ‘The implication of this picture is that we never meet God unmediated or unembodied.’ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA 1987), 184.

³¹ McFague, *The Body of God*, 133f. Cf. Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology*, 151.

This concept, of an immanent-transcendent God, the idea that God is – somehow – present in the world, is described as ‘embodied.’³² McFague even goes further by talking about ‘The Cosmic Christ.’³³ In this context, she claims a ‘cruciform living,’ ‘an alternative notion of the abundant life, which will involve a philosophy of ‘enoughness,’ limitations on energy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others.’³⁴

Furthermore, McFague betakes the spirit-body-issue to explain God’s relation to the world. Thereby, God is understood as ‘the spirit that is the breath, the life, of the universe, a universe that comes from God and could be seen as the body of God.’³⁵ She uses *spirit* instead of *mind*, because other than mind, spirit can be found in all creatures and entities of the universe. Doing so, she promotes cosmocentricism instead of anthropocentricism. Moreover, the spirit-body-analogy antagonizes a dualistic world approach as well as an association of the divine with the solely intellectual and controlling part, the one ordering and limiting the universe. Instead, spirit understood as the energizing and enlivening part interweaves every entity and allows for a theology of nature, focusing the God-creature-relationship instead of just the God-man-relationship.³⁶ We are only adequately described, if the spirit-body existence is taken into consideration. Neither our spirit nor our body succeeds in properly characterizing us. Moreover, I assume most readers would agree that they are *one* person, with a bodily as well as spiritually world-approach, without considering it adequate to speak of two entities within one person. Comparably, McFague articulates *one* God, existing in a bodily di-

³² Margit Eckholt, *Schöpfungstheologie und Schöpfungsspiritualität: Ein Blick auf die Theologin Sallie McFague* (München 2009), 21.

³³ Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, 102, 179–191. McFague’s idea of the ‘Cosmic Christ’ touches the following aspects: salvation occurring in creation, in the body of God (179); the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of creation and salvation (180); the liberation of nature from oppressions (‘our oppressive practices’) (187); the healing of the human and the nonhuman (188f). Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology*, 100–107; 152.

³⁴ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN 2001), 14.

³⁵ McFague, *The Body of God*, 144.

³⁶ Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, 144f. Hartshorne uses the mind-body-analogy as well as the body-cell-analogy to describe the God-world-relation. Cf. ‘In sum, then, God’s volition is related to the world as though every object in it were to him a nerve-muscle, and his omniscience is related to is [sic!] as though every object were a muscle-nerve. A brain cell is for us, as it were, a nerve-muscle and a muscle-nerve, in that its internal motions respond to our thoughts, and our thoughts to its motions. If there is a theological analogy, here is its locus. God has no separate sense organs or muscles, because all parts of the world body directly perform both functions for him. In this sense the world is God’s body.’ Hartshorne, *Man’s Vision of God*, 185; cf. 174–211. Cf. Viney, *The Varieties of Theism and the Openness of God*, 205.

mension – the world – and in one or perhaps uncountable incorporeal dimensions. At this point, the phenomenological experts might not be amused by the undifferentiated usage of the terms ‘Leib’ and ‘Körper.’ Keeping in mind that myriads of books have been written on that topic, and – to put it very simple – ‘Körper’ is usually used in a more scientific-physical sense while ‘Leib’ goes far beyond scientific aspects, I am not aware that either Hartshorne or McFague emphasize the difference here. My main point in this article is to analyze the consequences of the idea that God’s world is understood as God’s body. I will do so in the next step, before making a point in saying that – based on the correctness of the arguments presented – living in a close relationship with God, that is living a spiritual life, necessarily implies a life respecting and protecting our environment, God’s world, the embodied God.

2. TAKING THE CONSEQUENCES INTO ACCOUNT

If Hartshorne and McFague are right, then what we do does not only indirectly, but directly affect God. On the one hand, Hartshorne and McFague stand in a long tradition of demonstrating in how far God encounters us in other entities, or, to talk with Buber, Levinas and Derrida – to only name a few – God is in ‘the other.’ On the other hand, the process theologian and the ecofeminist theologian accentuate a slightly different point that nevertheless affects us in an essential way: God encounters us not only in ‘the other’ – in the sense of another human being or animal – but in ‘nature.’ The eco-theological perspective brings our environment into focus, nature in its multifaceted presences, thereby bringing man into his position as God’s servant, thus the servant of nature, in contrast to his idea of being creation’s crowning glory. If one takes the assumption of God’s world being God’s body seriously, one can provocatively say:

...If God is truly embodied in nature, then God is not only in big trouble in recent years, moreover, God seems to be the subject of destruction.

...If God is truly embodied in nature, then we do not only drive 50,000 species per year to extinction, we then drive God Godself to extinction.

...If God is truly embodied in nature, then we deplete God, when we use up natural resources.

...If God is truly embodied in nature, then we waste God, when we waste water.

...If God is truly embodied in nature, then we harm God, when we continue the emission of global warming gases, we expose God's body to a deathly heat shock.

Relating to McFague's spirit-body-analogy as one possible way of imagining the idea of God's world being God's body, one might say that there is a difference that is not properly taken into consideration here: the difference between God and us. Just because our bodies experience illnesses, harm and pain suggests nothing about God's body having those experiences. The difference might be that – unless us – God is perfect. Therefore God's body has to be immortal, inviolable, always healthy, while we are the incomplete and fallible creatures, thus sinning and suffering from the consequences. Hartshorne agrees, using the following example: Just because a house consists of many small rooms does not make the house small.³⁷ Just because we are panentheistically in God, and we are sinners, does not lead to a sinful God. In the same way Hartshorne does not see a conflict considering this imperfect world as God's body. However, in the consequence of Hartshorne's body-cell-analogy, God does not necessarily experience pain in the same way as God's bodily members do, but God suffers just like we – as a whole – suffer, when we, for example, cut our finger or break our leg. It is not just the finger or the leg that is suffering, we suffer. Thus, in a sympathetic, bilateral, panentheistic God-creature-relationship, God *somehow* suffers with God's creatures.

Furthermore, considering God's creation as an ontological necessity – as Hartshorne does – leads to the assumption that God necessarily needs a body. *This* world is contingent, but *a* world – *any* world – is necessary.³⁸ God

³⁷ Cf. Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity*, 145.

³⁸ 'But the divine fiat must be as good as any other possible one. Thus God is free in what he does, and yet is not free to act in inferior fashion. He is slave to his goodness, if you will. But he can express this goodness as he pleases in any world arrangement that is not inferior to any possible other, so far as God determined or might determine it.' (Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity*, 137f.) 'God requires *a* world, but not *the* world. By contrast, what the world requires is not simply *a* God but *the* one and only possible God, the Worshipful One.' Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time*, 64f. Cf. Hartshorne & Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, 22; Griffin, *Process Theology and the Christian Good News*, 12; Griffin, 'In Response to William Hasker,' 246–262, esp. 247–253. Hartshorne, 'Das metaphysische System Whiteheads,' 575. Brierley, 'Naming a Quiet Revolution,' 9; Müller, 'Gott – größer als der Monotheismus?' 43; Müller, *Glauben-Fragen-Denken*, 728, 738; Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven 2006), 82. 'Finally, the issue over incorporeality is tied up with the issue over creation. [...] Hartshorne argues effectively that God is related to the world in two crucial respects as a human mind is related to its body: (1) God is aware, with maximum immediacy, of what goes on in the world, and (2) God can directly affect what happens in the world. On the principle that what a mind (1) is most immediately aware of and (2) has under its direct voluntary control is its body, Hartshorne concludes that the world is God's body, and hence that God is not incorporeal. But this analogy can be pushed through all the way only if, as Hartshorne holds, the

could have had a different body, maybe God has one we do not know of, but a body – *any body* – is presupposed in order to ‘furnish the World Soul with awareness of, and power over, its bodily members.’³⁹

At this point, I will briefly summarize the main statements as well as arguments so far: *In the first place*, God’s world can be understood as God’s body. Thus, the world is within God, part of God, however, God is not absorbed in the world; God is more than ‘world.’ God’s world is the place of God’s interaction with the world. *Secondly*, God lives in a close and real relationship with God’s creatures, whereby ‘creatures’ is understood in a broad sense embracing all created entities. *Thirdly*, what we do and what we fail to do influences God, with whom we live in a two-sided-relationship. *Fourthly*, even though God’s body is unique and cannot be equalized with creatures’ bodies, God’s body is severely suffering in those times, if God is – as Whitehead puts it – ‘[...] the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands.’⁴⁰

3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF ‘EMBODIED RELIGION’

Those assumptions lead us to the concluding statement that believers need to be more aware of their ecological footprints. Moreover, one cannot live in a close relationship with God; preach a life in harmony with God’s will, thereby ignoring nature’s dignity. Therefore, Christian religion is inevitably called to accept the challenge of integrating nature – in all its facets – into their gospel. It is provoked to stop tabooing human nature as well as environmental damage. Because as McFague states: ‘Christianity is the religion of

world (some world or other) exists by metaphysical necessity, independent of God’s will. Otherwise God will not be corporeal in the strongest sense – essentially corporeal. Of course even if God brings it about by a free act of will that the world exists, we might still, in a sense, regard the world as God’s body. But in that case it would be a body that He had freely provided for Himself, one that He could just as well have existed without. He would not be essentially corporeal. If we understand corporeality in this stronger sense, and Hartshorne does espouse it in this sense, it is clear that it stands or falls along with Hartshorne’s position on creation. If the classical doctrine of creation is retained, one can deny essential corporeality, while still agreeing with Hartshorne on relativity, contingency, and potentiality.’ William Alston, ‘Hartshorne and Aquinas: A Via Media,’ in: John B. Cobb & Franklin I. Gamwell (eds.), *Existence and Actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne* (Chicago, IL 1984), 78–98, here 87.

³⁹ Daniel Dombrowski, ‘Does God Have a Body?’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2/3 (1988), 225–232, here 230. Regarding Hartshorne’s Plato-references also see Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, 52–56; 59–62.

⁴⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 351.

the incarnation *par excellence*. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment: from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology (Christ was fully human) to the Eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the body of Christ who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body. Christianity during first-century Mediterranean culture, which was noted for its disparagement of the body and its otherworldly focus, defiantly proclaimed its message of enfleshment.⁴¹ And yet, Christian religion stands in a long tradition of excluding, bashing, concealing and demerging man's bodily needs instead of facing the challenge of integrating them into a Christian lifestyle. Similarly, it remains true to itself, by defying and neglecting the 'body nature.'⁴² However, if God is truly embodied in the cosmos, then we urgently need to think about what the actualization of 'embodied religion' could be.⁴³

Reading this article up to here took approximately 20 minutes. Within those last 20 minutes, eight hundred football pitches of rainforest were lumbered.

⁴¹ McFague, *The Body of God*, 14. Cf. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body*, 157.

⁴² In this context, McFague talks about the *interconnectedness of oppressions*. Cf. McFague, *The Body of God*, 14. 'Whatever else salvation can and ought to mean, it does involve, says the body model, first and foremost, the well-being of the body. A theology that works within the context of the body model claims that bodies matter, that they are indeed the main attraction.' McFague, *The Body of God*, 18.

⁴³ 'In sum, a Christian nature spirituality is Christian praxis extended to nature. It is becoming sensitive to the natural world, acknowledging that we live in this relationship as we do also in the relationship with God and other people. ... A Christian nature spirituality, then, is loving nature in the same way that we love God and other people: as valuable in itself, as a "subject." A Christian nature spirituality tells us further that in our time nature is oppressed and needs our special care. To care for it properly, we must pay attention to it, learn about its need, become better acquainted with it.' Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN 1997), 24f.

Trinity, Embodiment and Gender

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ABSTRACT

This article will scrutinize the approaches of Janet Martin Soskice and Gavin D'Costa to the Trinity, embodiment and gender. It argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with embodiment, and assesses Soskice's and D'Costa's answers to gender-related questions that have arisen from the connection between embodiment and the Trinity. The aim of the article is firstly to prove that orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity are not essentially exclusive to women, and secondly that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model by which to understand sexual difference at the human level.

KEYWORDS

Trinity, incarnation, embodiment, gender, feminist theology, difference, sexual difference, relational subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

What do embodiment and the Trinity have to do with each other? The doctrine of the Trinity is often seen as the most abstract doctrine in Christian dogma, a doctrine that transcends not only our physical reality but our rationality as well. In the present article, however, I shall argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with embodiment, by drawing on the work of Janet Martin Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology at the Uni-

versity of Cambridge and fellow of Jesus College, and Gavin D'Costa, Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Bristol. Furthermore, I shall assess their answers to gender-related questions that have arisen as a result of connecting the Trinity with embodiment.

Common to Soskice and D'Costa is their view that the Trinitarian approach is essential to contemporary assessments of embodiment in a Christian context. Soskice emphasizes that the connection between embodiment and the Trinity was already very close when the doctrine was first articulated. At the time, the need for a specific doctrinal formulation was practical rather than theoretical. It arose from the belief in God's incarnation, i.e. from the conviction that God was embodied as an individual person in Jesus Christ, as well as from the practical and pastoral questions that the early Church associated with this belief. The doctrine of the Trinity was a response to the problem of how it is possible to simultaneously believe that there is only one God, and that Jesus truly is God in a human body. She clarifies the process as follows: 'The means, the tools at hand, were those of a Greek philosophy but the motives were pastoral and apologetic. The doctrine of the Trinity adds nothing extra to the basic Christian confession.'¹

Although the notion of embodiment had already played an essential role from early on, gender-related questions concerning the Trinity and embodiment did not arise until contemporary theology got underway in tandem with feminist approaches. Common questions posed by contemporary feminists include the following. 'If God is embodied as a male, what have women to do with him? Are men essentially closer to God and are women excluded from divinity due to their gender?' Or, expressed metaphysically: 'How is the gendered state of human being as *Imago Dei* related to God, and what is the relation between sexual difference at the human level and gender-related imagery in religious language?''²

My aim is to prove firstly that from orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity it is possible to find answers to these questions that are not exclusive to women (or men), and secondly that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model by which to understand sexual difference at the

¹ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' in: Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge 2002), 135–150, esp. 136.

² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 138–139. Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York 1992), 18. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston 1973), 19. Pamela Sue Anderson, 'Feminist Theology as Philosophy of Religion,' in: Parsons (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 40–57, esp. 42.

human level. Both Soskice and D'Costa reflect on these questions, striving to take the feminist challenge seriously, and to answer them from within the Christian, mostly Roman-Catholic, tradition.

INCLUSION WITHOUT FEMALE DIVINITY

The French feminist Luce Irigaray formulates the feminist criticism of the Christian concept of the Trinity in terms of exclusive maleness in the following way:

Christianity tells us that God is in three persons, three manifestations, and that the third stage of the manifestation occurs as a wedding between the spirit and the bride. Is this supposed to inaugurate the divine for, in, with women? The female? Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine... There is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit.³

Irigaray demands that there be a female god and finds a possible candidate in the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit. She is not entirely alone here, for in early Syriac tradition the Spirit had been styled as feminine, because the gender of this noun in Semitic languages is female – *ruha* in Syriac and *ruâh* in Hebrew. However, her motive for feminizing the Spirit is not historical or linguistic but rather ideological.⁴ She suggests that God's incarnation in Jesus Christ should be understood only as a partial incarnation and that the feminine spirit following him had made the incarnation complete. Only in that way would the Godhead include femininity and provide possibility of subjectivity for women.⁵

Gavin D'Costa accepts Irigaray's challenge and offers two compatible solutions to the problem she presents. In both, he rejects Irigaray's demand by highlighting that God's incarnation should not be understood as an exclusion of women even though God was incarnated as a man. First, God in fact did not only utilize Christ's male body as the instrument of salvation but the female

³ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* transl. Gillian C. Gill (New York 1993), 62.

⁴ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford 2007), 112. Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 143–144. Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London 2000), 43–45.

⁵ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 8.

body of Christ's mother Mary as well. The physical motherhood of Mary thus proves that femininity cannot be contrary to divinity. Secondly, he partly agrees with Irigaray's argument that God's incarnation as the individual male Jesus Christ could be understood as an incomplete incarnation.⁶

D'Costa, however, rejects Irigaray's view that the incarnation was completed only in the incarnation of a female spirit, because that would assign sexual difference within the Trinity. Instead, the incarnation was completed only in the life of Jesus' resurrected body – the Marian church – which is additionally depicted as the body of Christ and as his bride. This 'Church-body' has been described as a female body throughout history and will not be complete until the *eschaton*. Every member – female and male – of the Church, the body of Christ, is a part of the salvific act of the Trinity. According to D'Costa, as members of Christ's body, members of the Church are also co-redeemers with Christ, as is Mary, the first Co-Redeemer. In spite of Irigaray's criticism of this model, women are not excluded, but have their own subjectivity by participating in the Trinitarian life as members of Christ's body, without having, however, a sovereign subjectivity. We shall shortly return to the concept of subjectivity later in this article.⁷

D'Costa also criticized Irigaray's call for feminine divinity, that her model would actually essentialize sexual difference in a way that would be alien to the Christian understanding of both man and woman being created in the image of each person of the Trinity. D'Costa as well as Soskice reject any attempt to assign sexual difference to the Trinity. They both emphasize that God is beyond human gender-limits, in other words he does not lack gender, but surpasses it, and therefore each of the three persons can be described with both male and female imagery. Furthermore, they both remark that in the previously mentioned Syriac tradition the Spirit was considered to be inferior to the Father and Son, and therefore feminine. This view is in contradiction with feminist purposes as well as orthodox understandings of the Trinity.⁸

D'Costa asserts that in assigning gender to the divine *per se*, Christianity is in danger of idolatry, that is, of univocally assigning qualities from the created world to God. He writes: 'Analogy reminds us that any likeness that indeed exists always does so within a greater unlikeness and difference. To

⁶ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 38–39.

⁷ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 38–39.

⁸ Gavin D'Costa, 'Queer Trinity,' in Gerald Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford 2007), p.269–280, esp. 273–274. Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 144.

forget this is to be idolatrous and anthropomorphic.’⁹ He suggests that ‘it is in the relationship between gendered difference, not in gender itself, that we find the analogical bridge to the Trinitarian God.’¹⁰

Even Christians from other – non-Catholic – denominations, like myself, may find D’Costa’s points fruitful and worth considering. Although the role of Mary and appealing to Marian dogmas may sound alien, his argument about being members of Christ’s body is not far removed from the Lutheran dogma of common priesthood, for example. However, Lutherans would probably not talk about co-redeemers, but rather co-workers, or they would not say that Christ’s incarnation was incomplete. Yet they could agree with D’Costa that men and women are members of the same body, the body of Christ and his Church-bride. According to this understanding, sexual difference does not subvert common humanity but is compatible with it. The work of the Holy Spirit in the Church demonstrates the inclusion of both men and women in union with God. And this union is performed bodily in the sacraments, in prayer, and in the Church’s proclamation that repeats the unique event of incarnation like an echo.

Further, Irigaray calls for a female god in order to establish the autonomy and subjectivity of women. In other words, she wishes to change some divine attributes on account of her feminist purposes. But since God is by definition a necessary being, the prime cause and mover of all existence who himself has no cause, would a god whose attributes are defined according to certain needs of certain people be God at all, or rather an idol? God has the desired influence upon culture, societies and the subjectivity of individuals solely as *God*, as an omnipotent, good, necessary and personal being. By changing the reference to the concept, its influence would be changed as well. It is not evident that any idol could provide help in establishing the subjectivity of women. Another question is whether Irigaray’s ideal of subjectivity and autonomy is even desirable, but we shall return to this later.

HOW TO INTERPRET THE GENDERED LANGUAGE OF THE TRINITY?

While Gavin D’Costa provided an interpretation of the continuing incarnation as an answer to the feminist challenge, Janet Martin Soskice’s response

⁹ D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 43. See also D’Costa, ‘Queer Trinity,’ 270.

¹⁰ D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 61.

focuses on the interpretations of gendered imagery in Christian language. Soskice notes that questions concerning gender and the Trinity are not relevant to feminist theologians who have already cast off the basic elements of the Trinitarian doctrine in their thinking. According to her, the Trinity has essential significance only for those who have a reasonably high Christology, in other words, for those who wish to say 'Jesus is God incarnate.'¹¹

To such persons she gives four reasons for adhering to the Trinitarian doctrine despite its ostensible masculinism. First she notes that the doctrine of the Trinity protects the otherness of God from anthropomorphism. One God with three persons is infinitely different from any human being. God is not a creature, or a male, although he was incarnated as a man. 'Father' and 'Son' are not to be understood strictly in biological terms.¹²

Secondly, she sees the doctrine as defeating the main target of the feminist critique: covert monarchianism. The indifferent and distant god criticized by feminist theologians is not the God of Scripture or the Trinity but rather the god of deism.¹³ She argues that the Trinitarian God of Scripture creates from love and is present in his creation. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity describes the ways in which God is with us all the way to incarnation, adopting human flesh and dying on the cross, and present among us in the Spirit.¹⁴

Thirdly, the Trinitarian doctrine endorses the fundamental goodness and beauty of the human being through the incarnation. Jesus was true man and true God, and in him God became a fully and truly sexed human being in a real human body.¹⁵ But it is precisely this male embodiment of God that is a stumbling block for several feminists. However, if it is complicated for them to accept that God was incarnated as a man, what would the alternative be? What if God had been incarnated as a woman, but every other detail in the biblical narrative remained in place? What would change? If God had been born as a little girl from the Virgin Mary without any contribution from a man, would this alternative not be rather exclusive of men? In that case would there not be a good reason for men to complain that they have no role in God's plan? A female god would have been born as a girl with a female body

¹¹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 136–137.

¹² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 137. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 69.

¹³ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 139. See also: Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 110–111.

¹⁴ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 139.

¹⁵ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140.

from a female body, and men would have been completely unnecessary. But unlike that narrative, God, according to the Bible, employed both a female body and a male body to accomplish his salvific act, not, however, by allocating each an equal role, not by flattening sexual difference, but rather by confirming it. I think that it would be appropriate to ask whether the feminist interpretation of the exclusion of women is essentially a failure to recognize the significance of physical motherhood. In addition, D'Costa has noted that feminists probably would not accept a female incarnation either, because Jesus ended up being violated and crucified. A tortured female savior would instead be seen as affirming phallic violence against women rather than proscribing it.¹⁶

The fourth point Soskice makes relates to philosophical questions that have been articulated by postmodernists and contemporary feminists. Soskice regards the doctrine of the Trinity as challenging the 'philosophies of One' that constitute the same targets of both feminism and postmodernism. The doctrine of the Trinity moves us beyond the binarism of 'the One' and 'the other,' where 'the other' is defined only as 'not me' and thus only serves the establishment of 'the One.'¹⁷ Soskice notes that Trinitarian theology was originally formulated to counter a similar metaphysics of the One which does not allow any genuine otherness but in which the otherness is merely the 'Other of the Same.' The Trinitarian God is unity in difference and relational in himself.¹⁸ None of the three persons can be understood as separate or independent from the other two. The persons of the Trinity *are* only in relation to each other in a 'perichoretic outpouring of love.'¹⁹

Earlier in this article Luce Irigaray was quoted as calling for divine help in order to establish women's autonomy and sovereignty. In contrast to her view, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a quite different ideal for human subjectivity. As Soskice emphasizes, the persons of the Trinity exist only in relation to each other, which means that genuine subjectivity is not to be found in distant solitude and autonomy but rather in loving relations with other subjects. This ideal is quite opposite to the feminist ideal of an independent emancipated woman who could paradoxically be seen as a representation of the Cartesian ideal of subjectivity.

¹⁶ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 62.

¹⁷ Here Soskice is reflecting particularly on Simon de Beauvoir's & Luce Irigaray's thinking.

¹⁸ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 100–101.

¹⁹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140–141.

According to Soskice, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals that 'to-be' most fully is 'to-be-related' in difference.²⁰ She refers to Augustine's *De Trinitate* where the *imago Dei* is considered to mean that human beings are created in the image of the Trinity instead of that of the Son, which is a male image. In this way Augustine rejected the implication that women were not created fully in the image of God long before feminists set out their questions on the same subject.²¹

Soskice reminds us that it is not possible to avoid masculine terminology in Christianity 'as long as the New Testament is with us.'²² In contrast to the Old Testament, 'Father' and 'Son' in the New Testament are very central divine nominations. Trying to replace the Christian language of 'God as Father' would result in a new religion.²³

Instead of replacing the language, Soskice is willing to draw attention to the reason why a gendered imagery is so crucial in biblical writings as well as in the liturgical tradition. She remarks that the gendered imagery found in the Bible mainly involves kinship titles like 'Father' and 'Son,' and concludes that the main purpose of the writers was not to emphasize sex but kinship, a close and loving relationship between God and human beings.²⁴ Furthermore, the way in which gendered nominations are usually applied rules out literal readings of the imagery. As an example, the image of God as a rock giving birth, with him being both the Father and the spouse of Israel, are rather effective in detaching the metaphor from univocal anthropomorphic interpretations.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Will these answers satisfy feminists who have been worried about the masculinism of the Trinitarian doctrine? Feminists such as Luce Irigaray who wish to find an essential establishment of human sexual difference in the sexual difference that occurs at the divine level will certainly be disappointed. The Trinitarian doctrine does not justify assigning sexual difference univocally

²⁰ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 124.

²¹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 141.

²² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 142.

²³ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 73.

²⁴ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 4–5, 78.

²⁵ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 76, 78–79. However, she seems to disregard the fact that in the New Testament the designation 'Lord' is used about twice as often as the designation 'Father.' 'Lord' is a strong expression of authority and gender without any associations to kinship.

to the Trinity. Instead of that, a feminist could be relieved that the Trinitarian doctrine does not describe divinity as one, or three, distant divine men but rather as one God in three persons, which transcends human gender definitions. The Trinitarian God is present in his creation, especially as being born into this world – in a male body but through a female body. The Trinitarian doctrine asserts that both sexes can be employed as instruments of God's holy work and therefore neither of them as embodied beings is alien to God or excluded from union with him. The most spiritual event of the incarnation was at the same time a thoroughly bodily event. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity breaks the boundaries between spiritual and embodied reality.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model for understanding the concept of difference. The difference between the persons of the Trinity is not contrary to their unity but rather a force that draws them to each other in reciprocal love, from which the whole of creation originates. Although we cannot apply divine reality to human life univocally, it can open up for us a potential perspective in which difference is not necessarily seen as separating and alienating. Instead, some forms of difference should rather be understood as being of a connecting nature, and therefore good as such.

However, this view does not claim that all differences function this way. Some produce alienation, discrimination and oppression. Perhaps all differences are capable of engendering these conditions if misinterpreted and misused, if the goodness or likeness of God is attributed to one part of the difference and wickedness correspondingly to the other. But if God as a perfectly good being contains difference within himself, it follows that human differences, such as the sexual difference between men and women, can be considered as essentially good as well, as a part of the richness of divine self-expression. Sexual difference could be seen as a connecting force, not as discriminating but as binding humankind together through marriage and families, and producing new life. In that case rejecting sexual difference in an attempt to resist discrimination and oppression would be a mistake. A more fruitful approach would be to strengthen those interpretations of sexual difference that emphasize both sexes as an *imago Dei* of the Trinitarian God.

Celebrating the Neuroscientific Body Sacramentally: *Reading the Body as Sacrament – A Radical Incarnational Theo-logos*

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy of religion can embrace the discoveries of neuroscience and thereby endorse these scientific texts, whilst offering a prophetic discord with regards to the reading of these texts. Certain neuroscientific discoveries are arguing for a radical immanence or total material embodiment, as everything can be explained via the internal neurological functioning of the body/brain. However, if one understands the body as text, how does this radical embodiment differ from the radical immanence of Derrida's famous statement that there is nothing beyond the text? This would open the way to interpreting the radical embodiment or materialism of neuroscience as something inter- and intra-textual with no beyond the text. Yet Derrida's famous statement is part of his auto-deconstructive reading of texts within their contexts and thus there is a radical openness towards the other (alterity), because of *différance*. The task of philosophy of religion is to challenge the one-dimensional (closed/conclusive) reading of these texts (body as text), and rather argue for the radical openness of texts as something that is internal to the grammar of the text itself. In reading the body as a text, a neuroscientific text, such a reading remains fundamentally open to various readings thereby not denying the discoveries of science, but embracing these discoveries as texts in need of reading. It is in the reading of these texts that philosophy of religion can play an important role – not in the traditional sense of bringing to the reading al-

ternative normative texts, but exploring the structures of texts and in the structural make-up of these texts discovering the role of faith, trust and hope in both the construction and reading of texts. This exploration of the fundamental structures of texts will focus on Derrida's 'grammar of faith' and thus celebrate the neuroscientific texts whilst reading them sacramentally.

KEYWORDS

neuroscience, Derrida, Laruelle, faith, science, postfoundational epistemology, body, text

In this article I will suggest that Wentzel van Huyssteen's proposal of a postfoundationalist epistemological space can facilitate a respectful and meaningful conversation, or as he argues, a fruitful duet between science and religion.¹ In *Duet or duel?* he follows the developments in evolutionary epistemology² to argue for a postfoundationalist epistemological space where there is an acute awareness and appreciation that no single reasoning strategy can sufficiently house the complexity of human rationality.³

On the question of the development of the human mind/rationality (evolutionary epistemology) and the subsequent arguments for free will, consciousness and responsibility, there are two main streams of arguments that can be broadly identified. The first is that everything can be explained biologically⁴ which can be described as a naturalist argument or as radical bodily immanence. The second stream argues that human rationality is too complex a phenomenon, taking into account the diverse reasoning strategies that the human mind is capable of. The human mind that can develop reasoning strategies for diverse fields such as science, music and art cannot be ex-

¹ J.W. Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel? Theology and Science in the Postmodern World* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

² See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 134.

³ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, xiv.

⁴ See for example: M. Arbib, 'Towards a Neuroscience of the Person,' in: R.J. Russel et al. (eds.), *Neuroscience and the Person* (Berkeley, Calif.: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, and the Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999), 77–100; B. Libet, 'Do We Have Free Will?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/8–9, 1999, pp. 47–57; D.F. Swaab, 2001, 'Hersenen, bewustzijn en geloof: neurobiologische aspecten [Brain, Consciousness, and Faith: Neurobiological Aspects],' in: P. Oomen et al. (eds.), *Hersenen – Bewustzijn – Zicht op onszelf* [Brain – Consciousness – Image of Ourselves], (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2001), 75–95.

plained in simple terms by taking evolutionary biology alone into account. To take this complexity into account other metaphors evolved to explain the development of human rationality such as emergence, complexity, creativity, etcetera which transcends purely biological evolution.⁵ It is clear and all agree that biology is the *necessary cause*,⁶ but where there is disagreement is as to whether biology is the *sufficient cause*.⁷ These two different readings can be compared to either a purely intra-textual reading (evolutionary biology) alone or an inter-textual reading where evolutionary biology is only one aspect, the necessary cause of human rationality, but certainly not the sufficient cause and thus conversation with other disciplines is necessary. To really understand the emergence of the complexity of the human mind various disciplines enter in an inter-disciplinary conversation or inter-textual reading of the text (body as text) and context or text (body) in context (environment).

Van Huyssteen argues that it is the quest for understanding the complexity of the human mind itself, evolutionary epistemology,⁸ which guides us towards this space where inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary conversations are necessary to understand the complexity of the human mind.⁹ In this space he proposes a postfoundational epistemology¹⁰ which allows for various reasoning strategies to interact with each other in conversation. He argues that evolutionary epistemology yields the kind of postfoundationalist, comprehensive epistemology that is necessary to respond to the challenges of postmodernity and help us rediscover the resources of human rationality that are shared deeply by both theology and science.¹¹ What Van Huyssteen discovers in evolutionary epistemology is a way to think and facilitate the challenge of a constructive form of postmodernism: 'the need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to the problem of human knowledge.'¹²

⁵ See S. Conway Morris *The Crucible of Creation: The Burgess Shale and the Rise of Animals* (New York: OUP, 1998); S. Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (New York: CUP, 2003); I. Steward, *Life's Other Secret: The New Mathematics of the Living World* (New York: John Wiley, 1998).

⁶ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, xiv.

⁷ See P. Clayton, 'Emergence from physics to theology: toward a panoramic view,' *Zygon* 41/3 (September 2006), 680 & F.M. Wuketits, *Evolutionary Epistemology: Its Implications for Humankind* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

⁸ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 132.

⁹ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 24.

¹⁰ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 7-8.

¹¹ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 134.

¹² See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 135.

It is in this postfoundational space that he argues theology can come to the conversation and enter into a fruitful and graceful duet with science. From science there are the metaphors of complexity theory, quantum physics, emergence, creativity and from theology there are the metaphors of Creator, intelligent design, etcetera. These metaphors are all acceptable and welcomed to the table because they are based on reasonable (sufficient) reasoning strategies that can be mutually respected and accepted by the various sciences towards a postfoundational conversation and these sufficient reasoning strategies¹³ allows the various disciplines with their diverse metaphors to sing in the cross-disciplinary choir.

To explain the complex connection between evolutionary biology and cultural evolution, science has offered various immanent metaphors, for example: complexity, emergence, quantum theory, etcetera. Some of these metaphors might currently be the best theories/metaphors, for example as Helrich¹⁴ argues that theoretical physics offers the best mathematical equations to understand the world and yet it needs to be kept in mind that science is not the final mathematical equation with which to understand and interpret the world as was believed in modernity and therefore the space is opened for postfoundational inter- and intra-textual reading of the world or humanity. Helrich argues that theoretical physics certainly seeks such a mathematical equation, but he adds that such an equation will never be written on a piece of paper and so the search to find the one 'correct' mathematical equation with which to comprehend the world and the self is impossible. Wigner argued that mathematics is the language for formulating the laws of physics with which humanity is able to understand the universe.¹⁵ In response to Wigner and Helrich, the question could be asked: is mathematics the language of the universe? The universe itself is beyond language and beyond mathematics, because all we have is the text/equation/symbol/sign/formula as there is no outside text.¹⁶ So even though, as Helrich argues, quantum theory certainly seems to be the best mathematical language with which

¹³ See Van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel?*, 34, 129. See also J.W. van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 150.

¹⁴ C.S. Helrich, 'On the limitations and promise of quantum theory for comprehension of human knowledge and consciousness,' *Zygon* 4/3 (2006), 545.

¹⁵ E. Wigner, 'The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,' *Communication in Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13/1 (1960), 14.

¹⁶ See J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1997), 158.

to understand the universe as it is the most effective tool to understand, it remains a metaphor and therefore the need for postfoundational conversation remains.

These different metaphors seek to understand the world and humanity. Some of these metaphors seek to do this without a return of supernatural arguments or arguments for metaphysical being and others are open to supernatural arguments thereby opening the space for theology to enter into the conversation. Theology can therefore bring to the table her metaphors of God, but to what purpose? Is this a form of apologetics using the gaps or uncertainties in science to justify faith in God? Is the language of theology, specifically the Scriptural based theological language, truly useful to help understand and interpret scientific challenges? What contribution does theology offer the scientific conversation? What does theology have to offer the scientific discussion on the evolution of humanity? Can the theological concept of the *Imago Dei* truly contribute to the scientific discourse or is the conversation a struggle on the side of theology to identify where exactly in the scientific discussion the image of God would be appropriate: a theology of the gaps? Or is it a unilateral conversation where science offers the paradigms and the language/metaphors in which to think about certain things, God, creation, miracles, soul, afterlife and the image of God, etcetera and then theology frantically tries to accommodate her metaphors to this scientific language? It can also be argued that this duet is an appeasing time-filler to keep the religions (a powerful force in contemporary culture) on board until science does find some answers that are maybe more useful than the current answers and then what happens to theology?

Yet, just because science (evolutionary epistemology) itself points towards a postfoundational inter-textual reading it does not automatically entail an element of the supra-natural text. It does not exclude it, but nor does it include it – certain things cannot yet be explained, but that does not translate into the existence of some supra-natural being or even a metaphysical Being or God. Evolutionary epistemology does not necessarily include supra-natural elements just because it cannot conclusively explain the complex connection between biological evolution and cultural evolution.

Therefore, although one recognises the role of experience, tradition and metaphor in all knowledge there is a bias towards science as offering the ultimate ‘rational language’ or the *most* sufficient reasoning strategies and therefore all other languages needs to be in response to this rational language that has proven itself through its utility and technological prowess. This bias

I can accept, but it only accentuates the question: what can theology offer in the postfoundationalist conversation? I will argue that theology does not have much to offer science, because it is not a scientific discourse and thus the concepts such as image of God, creation, God, etcetera are not scientific statements, but utterances of faith. Is Christian theology, as based in Scriptures, necessarily about a supernatural Being? Is Christian theology a 'science' about a metaphysical Being or is Christian theology, as founded in Scripture, a science of faith in response to revelation as Karl Barth¹⁷ argued. One could argue that Christian theology focusses on the revelation of the Word (Christ) in Scripture. Thus Scripture as the basis for theology does not offer anything concerning science (physics) or anything concerning metaphysics, because it was not written as a physical (scientific) or metaphysical treatise, but it is about the Word of God (Christ) as witnessed to in scripture. In other words, it is about God's revelation of God-self in the immanence of Christ in the history of the world.

I would rather propose that Theology (with its focus on the Word made flesh) can embrace the radical immanence of natural science and therefore endorse the scientific text full heartedly and enter into the intra- and interdisciplinary postfoundational conversation without any attempt to read the Other, as super-natural or metaphysical Being. All we have is the text,¹⁸ hereby not denying the existence of an Other or other as every other is wholly other,¹⁹ but denying that one can make any conclusive statements concerning the other who is also wholly Other. If the insights of linguistic theory are taken into account then both naturalism and supernaturalism are texts seeking to understand the Other who is every other.²⁰ Thus, there is no dualism and there is no duel, but if anything there is One (various texts) and a unilateral duality as both naturalism and supernaturalism unilaterally, in Laruelle's sense, confront – not the Other (because the Other always comes to mind as text), but the future.²¹ Or as Žižek argues, that things do not merely appear; they appear to appear, thereby 'concealing the fact that they

¹⁷ K. Barth, *God in Action*, transl. E. G. Homrighausen & K.J. Ernst (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937) 3ff.

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

¹⁹ J. Derrida, 'Sauf le nom,' in: J. Derrida & T. Dutoit (ed.), *On the Name*, transl. D. Wood, (Stanford: University Press, 1995), 76.

²⁰ Derrida, 'Sauf le nom,' 76.

²¹ F. Laruelle, 'What can non-philosophy do?', transl. R Brassier, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 8/2 (2003), 181.

are what they appear.²² This double framing conceals the fact that things *are* what they appear.

Therefore the immanent reading of science remains inconclusive concerning the other (reality) and it is necessarily grammatically so because of *différance*. Every other is wholly other, Derrida argues, and therefore science cannot provide conclusive answers just as there cannot be conclusive answers to the question of theism or for that matter on the question of atheism. So at best one is perhaps left with speculative realism as Quentin Meillassoux²³ argues. In his speculative realism he has created the space for the possibility of a future God.²⁴ My question is: does theology want to engage in this speculative realism or with the possibility of speculative super-realism somewhere in the future? My answer is, no, and I believe that there is a strong theological tradition that would support such an emphatic *No!* A tradition that would argue that the focus of theology is not on that which cannot be known, God, but rather on that which is revealed (Christ) thus embracing the immanent text/s and contexts whilst offering prophetic discord, as these texts are never final but awaiting final judgement in the time that remains. The Christ event (alone) should be embraced in faith and grace alone. This revelation of the incarnated (immanent), crucified and resurrected Christ provides the hermeneutical key not only to Scripture, as Luther argues,²⁵ but I would argue to the postfoundationalist reading of texts and contexts as such. My vision of theology is to disengage from the speculative enterprise of either speculative realism or speculative super-realism and rather offer the world a hermeneutical key to read the grammar of texts of the world, and thereby offer an ethos of reading based on, as Laruelle argues, a science of Christ,²⁶ not in an attempt to answer questions concerning God, but with regards to the questions of the world in the hope of the kingdom that is still to come. The Christ event (narrative) as for example captured in the Carmen Christi (Philippians 2), read together with Derrida's understanding of language, could serve as such a

²² S. Žižek, 'A Plea for a Return of *Différance* (with a minor *pro domo sua*),' *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006), 235–236.

²³ Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on Radical Contingency*, transl. R. Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008).

²⁴ Q. Meillassoux, 'Spectral Dilemma,' *Collapse IV*, ed. R. Mackay, Urbanomic, Falmouth, 2008, 261–276.

²⁵ See P. Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 6. Auflage 1983), 73.

²⁶ F. Laruelle, 'A Science of Christ,' paper presented at the Grandeur of Reason: Religion, tradition and universalism conference in Rome, 1–4 September 2008.

science of reading the texts of the One, as that is all there is, because any thinking of the Other is still in language, the language of the same/One. This is the contribution that theology can offer the science-religion conversation, and the Scriptures as texts of faith, hope and love can hermeneutically guide and offer an ethos for inter-disciplinary reading of texts and contexts. Stuart Kauffman, in an interview with Steve Paulson,²⁷ argues for the need for a sacred science. I would argue for the need for a Christ-science, for the reading of texts and contexts at the table of the kingdom to come.

One can read the Christ event as the *Ereignis* of language and as such it is the *Ereignis* of difference.²⁸ John Schad²⁹ argues that each discourse can be read as an allegory or a re-writing of the other and it is possible because they are intertexts and one cannot read the one without the other. It is as Derrida argues,³⁰ when one no longer knows what is an example of what then literature has begun as literature has always already begun. The Christ narrative will be read together with Derrida's understanding of *différance*, and the two will interpret each other. What makes such mutual interpretation both possible and impossible is that the grammar of *différance* and the trace is best described in the grammar of faith, promise, hope and thus prayer, and these Biblical texts have as their content narratives concerning faith, promise, hope and prayer and therefore they can function as exemplary texts of *différance*. These texts' (Jewish-Christian Scriptures) 'truth' is not their metaphysical or onto-theological reference, but the 'truth' of language just as the poetic speaking of language was for Heidegger the purest (truest) form of language.³¹ For Derrida, it is prayer³² that is the speaking of language.³³ Thus one

²⁷ S. Paulson, 'God enough,' Salon.com, Wednesday, Nov 19, 2008 11:40 Am UTC, viewed from [HTTP://WWW>SALON>COM/2008/11/19/STUART_KAUFFMAN/](http://WWW>SALON>COM/2008/11/19/STUART_KAUFFMAN/) on 05.08.2012.

²⁸ John Schad, "'Hostage of the Word': Poststructuralism's Gospel intertext,' *Religion & Literatures* 25/3, 1993, 1, argues that God and speech (one could say God and writing, taking Derrida's arguments into consideration) share the same impossible beginning and therefore are always already identical, or coextensive. He argues that this becomes apparent in the Johannine Prologue, which he refers to as the Johannine heresy: that God who is Word becomes flesh (text or context). Michael Edwards reminds one that in Greek the same word is used to describe speech and Christ (M. Edwards, *Of Making Many Books* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 179). Robert Scharleman (R.P. Scharleman, 'The Being of God when God is not being God,' in: T.J.J. Altizer et al. (eds.), *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroads 1982), 102) argues that 'God is what language means and language is what God means.'

²⁹ Schad, 'Hostage of the Word,' 2.

³⁰ J. Derrida, 'Passions: 'An oblique offering,' In: T. Dutoit (ed.), *On the Name*, transl. D. Wood, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 142–143 n.14.

³¹ M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

can say that prayer, faith, promise and hope are the speaking of language. The 'truth' of these Scriptural texts therefore is not in their reference, but because they are narratives concerning faith, promise, hope and prayer they are exemplary of the grammar of writing and therefore they become exemplary texts of language and exemplary texts of texts and of contexts. As exemplary texts they are necessary for the understanding and interpreting and opening of contexts – the 'reality' of the world.

The Christ narrative can be used as an exemplary narrative, not to prove the truth of a historical Jesus, but to understand and interpret, deconstruct the texts of the world (context), by using the Christ narrative to read and re-read the texts of all that is and in that sense discover the 'truth' of these narratives, irrespective of their reference to which no one has conclusive access, but 'truthful' in the sense of useful interpretation (deconstruction) of reality (context) because of their grammar of faith, prayer, promise and messiah to come. In that sense the Christ narrative is perhaps exemplary of the story of language and as story of language it is exemplary of the story of the world (history of the world).³⁴

It begins with the incarnation of the God, the Logos, who becomes flesh – in other words, God pitches God's tent in human history. God the transcendent becomes immanent in the context of human history. The Word (transcendental signified) becomes words, texts, writing, *différance* as it enters human history and thus it becomes vulnerable.³⁵ The Word becomes flesh so there is no outside text anymore, only a trace of the Other (Father), of an immemorial past never present and a future always still to come.³⁶

³² Derrida argues that the God of negative theology is worth saving and secondly the prayer of negative theology needs to be translated for everyone (see Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, 46–48).

³³ See J. Derrida, 'How to avoid speaking: Denials,' P. Kamuf & E. Rottenberg (eds.), *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* Vol II, transl. K. Frieden & E. Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 143–195.

³⁴ John Schad, as already discussed above, interprets the Johannine Prologue in this light. Charles Winquist argues something similar when he says that 'The death of God..... is the birth of the Word' (Schad, *Hostage of the Word*, 2). Schad continues and argues that the Johannine incarnation and the postmodern or poststructuralist situation might be described, it seems, in one and the same way (Schad, *Hostage of the Word*, 2).

³⁵ '...that Christ, as the Word, does not so much put himself beyond language but rather that he endures all its frailties. Indeed, this very life and ministry – characterized as they are by discontinuities, displacements, and misinterpretations – parallels closely the fate, or itinerary, of the Derridean sign' (Schad, *Hostage of the Word*, 4).

³⁶ See Derrida's discussion on the trace in J. Derrida, *Margins of philosophy*, transl A. Bass, (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 12, 21.

This incarnate Word (this inscription of writing) becomes vulnerable like a baby in a crib. It becomes vulnerable to the wounding of *différance*, the wounding of the other. The incarnate word is opened (wounded, vulnerable) to the *tout autre*, which is every other.³⁷

Yet it is particularly vulnerable to the big other (the powers that be), the imperial forces that seek to be or represent the Transcendent as *the* transcendental signified. However, the big other is conscious of the fact that it does not have perfect access to the transcendent and that it is not the ultimate presentation or representation of the transcendent and therefore knows that its power is only as temporary as the myth survives.³⁸

These forces of the various big others hear of the Word made flesh and they are threatened in a dual sense. Firstly they are threatened by the idea of a possible other's attempt at being *the* transcendental signified (big other) that might be more powerful than they and therefore they need to destroy this potential before it rises to power, or secondly they are threatened by the possibility that if it truly is the transcendental signified (the Word) that has become flesh, become *context* and text as is inscribed, that would mean that all power will be threatened as all power rests on a foundational myth that has forgotten that it is a myth and that there is no 'true' legitimization of power on the basis of a transcendental signifier (truth), as there is no transcendental signifier but only a quasi-transcendental that deconstructs.³⁹

How right these imperial forces were with regards to this incarnate word that had entered their *context* (history) and thus had fatally wounded their power and authority. This inscription (archi-inscription – incarnation of the Word) had fatally wounded any claims to power based on metaphysics: a single cause our ground. The incarnate Word began his ministry in the context of Palestine, the context of imperial forces (Roman universal imperialism and Pharisaic particular imperialism). His ministry (activity) challenged and deconstructed these systems of power and control and thus the animosity grew between the powers that be and Jesus (the incarnate Word – the inscribed

³⁷ Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, 76.

³⁸ See Derrida's discussion on Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* in: J. Derrida, 'Force of law: The "mystical foundation of authority,"' in: G. Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* transl. M. Quaintance (London: Routledge, 2002), 228–298.

³⁹ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. follows a similar path in his book *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, where he argues that what was exposed was the 'unfounded foundation of the law and thus renders it deconstructable' (see T.W. Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 61).

text)⁴⁰. The only solution for these powers that be was to destroy this inscription that challenged or deconstructed their power. Jesus (the inscribed/incarnated Word – archi-writing) fundamentally questioned their power as he reinscribed the myths of their power. He fundamentally challenged the metaphysics of their thinking and their system and therefore he was crucified as the greatest criminal⁴¹ by the imperial forces of that time.⁴²

What makes this possible – this semi-translation of the story of Christ into the story of *différance*⁴³? It is because *différance*, and more specifically deconstruction as an effect of *différance*, is impassioned by the messianic (the other still to come) and thus the messianic story fits, the difference being that the Christian believes that the messiah did come and *différance* holds onto the fact that the messiah is always still to come.

The crucifixion: It is not the sign (the incarnate Word) that is crucified, but the messiah⁴⁴. Christ is not crucified because of being the incarnate word (writing/*différance*), but he is crucified because of the disruption and deconstruction this writing causes in the text or *context* and thereby challenges the powers that be. The Word incarnate, as argued above, translates into speech, signs, the inscription, archi-writing (flesh) and consequently the undecidability of the play of *différance*. This play of *différance* deconstructed the powers that be and it was because of this ultimate criminality (deconstruction) that Jesus was crucified as he challenged the metaphysical foundations of the authority of the powers that be by revealing them to be powerless inscriptions and thus re-inscribing them into the play of undecidability.

⁴⁰ See John Caputo's book, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, where he brings the ideas of deconstruction and *différance* into dialogue with the ministry of Jesus and per implication the ministry of the church. J.D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁴¹ See Derrida's discussion on Walter Benjamin's discussion on the ultimate criminal, in Derrida, *Critique of Violence*.

⁴² See 1 Corinthians 2:8, where Paul makes it clear that the agents of the crucifixion were the rulers of this age.

⁴³ As Eric Ives argues, deconstruction is not a bad master, but a necessary servant for Christianity (E. Ives, 'Modern historical scholarship and the Christian Gospel,' *The Glass* 6 (1972), 65), or as Schad argues, deconstruction is the fate of Christianity (Schad, *Hostage of the Word*, 7).

⁴⁴ Jennings also argues that the cross is a verdict against the messiah and that the execution of the messiah is exemplary (Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, 65). He argues this in the context of the law-gospel debate in Paul and that the law has to be deconstructed for justice to be possible. 'That the wedge driven between justice and the law is precisely the execution of the messiah is, of course explicitly affirmed in Galatians (2: 21)' (Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, 64).

The powers that be responded to this deconstruction, seeking to arrest this undecidability, trying to arrest the certainty of uncertainty that questioned their certainties. It is this grammar that they sought to arrest and destroy so that they could return to their certainties. It is the *way, the truth and the life*⁴⁵, which is the grammar of all that is with nothing beyond (text and context), that they hoped to destroy by crucifying Christ.

The Messiah (messianic way) was crucified, this *way, life and truth* was crucified, crossed out, erased. Within the story of the text or in the context, the messiah was crucified by the two powers according to the legal functioning of the Roman and Jewish law, but theologically it is also argued that God (*tout autre*) crucified him and yet it was God who was crucified⁴⁶. Therefore it was the Other (God) who crucified the messiah so as to save the Other (God) and the same. One could argue that the cross is the death of the death of God, which does not translate into the life of God, but maybe the life of God as understood as the endless desertification of language⁴⁷.

Différance, like God, needs saving from becoming the final Word: the certainty of certainty which would indeed be death namely the end of play as Schad⁴⁸ argues. If the transcendent (the Word) is incarnate (there is no outside text) and if the Messiah (death of God) rises to power (if différance does indeed become *the* Messiah, a new transcendental signified) then it would be the end of history, namely death: the certainty of certainty and the absolute reduction of the other to the same, of Différance with a capital D. The world would collapse, as the world that is created (*poesis*) in and of difference⁴⁹ would be without difference. Thus the death on the cross of God is not the death of the transcendental signifier as that death already occurred in the incarnation. It is the death of a capitalised Writing or Différance, the death of the Messiah who came: the death of the death of God. The death on the cross is not the certainty of certainty (death) as Schad argues, but the return of play, and therefore the certainty of uncertainty, the re-inscription of Différance into différance so that this play never rises to power. The cross ensures that différance is only ever a weak force⁵⁰ (weak messiah) who has no

⁴⁵ In reference to John 14:6

⁴⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 200–274.

⁴⁷ See Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, 56.

⁴⁸ See Schad, *Hostage and Word*, 10ff.

⁴⁹ See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 200.

⁵⁰ See J.D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

power and yet all power comes from him⁵¹: a quasi-transcendental and never *the* Transcendental.

In a sense one can say the Messiah came and did not come, and Christians still await him/her (the second coming) – an important aspect in the story of Christ and *différance* so that *différance* does not become a capitalised transcendental signifier, but remains, if anything, a quasi-transcendental. Christ, a quasi-Messiah, who came and is still to come and thus opens the space of history in the time that remains.

Différance crucifies (deconstructs) any attempt to be the final judgment (transcendental signified) and opens the space for the messiah still to come (second coming). The trace of the other who has not been heard, who has no place⁵², and thus any theology based on the Christ event, that uses the name of God, is haunted by a democracy still to come (hearing the other who has not been heard), by justice still to come (offering the other a place who has no place) and offers hospitality to the unheard, place-less other. In such a context of offering hospitality to the other, of praying for justice and democracy still to come, it is impossible to rise to an imperial power.

This is exactly where Theology, and specifically the Word of God (Christ), can help and offer an important contribution to the conversation. Theology thus does not provide us with interesting ideas (metaphors) about the Other that can engage in a fruitful duet with science, because such ideas, as Luther says, can only lead to the devil⁵³, but theology rather provides a hermeneutical key (Christ event) to read the grammar of the texts rather than speculate about that which is beyond.

Theology thus does not sing the duet with science about the Other, but offers the sciences the hermeneutics (science of reading) and ethos for a cross-disciplinary postfoundational conversation.

In this article I have sought to propose the postmetaphysical turn towards language in the thoughts of Derrida as a more useful space and maybe theologically 'more suitable space' for theology to engage in the postfoundational conversation with the other sciences rather than to seek to sing a duet with science on metaphysical or super-natural questions, where the possibility always remains that the duet turns into a duel. Furthermore to rather facilitate the space where this postfoundational conversation as unilateral dual-

⁵¹ In reference to Jesus' response to Pilate see John 19:11.

⁵² Matthew 25:45.

⁵³ See Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 33.

ity, turns not towards speculation concerning the Other of metaphysics, but towards the future that can only be faced in faith, hope and love – the three gifts of the Spirit⁵⁴. It is the Christ event that offers and guides such a reading (faith, hope and love) of the texts and contexts of the world towards a more just interpretation (justice understood as offering hospitality towards those who have no voice or place).

The task of theology is not to seek to argue for the truth of metaphysical arguments over against the arguments of science, but rather that theology redefines her ancient role as queen of the sciences who in the past invited the various disciplines to her royal court. Today a more suitable biblical image might be the inclusive kingdom table of the feast or celebration of communion where ever more are invited to share the body of texts. At this inclusive table to offer a hermeneutical key (a science of Christ) to read and deconstruct (crucify) the body of texts in the postfoundational epistemological space for the multi- or Cross-disciplinary conversation and to drink of the wine of the new covenant of hope, faith and love. Theology is not the Queen of the sciences playing an imperial role as an absolute monarch with regards to the content of the arguments and thereby having the right to determine what is right or wrong, but rather liturgically facilitating the space by providing the hermeneutical key to unpack the grammar for the conversation and playing, if anything, the role of the court jester or holy fool⁵⁵ and thereby deconstructing or crucifying the absolute laws that seek to hold all that is captive to a single theory or metaphor.

This Christ science guided by the metaphor of the sacrament of the table can perhaps provide an ethos for interdisciplinary conversation where every knee will bow at the name of the crucified Christ in humility and acknowledgement of the vulnerability of all our knowledge constructions, but in the spirit of hope, faith and love and an openness to the future of the kingdom always still to come.

⁵⁴ See 1 Corinthians 13.13.

⁵⁵ See J.-A. Meylahn, *The Limits and Possibilities of Postmetaphysical God-talk: A Conversation between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 321ff.

‘Theologies of the Body’ *Devotional Fitness in US Evangelicalism*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents cases of religious embodiment which are concrete corporeal manifestations of ‘theologies of the body.’ Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, US evangelicals have developed biblically based dieting and fitness programs which offer a ‘Christian alternative’ to the ‘secular’ fitness and dieting world. These regimens blend elements of bible study and exercise routines, drawing their spiritual authority from divine inspiration. It is not just in well-known liturgical contexts that the presence of God is made sensually perceivable. The often physically exhausting workout routines are considered as ‘spending time with God’ and ‘taking care of God’s temple, your body’ and will be analyzed from the perspective of the embodiment paradigm.

KEYWORDS

devotional fitness, evangelicalism, embodiment, religion and sports,
American religion

INTRODUCTION

The 19th conference of the ESPR was dedicated to ‘Embodied Religion’ and it was based on the underlying thesis that ‘religion is always embodied in various ways.’ Setting out from this statement, this paper will present cases of

religious embodiment which are peculiar as it is unequivocal for both participants and researchers that they are dealing with concrete, very practical and corporeal ‘in-corporations’ of ‘theologies of the body.’

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, US evangelicals have developed biblically based dieting and fitness programs which offer a ‘Christian alternative’ to the ‘secular’ fitness and dieting world.¹ These regimens consciously blend elements of bible studies and exercise routines, drawing their spiritual authority from divine inspiration. This fashion of religiously disciplining the body mirrors in many ways commonly accepted body standards of contemporary western societies.

Such programs provide evidence of the assumption that the relationship between God and the believer is not just of a spiritual kind but may be physically enacted. Just as religious frameworks structure issues of sexuality, reproduction and family, they also inform concepts of health and disease. In the case under observation, health is unmistakably associated with a slender and fit body while disease lurks in sugar and fat.

The goal of this paper is to illustrate how religion ‘does not only change the human mind’ but also ‘affects the human body,’² by describing the ‘religious’ imperative of exercising and slimming down.³ I will hence present some first ideas from my doctoral thesis which is supervised in the Department of Religion at Muenster University.

For this purpose, I will start with examples from the field that I observed in the fall of 2011 in the USA (chapter 2). After that, the embodiment paradigm will be introduced (chapter 3). I suggest to distinguish concepts of embodiment *sensu lato* and *sensu stricto* and then apply the latter in an exemplary fashion to the before described phenomena (chapter 4).

Most observers, academics and non-academics alike, when confronted with devotional fitness, immediately criticize these programs for their seemingly naïve attitude towards contemporary slimness ideals and the potential health hazards inherent to every program in favor of slimming down and losing weight. I wholeheartedly agree with this criticism. In this paper, how-

¹ Ruth Marie Griffith has, from a historical perspective, extensively dealt with these groups in *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley 2004).

² As the Call for Papers for the ESPR conference phrased it.

³ Gregor Schrettle has analyzed this religious imperative in Gwen Shamblin’s organization called ‘Weigh Down Workshop,’ see Gregor Schrettle, *Gwen Shamblin’s Dieting Religion and America’s Puritan Legacy* (Essen 2006).

ever, I will restrict myself to referencing influential critics while focusing on other matters of interest.⁴

‘BOD4GOD,’ ‘BODY & SOUL,’ ‘FIRST PLACE 4 HEALTH’

Bod4God is a book⁵ and weight-loss program published in 2009 and designed by Steve Reynolds, Pastor of Capital Baptist Church in Annandale, VA, in the outskirts of Washington, DC. Reynolds raised considerable interest by the media and his program was subject to public debates.⁶ Reynolds, labeled the ‘Anti-Fat Pastor’ by the media, dealt with serious weight and health issues himself before he discovered that the solution to overweight shall be found in the Bible. A keyword search for the word ‘body’ produced 179 incidents.⁷ A subject which is discussed that often in biblical texts, Reynolds concluded, must be of importance in God’s eyes.

In his book, Reynolds developed ‘four keys’ to succeed in weight-loss. These keys are:

- (1) Dedication – ‘honoring God with your body,’
- (2) Inspiration – ‘motivating yourself for change,’
- (3) Eat and Exercise – ‘managing your habits,’
- (4) Team – ‘building your circle of support.’

His book, a ‘theology of the body,’ lays the groundwork for weight-loss oriented competitions called ‘Losing to Live.’ These events originated in Reynolds’ congregation and have been implemented in other churches in the US as well, e.g. in the Independent Bible Church in Martinsburg, WV, the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Floresville, TX, and The Journey Church in New York, NY. They take place over a period of twelve weeks and include groups competing against each other about how much weight they lose together. Every week, on Sundays, the groups get together in the church to celebrate last week’s winners, to meet their small groups, spend time in prayer and bible study, and learn about healthy living and eating right.

⁴ See, e.g. Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Nashville 1992) and Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image* (New York 2008).

⁵ Steve Reynolds, *Bod4God: The Four Keys to Weight Loss* (Ventura 2009).

⁶ See e.g. Jacqueline L. Salmon, ‘An Almighty Weight Loss,’ *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2008. Likewise, Reynolds has been discussed on the popular TV show ‘The View,’ hosted by Barbara Walters, Whoopi Goldberg, Joy Behar, Elisabeth Hasselbeck und Sherri Shepherd.

⁷ Reynolds, *Bod4God*, 22–23.

Reynolds cooperates with two large organizations of devotional fitness: 'Body & Soul Fitness' and 'First Place 4 Health.' The first one focuses on fitness classes and working out. They have developed fitness routines choreographed to Christian praise music, combined with communal prayer and sharing. 'First Place 4 Health,' on the other hand, is a Christian diet program based on small group meetings and bible study.

'Body & Soul Fitness – Where Faith and Fitness Meet' was developed in 1981 by Jeannie and Roy Blocher from Germantown, MD. Their goal is to 'encourage you to pursue both physical and spiritual fitness, wherever you are in the world.'⁸ They start from the assumption that '[f]itness involves more than just your body' and that 'developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is part of being a good steward of this "physical body" we've been given.' Therefore they place a major emphasis on exercise classes that are designed to 'help you get (and stay) in shape.' They assume that 'there is more to fitness than a great workout' and hence seek to affect all other areas of life by following a 'truly holistic approach to fitness because there is a tangible connection between the physical and spiritual dimensions of our lives.'⁹

What are the effects pursued in Body & Soul? First, the program wants to 'energize' participants for 'physical strength and spiritual energy.' They also intend to help members 'grow stronger physically' and 'discover God's plan for your life.' Apart from that, and supporting these effects, the program provides information on how to lead and maintain a 'healthy and active life.'¹⁰

Lynne Gerber has researched 'First Place 4 Health' extensively in a recent publication.¹¹ Style and rhetoric of this program are strongly reminiscent of popular weight-loss programs such as 'WeightWatchers' with the exception that, in First Place 4 Health, extensive bible study and scripture memorization play a crucial role. Participants regularly meet over a period of twelve weeks. Getting together as a group and sharing their troubles and worries is considered an important element. Intimacy and mutual trust are nourished and cherished. A central 'ritual' is the 'weighing in' right at the beginning of

⁸ Body & Soul, 'Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet' [<http://bodyandsoul.org/>, accessed July 17, 2011].

⁹ Body & Soul, 'Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet.'

¹⁰ Body & Soul, 'Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet.'

¹¹ Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago 2012).

each small group meeting. Participants are required to step on the scales and recite a scripture verse.¹²

One of the first questions proponents of devotional fitness have to deal with is: What does fitness have to do with faith? Among the most common arguments, proponents of devotional fitness programs will often employ the idea that God cares about everything his followers do – ‘everything’ specifically includes issues of eating and weight. Carol Showalter, designer of the ‘3D’ plan (short for ‘Diet, Discipline and Discipleship’), e.g., writes on her homepage, ‘The Bible says that He cares about sparrows, and even about the hair on your head! So why wouldn’t God care about my struggles with eating?’¹³

Besides many other arguments which I do not have the space to elaborate here, founders and leaders of such programs usually stress that our bodies are God’s instruments on earth and that Christians can only fulfill their mission if they are physically and spiritually fit.

An important argument in favor of Christian fitness programs that is more apt to convince skeptic ‘insiders’ is the need to evangelize. Reynolds, author of *Bod4God* does not conceal that this is a prominent intention behind his concept.¹⁴ People that usually would not approach a church might nonetheless feel attracted to fitness and healthy living and thus interact more easily with evangelical milieus than they would usually do.

EMBODIMENT AS A PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Embodiment as a terminological figure has been known for quite some time in anthropology, ethnology and the study of religion, yet on a more general level compared to the approach I wish to focus on here. For instance, Clifford Geertz’s now classical definition of religion as a cultural system understands ‘symbols’ as ‘tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, *concrete embodiments* of ideas, atti-

¹² This ritual has been analyzed by Lynne Gerber, ‘Weigh-In,’ *Frequenci.es* [<http://frequenci.es/2012/01/02/weigh-in/>, accessed January 3, 2012].

¹³ Carol Showalter & Maggie Davis, ‘The 3D Plan: Eat Right, Live Well, Love God,’ [<http://www.3dyourwholelife.com/lovegod.php>, accessed July 17, 2012].

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Bod4God*, 203.

tudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.”¹⁵ Thomas Luckmann, too, thinks of symbols as ‘incorporations of a different reality in the ordinary [reality].’¹⁶

When Luckmann and Geertz talk of ‘embodiment’ or ‘incorporation,’ they harness a version of the concept which I refer to as ‘embodiment *sensu lato*.’ Quite certainly, they do not associate ‘embodiment’ exclusively with the fleshly matter of being, the corporeal reality of human experience. More generally, they consider symbols as *metaphorically* tangible concepts that have left the world of ‘ideas, attitudes, judgments,’ etc. and have been ‘objectified’ to the extent that they are now a more or less standardized form of everyday communication.

The notion of ‘embodiment *sensu lato*’ draws attention to the fact that mental or cognitive notions require ‘tangible’ manifestations, metaphorically and, in addition, literally, to impact individuals and society. This idea is fundamental to the emergence of embodiment as a paradigm. In this restricted use of the term – embodiment *sensu stricto* – the concept refers to the concrete fleshly body, tangible in a very literal sense, and prone to visual, haptic, auditory etc. perceptions. Translating this idea to religion, Matti Kamppinen defines: ‘Embodied religion is [...] something that involves actively engaged religious bodies, performing rituals, or otherwise communicating with supernatural entities. Embodied religion is religion as it is studied in respectable fieldwork-based ethnography. Embodied religion is not a specific type of religion, but rather a research setting, where religious bodies are studied by means of interview and participant observation.”¹⁷ It is noteworthy, I think, that Kamppinen focuses on the corporeal bodies of both actors and researchers in the ‘religious field’ and thus acknowledges the role of the scholar’s physical presence in the field.

With this distinction in mind, it is easier to review the manifold approaches labeled ‘embodiment.’ Albeit simplified and dichotomized, it may be a useful tool in academic discussions where it is not always made explicit how broad the term ‘embodiment’ should or should not be understood. The rather diffuse notion of embodiment as something both ‘metaphorical’ and ‘literal,’ to my mind, impedes efficient inter- and cross-disciplinary communication, let alone unambiguous interaction with non-academic circles.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System,’ in: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 2009), 87–125, esp. 91–94 (italics added).

¹⁶ Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (Frankfurt 1967), 175–76 (italics added).

¹⁷ Matti Kamppinen, ‘The Concept of Body in Religious Studies,’ in: Tore Ahlbäck, *Religion and the Body* (Åbo 2011), 206–215, esp. 209.

Indeed, when entering the debate beyond academe, ‘embodiment *sensu stricto*’ might be an apt point of departure to get across scholarly notions of materialization and objectification of ‘purely’ mental concepts and ideas. The actual physical body, according to this paradigm, is the inevitable locus of manifestations of non-physical entities. Ideas cannot become tangible if not through and by means of the human body. In extension, the embodiment paradigm challenges exactly this notion of the ‘physical’ being separate from the ‘mental.’

In short, anthropological approaches to the ‘body’ following the embodiment paradigm in its strict sense have two major concerns. (1) They try to overcome classic mind-body-dualisms and (2) they focus on materiality and substance rather than on ideas and notions. Opposing older assumptions that the body is a function of mental processes, e.g., erudite rules of ritual, newer accounts entertain the idea that, vice versa, mental notions might themselves be a function of the body.¹⁸

Against older accounts, anthropological work following the somatic turn¹⁹ does not uphold the analytic dichotomy of ‘body’ and ‘soul,’ or of experiences related to the body and those related to the soul. Instead, research inspired by the somatic turn focuses on the fact that these positions are complementary and mutually dependent.

In a new collection on the subject, Anna Fedele and Ruy Llera Blanes propose a ‘comprehensive approach to this key point: the significance and agency behind religious conceptions of the body in their relationship with ideas of the soul. We propose to bring to the forefront of the anthropology of religion the part of the body-soul dichotomy that tended to be neglected or treated as merely accessory in many discussions of religious phenomena: the issue of corporeality in religious contexts.’²⁰

Thomas J. Csordas’ work is often reckoned among the most influential in the field of embodiment.²¹ His seminal article ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology’²² argues that ‘a paradigm of embodiment can be elaborated for

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, ‘Embodiment,’ in: Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek & Michael Stausberg (eds.), *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden 2006), 533–543, esp. 538.

¹⁹ The expression ‘somatic turn’ (σῶμα = body), in this paper, shall refer to the emergence of the embodiment paradigm *sensu stricto*.

²⁰ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ in: Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes (eds.), *Encounters of Body and Soul in Contemporary Religious Practices: Anthropological Reflections* (New York, 2011), x–xxvii, esp. x–xi.

²¹ E.g. by Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ xv.

²² Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,’ *Ethos* 1 (1990), 5–47.

the study of culture and the self'.²³ This paradigm states that the 'locus of the sacred is the body, for the body is the existential ground of culture.'²⁴

A paradigm as a consistent methodological perspective, Csordas suggests, should make possible a re-evaluation of existing work and new approaches in empirical research. He explicitly does not try to incorporate the vast multi-disciplinary literature on the body but leans strongly towards phenomenology.²⁵ 'This approach to embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture.'²⁶

Csordas' central intention is to bring about a collapse of dualities between mind and body, subject and object.²⁷ 'This collapse allows us to investigate how cultural objects (including selves) are constituted or objectified, not in the processes of ontogenesis and child socialization, but in the ongoing indeterminacy and flux of adult cultural life.'²⁸ Accordingly, Csordas tries to 'elaborate a non-dualistic paradigm of embodiment for the study of culture.'²⁹

Both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work Csordas draws on, 'attempt [...] to collapse these dualities, and embodiment is the methodological principle invoked by both. The collapsing of dualities in embodiment requires that the body as a methodological figure must itself be non-dualistic, that is, not distinct from or in interaction with an opposed principle of mind.'³⁰

APPROACHING DEVOTIONAL FITNESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EMBODIMENT PARADIGM

The contributions to Fedele's and Blanes' *Encounters of Body and Soul in Contemporary Religious Practices* have drawn attention to the fact that encounters of body and soul are central to religious experience and that it is

²³ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁴ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 39.

²⁵ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁶ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁷ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 7.

²⁸ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 39–40.

²⁹ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 12.

³⁰ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 8.

useful to consider these entities as interwoven and not opposite.³¹ Following this and recurring on the approaches summarized above, I would like to consider devotional fitness as embodied religious practice.

In some cases, where there is a proper 'theology of the body,' devotional fitness is highly reflective. In these incidents, founders sometimes think of their programs in terms of embodiment. One has to bear in mind, though, that they apply a concept of 'embodiment' which differs from the academic understanding explained above.

'ActivPrayer' is such an example. In their somewhat theologized attempt to explain Christian fitness, they start from the idea that 'Christian fitness (as in physical fitness) is a natural application of the Christian faith to general health and well-being' and that a combination of Christianity and fitness makes 'perfect sense.' The body 'plays a key role in the Christian faith' because Christianity is based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, ActivPrayer concludes, 'Christianity is an incarnate religion' and 'being a body' is a central element in a true Christian's life. The body has appetites and desires which should be moderated but it is also an important medium and catalyst of spiritual experience, e.g. 'when we experience deep love (of God, or even another human person), we can feel it in our very bodies.'³²

The authors conclude that we have to 'understand the embodiment of the human person or the embodied nature of our soul' in order to 'open up a door to an entire world of possibilities in Christian fitness.'³³ Christian faith, in this case, is considered to be existentially grounded in the body; it is 'embodied' at its very core. This understanding correlates with scholarly perspectives on the embodiment paradigm which place the body in the center of culture and society. Devotional fitness therefore becomes a particularly adequate testing ground and research field for theories of embodiment.

If we follow the claim that the body is the existential ground of culture³⁴ we will have to understand the body in order to understand culture, or, in Cecil G. Helman's words: '[T]he body is culture – an expression of its basic themes. A full understanding of any human body gives, at the same time, a fuller understanding of the culture embodied within it.'³⁵

³¹ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, 'Introduction,' xxi.

³² ActivPrayer, 'ActivPrayer: Soul Fitness' [<http://www.activprayer.org/classes/item/273-christian-fitness-explained>, accessed June 23, 2011].

³³ ActivPrayer, 'ActivPrayer: Soul Fitness.'

³⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,' 39.

³⁵ Cecil G. Helman, *Culture, Health and Illness* (New York, 2000), 15.

In this case, dealing with evangelical fitness culture, I seek to understand the role of the human body within this culture in order to understand devotional fitness. I would like to demonstrate this approach in a provisional manner with regard to two particular aspects of embodiment.

(1) Somatic representations of individuality and collectivity

Every kind of sports is set in and shaped by its surrounding social and cultural context. What happens to our bodies happens to society and vice versa. Sports and fitness incorporate and enact social patterns of conduct and clusters of values.³⁶

The fact that most evangelical fitness classes are based on routines that require neither partner nor opponent is, I hypothesize, linked to the value of autonomy in contemporary US culture.³⁷ Many of these programs do not even require a group gathering and are designed to be practiced at home individually learning through media such as books and DVDs, working out in front of the TV, and contemplating upon biblical scripture in solitude and stillness.

In contrast to these programs, other designs intentionally incorporate partner exercises. They explicitly encourage group meetings and appreciate the harmony and friendships nourished in their programs. This is, for instance, the case in the above-described organization First Place 4 Health.

The scholar of culture³⁸ may relate these phenomena to experiences of *communitas* according to Turner – events that celebrate togetherness and the spirit of community.³⁹ A central feature of these programs is their attempt to build commitment and accountability toward the group. They also stress equality among the group members; even the ‘leader’ is just ‘one on the journey’ and not hierarchically superordinated. In short, success is not possible when you are on your own.

Yet again, the central goal and motivation of these programs is not a collective one, it is an individual one. Weight-loss can only be achieved by an

³⁶ Thomas Alkemeyer, ‘Bewegung und Gesellschaft: Zur “Verkörperung” des Sozialen und zur Formung des Selbst in Sport und populärer Kultur,’ in: Gabriele Klein (ed.), *Bewegung: Sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Konzepte* (Bielefeld 2004), 43–78, esp. 60.

³⁷ Out of the vast literature on individualization in (post-)modern times, I reference only, for a general account, Louis Dumont, *Individualismus: Zur Ideologie der Moderne* (Frankfurt 1991) and, specifically regarding the USA, Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York, 1997), esp. 275.

³⁸ E.g. Thomas Alkemeyer, ‘Bewegung und Gesellschaft,’ 61.

³⁹ Victor Turner, *Das Ritual: Struktur und Anti-Struktur* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 124.

individual body; it can only become visible in a single body. Programs that, like 'Losing to Live,' arrange competitions based on collective weight-loss (see above) try to soften this ambiguity: In fact, success or failure is shared as groups compete with other groups, yet, in every case, both within the group and in the overall competition, winners and losers are not collective bodies – they are individual bodies.

To sum up, the body in these examples reveals and, at the same time, enacts, a central ambiguity of evangelical fitness culture: the longing for collectivity or *communitas* and for individuality or autonomy at the same time.

(2) Somatic representations of contemporary body ideals

Participants and designers of devotional fitness programs virtually never question the idea that slimness (usually communicated in terms of 'health') is something one should strive for. I cannot go into the depths of the emergence of contemporary slimness ideals here,⁴⁰ but it seems unquestionable that the bodies of devotional fitness reveal commonly accepted body ideals in their quest for fitness and slenderness. Michelle Mary Lelwica, who, in her 1999 book *Starving for Salvation*, has analyzed *The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* agrees that Christian weight-loss programs incorporate 'prevailing cultural norms of health and beauty.'⁴¹ In bodies, and especially in female bodies,⁴² 'the prevailing social order [is] negotiated and reproduced.'⁴³ However, in the special case of devotional fitness, this is not everything: Social norms are not only reproduced, they are, at the same time, reshaped and re-signified, so to speak. A 'healthy' (i.e., slender) body is not only desirable because of the 'mundane' advantages associated with fitness (being popular, attractive, successful etc.). Also, and more importantly, it becomes 'the visible marker of godliness,' as Griffith concludes in her much acclaimed study on *Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*.⁴⁴ In other words, the bodies in evangelical fitness programs enact a worldview which is underpinned both 'religiously' and 'secularly,' which implements both fleshly and spiritual matter.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Hillel Schwartz's oft-quoted study *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York 1986).

⁴¹ Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* (Oxford 1999), 77.

⁴² For the time being, I cannot deal with devotional fitness from the perspective of gender studies, even though this is a useful instrument which will be harnessed for my doctoral thesis.

⁴³ Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 182.

⁴⁴ Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 180.

CONCLUSIONS

As this paper has shown, the embodiment paradigm *sensu stricto* with its central premise of the corporeal body as the existential ground of culture is a useful perspective when trying to approach devotional fitness. The collapse of dualities, a central feature of the embodiment paradigm, is not only a goal in methodological discussions of scholarly kind, it is also a distinct feature of devotional fitness (as the example ‘ActivPrayer’ has shown, see above). Furthermore, various strands of contemporary spirituality highlight the importance of (re-)uniting body and soul. Actors criticize the outworn dualities of body and soul in Christian theologies and, instead, formulate holistic concepts of body and soul.⁴⁵

As a result, I may notice that this is a common feature of both contemporary spirituality and evangelical fitness. On a more general level, devotional fitness may therefore be seen in the wider context of contemporary spirituality. Take, e.g., Giselle Vincett’s and Linda Woodhead’s idea of spirituality as presented in their contribution to *Religions in the modern world*. Spirituality as a meta-term, in their view, shows seven characteristics:

- (1) ‘a value-laden contrast between spirituality and religion’;
- (2) ‘emphasis on the importance of inner, subjective, ineffable experience’;
- (3) ‘authorization of the individual to be the final arbiter of spiritual truth’;
- (4) ‘high valuation of “seeking;” open and tolerant attitude towards other spiritual “paths”’;
- (5) ‘promotion of practical, often embodied, means and techniques for attaining spiritual insight – e.g. meditation [or, in this case: fitness]’;
- (6) ‘tendency to embrace “progressive” and “anti-establishment” causes, including liberalism, equality, democracy, self-development [...]’;
- (7) ‘universalistic or “holistic” emphasis (i.e., an emphasis on the interconnectedness of things).’⁴⁶

Except for the ‘tolerant attitude towards other spiritual “paths”’ (4) and the ‘tendency to embrace “progressive” and “anti-establishment” causes’ (6) most of these traits are well applicable to describe devotional fitness. It does

⁴⁵ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ xvi.

⁴⁶ Giselle Vincett & Linda Woodhead, ‘Spirituality,’ in: Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami & Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Religions in the modern world: Traditions and transformations* (London 2009), 319–337, esp. 320.

not agree with the evangelical worldview to appreciate non-Christian paths to salvation and most currents within US evangelicalism are politically conservative and do not embrace democracy. Especially the fifth point, however, the 'promotion of practical, often embodied, means and techniques for attaining spiritual insight,' gets hold of a central feature of devotional fitness.

Slightly modifying the concept of Vincett and Woodhead, devotional fitness may nonetheless be considered as a highly embodied form of contemporary spirituality, one that poses specific challenges to the researcher and opens new horizons in the study of embodied culture and religion.

Neurocalvinism

Calvinism as a Paradigm for Neuroscience

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ABSTRACT

In order to assert that the determinism of neuroscience is comparable with that of Calvinism, Dick Swaab, a leading neuroscientist, speaks of 'neurocalvinism.' To test this assertion, the author uses the classic view of Calvinism, propounded by Jonathan Edwards, as a conceptual framework. This allows the author to conclude that Edwards has a holistic understanding of human personality, that he defends compatibilism and upholds responsibility and morality. However, Swaab presents himself as an incompatibilist who has a tendency to deny responsibility and morality. Thus, in the case of Edwards, it is not possible to speak about neurocalvinism.

KEY WORDS

neuroscience, determinism, necessity, compatibilism, free will, morality, responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

Neuroscience is very popular among all kinds of people, particularly because this branch of science promises to help us to develop an understanding of ourselves. One of the most important and perplexing issues concerning

our human identity is the question of the freedom of will.¹ It appears that our modern understanding of a human being – characterized by having autonomous free will – is being undermined by neuroscience.² It is understandable that people are both shocked and, at the same time, hugely interested in the consequences of these discoveries, because these discoveries examine what our identities as human beings are. Among the many questions raised by contemporary research are: can a system of neurons provide for features like freedom to reason and to decide? If our decisions are simply the product of a neuronal state, how can we be held morally responsible for them?

One of the leading neurobiologists in The Netherlands is Dick Swaab who wrote a very popular book about neuroscience which attracted the interest of thousands of people.³ In this book, he speaks about neuroscience as ‘neurocalvinism,’ referring to the doctrine of predestination found in Calvinism.⁴ In making this reference, he suggests that his approach to neuroscience, and the many consequences that it has for the understanding of human responsibility, will, personality and morality are comparable with, or are at least related to, the Calvinistic view of human beings, especially in its indication of a deterministic worldview.⁵ The suggested relationship between Calvinism and neuroscience demands that a deeper examination of the relationship between the Calvinistic and neuroscientific understandings of human beings is conducted.

After some methodological clarification, this paper describes in broad outline Jonathan Edward’s Calvinistic thoughts about free will and determinism in relation to responsibility and morality. Consequently, an investigation is made as to how Swaab’s neuroscience relates to this Calvinistic paradigm. This leads to a conclusion about the ‘Calvinistic’ character of neuroscience

¹ Some current Dutch popular books: V.A.F. Lamme, *De vrije wil bestaat niet. Over wie er echt de baas is in het brein* (Amsterdam 2010); T. v.d. Laar en S. Voerman, *Vrije wil: Discussies over verantwoordelijkheid, zelfverwerkelijking en bewustzijn* [(Rotterdam 2011); M. Sie (ed.), *Hoezo vrije wil? Perspectieven op een heikele kwestie* (Rotterdam 2011).

² Much of the contemporary case for the illusory nature of free will is derived from the work of B. Libet, A. Freeman & K. Sutherland, ‘Editor’s Introduction: The Volitional Brain,’ *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/8–9 (1999), ix–xxiii, xvi. Cf. T. Bayne, ‘Libet and the Case for Free Will Scepticism,’ in: R. Swinburne (ed.), *Free Will and Modern Science* (Oxford 2011), 25–46, 26.

³ D.F. Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein: Van baarmoeder tot Alzheimer*, (Amsterdam 2010). Since October 2010 this book has continually been on www.debestseller60.nl (accessed 2012, July 23).

⁴ Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 381.

⁵ C. Blakemore expresses: ‘The human brain is a machine which alone accounts for all our actions, our most private thoughts, our beliefs,’ cited by R. Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromonia, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham 2011), 52.

and the 'claim' that Swaab makes. In this context some considerations about the relevance of the concepts of freedom and determinism in Calvinism, and what these may add to the body of knowledge on neuroscience, are made.

2. METHODOLOGY

Speaking about 'neurocalvinism' and relating neuroscience to Calvinism necessarily involves looking at a problem of methodology: can neuroscience be related to theology? Isn't it anachronistic to compare a theologian of the eighteenth century with a neurobiologist of the twenty-first? Another question that concerns the broad scope of Calvinistic theology is: can it be spoken of as *the* Calvinistic theology? Questions such as these demand answers that can only be found at the level of methodology.

Firstly, a neurobiologist is talking about 'neurocalvinism'; straight away this justifies the research question about whether Calvinism has some type of relationship with neuroscience. Secondly, given the fact that a neuroscientist is asserting that neuroscience has implications for philosophy, morality, theology and humanity, it is justified that, from the point of view of philosophy, morality and theology, the claims made by the neuroscientist should be examined. Thirdly, since the turn of this century, there has been such an enormous increase in the level of cooperation between theologians and neurobiologists in understanding the coherence of brains and religion that some people have even spoken about 'neurotheology'.⁶ This is not the ultimate proof of the correctness of the relationship between theology and neuroscience, but it is an indication that this cooperation is widely accepted. Fourthly, it can be argued that a relationship exists between theology and neuroscience, because although both academic disciplines look at personhood and identity, they both hold very different views about the problem of the human will. Fifthly, given the fact that the implications of the discoveries

⁶ Compare www.ibcsr.org and the magazine, *Religion, Brain and Behavior*; W.S. Brown, N. Murphy & H. Newton Mahony (eds.), *Whatever Happened to the Soul: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis 1999); R.J. Russell, N. Murphy, T.C. Meyering & M.A. Arbib (eds.), *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Berkeley 2002); U. Lüke, H. Meisinger & G. Souvignier (eds.), *Der Mensch – nichts als Natur? Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen* (Darmstadt 2007); A.W. Geertz, 'When cognitive scientists become religious, science is in trouble: On neurotheology from a philosophy of science perspective,' in: *Religion* 39/4 (December 2009), 319–324; W. Achtner, *Willensfreiheit in Theologie und Neurowissenschaften: Ein historisch-systematische Wegweiser* (Darmstadt 2010).

made by neuroscience can justifiably be looked at from a theological point of view, it is clear that the choice of Calvinism is a given when Swaab's choice is made. A problem in the Calvinistic tradition is that this tradition is not unambiguous about free will and necessity. There is a difference, for example, between the concepts of Calvin,⁷ Voetius⁸ and Edwards.⁹

In this essay, Jonathan Edwards's concept of free will is compared with that of Swaab, because firstly, Edwards opposes the same front of self-determination as Swaab.¹⁰ Secondly, Edwards opposes this front because he understands the tendencies of the modern age.¹¹ Thirdly, the fact that Edwards, despite his deterministic thinking, maintained morality and responsibility make it interesting to look at the key-structures of his thought. This leads to the formulation of the central question in this article: does Swaab rightly refer to Edwards's Calvinism to underpin his concept of human personality in relation to free will?

3. EDWARDS'S CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

The Arminians of Edwards's time – as far as he understood – reasoned that determinism and necessity would destroy freedom, responsibility and morality.¹² Edwards's opponents understood human beings as impersonal machines who acted from necessity and as the links in the chain of cause and effect. To maintain humanity they denied the necessity of human deeds and argued that human beings could not be held responsible for the deeds that they executed out of necessity. To uphold responsibility and morality, a self-determining will was necessary.

⁷ See P. Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford 2004), 157–183.

⁸ See A.J. Beck, 'The Will as Master of Its Own Act: A Disputation Rediscovered of Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) on Freedom of the Will,' in: W.J. van Asselt, J.M. Bac & R.T. te Velde (eds.), *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids 2010), 145–170.

⁹ Edwards thematized free will, *WJE* 1 (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, New Haven 1957vv, vol. 1). Edwards identifies himself with Calvinism, *WJE* 1:131.

¹⁰ Compare *WJE* 3:375; *WJE* 16:722–723. D.A. Sweeney and A.C. Guelzo understand Edwards's understanding of will as 'the engine of the Edwardsean tradition,' *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edwards Amasa Park* (Grand Rapids 2006), 57.

¹¹ Compare his letter to John Erskine, *WJE* 16:491; G.M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven 2003), 437–438; M.J. McClymond & G.R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford 2012), 15.

¹² *WJE* 1:277, 295. The problem of free will was central, *WJE* 3:375.

In this section, the holistic dimension of Edwards's concept of freedom is explored and his qualification of the concept of freedom is examined in detail. Finally, an investigation is made into how Edwards reconciles determinism on the one hand, with responsibility and morality on the other.

3.1 THE HOLISTIC DIMENSION OF EDWARDS'S VIEW

Edwards understands the Arminian concept of a self-determining will as follows:

These several concepts belong to their notion of liberty: 1) That is, it consists of a self-determining power in the will, or a certain sovereignty which the will has over itself (...). 2) Indifference belongs to liberty in their notion of it, or that the mind, previous to the act of volition, is in equilibrio. 3) Contingence is another thing that belongs and is essential to it; not in the common acceptance of the word, as that has been already explained, but as opposed to all necessity, or any fixed and certain connection with some previous ground or reason of its existence.¹³

To achieve this freedom, Arminians isolate the will from the entirety of the human personality, which means that the functioning of the will is reduced to the moment of choosing and that choosing and willing become accidental occurrences.¹⁴ A further consequence of this approach is that it is only the 'pure act' of the will that values the 'act' of the will, not the habit that caused the act.¹⁵ This means that a bad heart could be an excuse for vice, but having a good disposition of the heart would be no reason to speak about virtue. The characteristic of this libertarian concept of free will is indifference.¹⁶

Edwards's deepest motivation for the rejection of this concept is theological. He cannot accept the repudiation of determinism, because he under-

¹³ *WJE* 1:164–165. Compare *WJE* 3:375–376.

¹⁴ *WJE* 1:303–304.

¹⁵ *WJE* 1:324–325, 329–330.

¹⁶ *WJE* 1:303–304. Edwards opposes a certain (extreme) version of Libertarianism. For more about Libertarianism, see R.H. Kane, 'Libertarianism,' in: Fischer, Kane, Pereboom & Vargas, *Four Views on Free Will* (Oxford 2007), 5–43. Kane defends an undetermined free will, 'Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism,' *Journal of Philosophy* 96, 217–240. See also Joseph Keim Campbell, *Free Will* (Cambridge 2011); T.J. Mawson, *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London 2011); T. Honderich (ed.), 'The Determinism and Freedom Philosophy Website,' <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwIntroIndex.htm> (accessed 2012, July 23).

stands this to be a repudiation of the all-decreeing God.¹⁷ Theological aspects of the dispute, such as these, are not included in this essay; however, efforts will be made to examine the anthropological arguments.

Edwards's criticism is specifically directed at indifference as a property of the self-determining will:

Those notions of liberty of contingency, indifference and self-determination, as essential to guilt or merit, tend to preclude all sense of any great guilt for past and present wickedness (...). All wickedness of heart is excused as what, in itself, brings no guilt.¹⁸

Edwards criticizes this concept of freedom, because its effect is the opposite of what is aimed at, namely the denial of responsibility and morality. According to Edwards, to value indifference as virtue contradicts common sense.¹⁹ It implies that a cold heart and a compassionate attitude would both be valued equally by a friend in need.

Another property of this concept of freedom concerns the function of commandments and promises. Because commandments are used to take away the indifference of the will and to influence will, commandments, according to the Arminian scheme, will undermine freedom, which is against all common sense. This view leads one to the conclusion of inconsistency, because every appeal to virtue takes away the virtuous character of obedience to that appeal.²⁰ Edwards does not only deny that morality and responsibility are bound to the Arminian concept of freedom, but returns the argument; the Arminian concept of liberty of contingency, indifference and self-determination will destroy morality and responsibility instead of promoting it. To promote morality and responsibility, it is necessary to use the concepts of the habitual dispositions of the heart.²¹ This means that the human will cannot be isolated from the entirety of the human personality:

If strict propriety of speech is to be insisted on, it may more properly be said, that the voluntary actions which is the immediate consequence and fruit of the mind's volition or choice, is determined by that which appears most agreeable,

¹⁷ *WJE* 16:722; P. Ramsey, 'Editor's introduction,' *WJE* 1:25–26. Edwards accepts the comparison with the Stoic worldview, however he rejects this concept because of the lack of freedom, *WJE* 1:372–374. Edwards defends that God chooses what is wise and most fitting, denying the arbitrariness of God's will, *WJE* 1:375–396, 418, 434.

¹⁸ *WJE* 16:722.

¹⁹ *WJE* 1:320–323.

²⁰ *WJE* 1:331.

²¹ *WJE* 1:156–157.

than the preference or choice itself, but that the act of volition itself is always determined by that in or about the mind's view of the object, which causes it to appear most agreeable.²²

The implication of Edwards's concept is that human will is not to be understood as a source of choices, but as an instrumental function of the human person. The alternative to this instrumental function of the human will is that an indifferent will can make choices that go completely against the strongest inclinations of human personality, which would be absurd.

This approach of Edwards coheres with another aspect of his concept. Instead of three hierarchically-ordered faculties of the soul, he speaks about two equal faculties, namely mind and will.²³ The affections are included in the will, which implies a less intellectualistic and a more voluntaristic and intuitive approach. Edwards denies that the human mind and the will are parts of the human soul, but understands them as being different modes of operation of the same human soul.²⁴

In the background of Edwards's understanding of the status of human will is his worldview. As a child of the Newtonian age, he reasons from a mechanistic worldview in which the order of cause and effect form part of the basic structures of reality.²⁵ It is important to understand that Edwards applies this mechanistic worldview of cause and effect to his anthropology. This order means that it is absurd to infer that the human will causes itself. Edwards compares this absurdity with an animal which begat itself and was hungry before it had being.²⁶ In this way, Edwards confirms the absurdity of an uncaused free will and defends the stance that the will is determined by a combination of the object and the mind's view of the object.²⁷

3.2 EDWARDS'S VIEW OF FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Edwards formulates a second point of criticism of the Arminian concept of freedom and necessity:

²² WJE 1:144–145.

²³ WJE 1:217; 2:96. See McClymond & Dermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 311–318; P. Ramsey shows the relation to John Locke, WJE 1:49.

²⁴ Cf. McClymond & Dermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 314.

²⁵ WJE 1:365. See also G.M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 440–441.

²⁶ WJE 1:345–346.

²⁷ WJE 1:144. Compare G.M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 445.

We are said to be naturally unable to do a thing, when we cannot do it even if we will, because what is most commonly called nature does not allow it, because of some impending defect of obstacle that is extrinsic to the will, either in the faculty of understanding, constitution of body, or external objects. Moral inability is seen not in any of these things, but in either the want of inclination or the strength of a contrary inclination, or the want of a sufficient motive in view to induce and excite the act of the will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary (...). A woman of great honor and chastity may have a moral inability to prostitute herself to her slave. A child of great love and duty to his parents may be unable to be willing to kill his father.²⁸

Edwards distinguishes between natural and moral necessity to explain that the human inability to behave in a moral way can be against our will or in accordance with our will; natural abilities are against our will, for example, while moral inability is not. However, Edwards is not completely clear about the boundary of the definition of human inability, although his position does have the potential to distinguish moral necessity from other necessities. In this way, Edwards qualifies the concept of necessity as maintaining responsibility as a category on the one hand, and as maintaining freedom as a category on the other. This also leads to a redefinition of freedom:

But I would observe one more thing concerning what is vulgarly called liberty, which is the power and opportunity for one to do and conduct himself as he will (...). Let the person come to his volition or choice of how he will, yet, if he is able, and there is nothing in the way to hinder his pursuing and executing his will, the man is fully and perfectly free, according to the primary and common notion of freedom.²⁹

In Edwards's view the Principle of Alternative Possibilities is not a prerequisite condition for the maintenance of freedom and responsibility, but the conscious voluntariness of human volition is a sufficient condition for it.³⁰ For example: if a boy finds himself in a place where there is only one girl to bond with, and he loves this one girl, he loves her freely.

Apparently, Edwards unites freedom and responsibility in the same way as the Arminians in his context do. If free will cannot be saved in a certain way, responsibility is lost. This approach implies that human beings are responsible for their morally bad behavior if natural inability was not the cause

²⁸ *WJE* 1:156–160. Edwards was among those who worked out this distinction. See P. Ramsey, 'Editor's Introduction,' *WJE* 1:37.

²⁹ *WJE* 1:164.

³⁰ Cf. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 442.

of it, and if they behaved voluntarily in this bad way. Behind this viewpoint is the conviction that moral inability is ultimately qualified as unwillingness and for unwillingness there is no excuse.³¹ Edwards's view coheres with the distinction between human beings before and after the fall; sin did not destroy human will as a faculty, but changed its orientation. Despite sin, human will remained free but, because of the sinfulness of the heart, human beings are not free to choose good. The reverse is also true. The eschatological dimension of the work of the Spirit implies that believers' experience the highest liberty that coheres with the necessity of virtues.³²

In this way, Edwards clarifies his concept of freedom by distinguishing between moral and natural inability or necessity. This distinction gave him the opportunity to uphold freedom as a guarantee for morality and responsibility.

3.3 CONCLUSION

Edwards denied the dismissal of determinism, he accepted the Arminian conjunction between free will on the one hand and morality and responsibility on the other, and he offered his own concept of freedom in which he appears to be a compatibilist, reconciling determinism and free will.³³ In his attack on the Arminian concept of a self-determining will, Edwards designed an alternative holistic concept of the human soul in which understanding and will contribute equally to human identity. In response to the Arminian concept of necessity, Edwards qualified necessity by making a distinction between moral and natural inability. In Edwards's understanding, freedom exists in the willingness of our will. In this way, Edwards could maintain determinism and necessity on the one hand, while maintaining human freedom, responsibility and morality on the other.

Against the reproach that determinism and necessity would dehumanize human beings, reducing them to machines, Edwards replied that the existence of human understanding and will upholds humanity. At the same time he clarified that the reproach actually attacks Arminians, who hold that a

³¹ *WJE* 1:307–308. In the tradition after Edwards, the 'Exercisers' saw evil as concentrated in the will only. See McClymond & Dermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 608.

³² *WJE* 1:364. Edwards sees the Christian life as an eschatological life, *WJE* 4:236–237.

³³ Edwards is a classic compatibilist. The new compatibilism (of Harry Frankfurt) makes a distinction between first-order and second-order desires. If the first-order desires are in control of the second-order desires, there is freedom.

human being is less than machine, because the so-called machine of Edwards is led by human intelligence, while their human will is led by nothing at all.³⁴

4. ASSESSMENT OF SWAAB'S VIEW

How does Swaab's view of free will compare to that of Edwards? According to Swaab, our complete personality is controlled by billions of brain cells. Every choice, even religious choice, can be related to the functioning of a part of the human brain. In other words, if the brain does not function, the human spirit does not function. Because the functioning of human spirit can be described and explained in physical terms, human will is controlled by physical laws. This explains the deterministic character of Swaab's understanding of human will. The difference between Edwards's determinism and that of Swaab is that Edwards's determinism has a metaphysical character while Swaab's physical determinism lacks this metaphysical dimension. The similarity between Edwards and Swaab is that both accept the physical order of cause and effect.

However, Edwards's approach was not on the level of brain science; Edwards's concept is open to Swaab's concept of physical determinism, knowing Edwards's acknowledgement of the physical order of cause and effect. Without being explicit about the definition of free will or justifying the use of a certain definition, it can be determined that Swaab reacts against the understanding that free will is described as the possibility of deciding or making choices without internal or external restrictions. Given this understanding of free will, he denies the possibility of a complete freedom of the will; he does not, however, define the word 'complete.'

Both Edwards and Swaab deny the libertarian concept of human free will, which proposes that the ultimate decision about our existence, willing and acting is taken in an isolated abstract human will. Although Swaab misses the finer anthropological distinctions that Edwards makes about the relationship between will and understanding, Edwards and Swaab agree that human will has to be understood and determined by the human personality, education and environment. At first glance, Edwards and Swaab seem to agree because they both oppose the same front. However, a more detailed examination reveals the differences between both views. Edwards is a compatibilist, while Swaab is an incompatibilist, and as such, their views are parallel

³⁴ *WJE* 1:371.

to soft determinism and hard determinism respectively. Swaab denies that a deterministic worldview coheres with the free will of human beings,³⁵ while Edwards accepts and defends free will.

Edwards understands human free will as human willingness in choosing and acting, relating free will to human consciousness. Swaab understands free will against the background of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities as an interpretative paradigm for free will, and he lacks the conceptual framework to understand free will as an awareness of voluntarily choosing. On the one hand, he gives the impression that conscious willingness is no more than a product of unconscious neural brain processes; on the other hand, he is bound to this impression, because he understands consciousness as the result of unconscious processes which are controlled by physical laws.³⁶

The fact that Edwards and Swaab both defend the coherence of free will and responsibility,³⁷ and that Swaab denies the freedom of will, implies that Swaab tends to deny responsibility in social life.³⁸ He illustrates this problem with several examples. Can a pedophile be responsible for his sexual orientation as this orientation is caused by his genetic background and the irregular development of his brain? Parallel with his acceptance that a homophile orientation is not a choice, Swaab suggests that it is also acceptable to view kleptomania and other forms of aggressive and delinquent behavior as behavior that is exhibited without choice, with all the consequences this has for accountability and responsibility.

From Edwards's perspective, Swaab makes the same mistake as the Arminians do by not distinguishing between moral and natural inability. Lack of this distinction explains the lack of human freedom and the lack of any possibility of justifying morality and responsibility. While Edwards would blame Swaab for projecting the structures of natural ability and inability upon the moral dimension of human life, Swaab would reply that morality has to be understood in physical terms, namely neural processes.

In this context, it is significant that Swaab denies the human soul.³⁹ He argues that a 'psychon' does not exist, but a 'neuron' does. Dying means that brains stop functioning. He does not see any reason to think that the soul is anything more than the functioning of billions of brain cells and thinks that

³⁵ Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 380–381.

³⁶ See Achtner, *Willensfreiheit*, 223–232 for the common views of neuroscientists.

³⁷ Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 385, 391.

³⁸ Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 392.

³⁹ Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein*, 357.

the universal belief in the existence of the soul is based on anxiety about death and the desire that humans have to be reunited after death. Thus Swaab argues from the point of view of reductionism, in which the working of the soul is reduced to the functioning of brain cells.⁴⁰ This leads to the overall conclusion that Swaab has a monistic materialistic understanding of human personality. Swaab's physical determinism has led him to conclude that physics is the all-embracing reality of the human being and that physicalism is 'all' (the position that only physical matter is needed to account for everything that exists in nature); a sure sign of this can be seen in the title of his bestseller: *We are our brain*.

Here, the core of the difference between Edwards's and Swaab's views is explained. Edwards can accept physical determinism, but Swaab cannot accept metaphysical determinism. Edwards accepts physical determinism as the natural order of cause and effect in which humanity participates, without reducing human being to physics. In Edwards's understanding of reality, the metaphysical world bears the physical reality. As an example: the physical world is for Edwards like a map of the world, while the reality of the world cannot be explained in terms of the map. All is physics, but physics is not all. This means that Edwards's worldview cannot be characterized as physicalism, but must be understood as metaphysicalism.

Edwards's metaphysicalism made him reject the Arminian reproach that Calvinists understand the human being as a machine; the same metaphysicalism would analyse Swaab's concept of the human being as a machine. So an answer has been derived for the central question of this essay: does Swaab rightly refer to Edwards's Calvinism to underpin his concept of human personality in relation to free will? The answer is no.

5. CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Table 1. Comparison of Edwards's and Swaab's understanding of determinism and free will

Perspective	Edwards	Swaab
Metaphysics?	Yes	No
Physical determinism?	Yes	Yes

⁴⁰ Cf. B. Keizer, *Waar blijft de ziel?* (Rotterdam 2012), 61–62.

Libertarian understanding of will?	No	No
Compatibilism?	Yes	No
Freedom of will?	Yes	No
Responsibility and morality?	Yes	No

Table 1 illustrates the comparability of Edwards's and Swaab's understandings of physical determinism and the libertarian understanding of will. Edwards and Swaab differ on all other points; while Edwards is a compatibilist, Swaab is not. Edwards's position allows the possibility of speaking about freedom of will, while Swaab denies it. Responsibility and morality are integral to the structure of Edwards's concept of human personality, while Swaab's concept denies any space for them. These differences go back to an acceptance or rejection of metaphysics. We can conclude that Swaab's 'neurocalvinism' and Edwards' Calvinism are not compatible.

Swaab's approach brought us into contact with physicalism, a stance that understands reality as a closed physical system. While reductive-physicalism can easily be attacked, this is not the case with non-reductive physicalism whose main tenet is that the mind operates at a higher level of complexity and cannot be directly reduced to physical conditions, implying that mental states are a byproduct of the physical state of the brain.

Does this reveal that there is some openness here to the concept of the human soul? Scientists, philosophers and theologians are afraid of a Cartesian dualism of soul and body. While a concept of the human soul cannot be developed within Cartesian dualism, this does not indicate that we do not have to think about the concept of the human soul. This research indicates that we are not to be enclosed in physicalism. Edwards's distinction between metaphysics and physics offers a midway between physical monism on the one hand and Cartesian dualism on the other,⁴¹ namely a duality within a coherent reality which guarantees human freedom, responsibility and morality.⁴²

⁴¹ For Edwards's criticism of Descartes, cf. N. Fiering, 'The Rationalistic Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics,' in: N.O. Hatch & H.S. Stout (eds.), *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (Oxford 1988), 73–101, 77–78; A. Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of Nature: The Re-enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (London 2010), 27.

⁴² G.H. Labooy pleads for metaphysics, the interaction between body and mind, and a certain independence of the mind, *Waar geest is, is vrijheid: Filosofie van de psychiatrie voorbij Descartes* (Amsterdam 2007), 262.

Free Will as a Continuum with Self-Imposing Constraints

Are Unconsciousness, Physical Tendency, and Free Will Compatible?

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ABSTRACT

Two seminal experiments in neuroscience indicated that brain activities were detected by EEG or fMRI before the participants were aware of their decisions. The findings suggested that free will is an illusion. It is assumed that conscious decision is a necessary condition for free will. However, the history of science is full of examples about how problem-solving emerged from unconsciousness, such as Kekule's benzene ring and polymerase chain reaction. The author suggests that free will should be viewed as a continuum with self-imposed constraints, rather than being equated with the absence of any constraint or physical disposition.

KEYWORDS

continuum, atheism, materialism, naturalism, history of science, free will, physical tendency, determinism

NEUROSCIENTIFIC CHALLENGE OF FREE WILL

Since the 1980s two seminal studies in neuroscience have been provoking debates regarding free will and determinism. In a study that utilized

Electroencephalography (EEG) to monitor the brain waves of subjects, Libet, Gleason, Wright and Pearl discovered the state of ‘readiness potentials’ (RP), which are the activations of specific areas of the cerebral cortex prior to the participants’ conscious decision of moving their finger. To be fair to Libet, he realized that there is a small window of opportunity for the conscious mind to overrule the action. This implies that we have ‘free won’t’ instead of free will.¹ The central idea of Libet is that unconscious processes initiate our conscious experiences.² However, quite a few subsequent writers, such as Daniel Wegner, took Libet’s experiment to advocate the notion that conscious will is just an illusion.³

In a similar thread, Haynes and his colleagues utilized functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to monitor patients as they were asked to make a decision. They found that brain activities had already occurred before the participants made the conscious decision of pushing a left or right button. Haynes’s research team stated that they could predict what a participant would do six to ten seconds before that participant is aware of his or her choice.⁴ Soon, Brass, Heinze, and Haynes explicitly stated, ‘The impression that we are able to freely choose between different possible courses of action is fundamental to our mental life. However, it has been suggested that this subjective experience of freedom is no more than an illusion and that our actions are initiated by unconscious mental processes long before we become aware of our intention to act.’⁵

The objective of this paper is to explain why the common interpretation of these two experiments fails to deny free will, and to offer an alternate explanation: free will is a continuum, and thus any physical disposition or constraint detected by neuroscience does not necessarily constitute evidence against free will. On the contrary, exercising free will is making self-imposing constraints, as indicated by the adage, ‘You make habits and habits make

¹ Benjamin Libet. ‘Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,’ *Behavioral Brain Science* 8 (1985), 529–566. Benjamin Libet, Curtis Gleason, Elwood Wright, & Dennis Pearl, ‘Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential): The Unconscious Initiation of a Freely Voluntary Act,’ *Brain* 106 (1983), 623–642.

² Benjamin Libet, *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³ Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002).

⁴ John-Dylan Haynes, ‘Decoding and Predicting Intentions,’ *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1224 (2011), 9–21. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.2011.05994.x.

⁵ Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze & John-Dylan Haynes, ‘Unconscious Determinants of Free Decisions in the Human Brain,’ *Nature Neuroscience* 11 (2008), 543–545.

you.’ When habits are formed, our behaviors work similar to an ‘auto-pilot’ mode. Specifically, our actions are driven by unconscious tendencies, which have been previously developed in a conscious mode.

ATHEISM AND NATURALIZATION OF MIND

On the basis of the findings of neuroscience, Sam Harris, one of the ‘four horsemen’ of the New Atheism, declared that free will is nothing but an illusion and wishful thinking.⁶ By the same token, Jerry Coyne stated, ‘I’m starting to realize there are striking parallels between belief in God and belief in free will. There is no evidence for the existence of either, and plenty of evidence against both. Belief in both makes people feel better.’⁷

Determinism does not necessarily go hand in hand with atheism while the notion of free will is not inherent in religion. This is exemplified by both Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism embraces the doctrine that a coherent self is illusory. The so-called ‘self’ is a result of a tentative composition of fleeting elements. Since there is no authentic self, there is, consequently, no genuine will.⁸ Further, within the Christian community there have been debates regarding Calvinism and various schools that advocate free will.⁹ Nonetheless, as mentioned in the beginning, atheism and the rejection of free will seem to form a strong association (e.g. Sam Harris, Jerry Coyne). The historical root of this connection could be traced back to as far as the 18th century. Long before Harris and Coyne, D’Holbach (1723–1789) had asserted that free will was an illusion. So-called the concept of ‘choice’ could not provide any escape from the causal chain that stretches back to our birth. According to Nichols, D’Holbach is arguably the best example of a hard determinist from the early period of modern philosophy. As a naturalist (materialist), D’Holbach supported psychological determinism, the philosophical view that all mental processes are determined by prior psychological or physical events. It is his conviction that nature consists of substance and motion only, hence

⁶ Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 5.

⁷ Adam Fetterman, ‘Free Will is the New God,’ *Social Psychology Eye* (2001) [<http://socialpsychologyeye.wordpress.com/2011/06/14/free-will-is-the-new-god/>].

⁸ Shaun Nichols, *Great Philosophical Debates: Free Will and Determinism* (Chantilly, VA: Teaching company 2008), 46.

⁹ Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2011).

everything in nature, including the human mind, is subject to and can be explained by physical laws.¹⁰

This ‘naturalization’ of the mind is echoed by quite a few modern scholars. The ‘astounding hypothesis’ proposed by Crick is a typical example: ‘Your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased it: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons.”’¹¹ Additionally, according to Bloom and Weisberg, the ‘common sense’ that the mind is fundamentally different from the brain comes naturally to children. Preschool children accept that the brain is responsible for some aspects of mental life, such as solving math problems. But at the same time, they deny that the brain has something to do with loving one’s brother. To Bloom and Weisberg, the mind is simply the brain, and therefore they are resentful that this type of ‘nonscientific’ concept, grounded in common-sense intuitions, is transmitted by seemingly trustworthy sources.¹²

To people who subscribes to the materialistic and natural worldview, free will is considered mystical or even supernatural. Nothing can go beyond materials; everything must be explained by physical laws formulated by science. Apparently, the advent of neuroscience provides evidence to support the view that the mind is the brain and free will is illusory. However, the argument based upon the Libet and Haynes experiments has two major logical flaws. First, it assumes that a conscious decision is a necessary condition for free will. The title of Wegener’s book even equates free will with conscious will. It seems that if the conscious awareness of the action and the brain activity associated with the action do not happen simultaneously, we are not considered free to choose our action. Second, if our thought is limited by a certain physical disposition, there is no free will either. The counter-argument given by the author is anchored by the definition of free will derived from classical compatibilism, the view that free will and determinism are fully compatible.¹³ According to classical compatibilism, free will is not the opposite of indeterminism, in which nothing can restrict our mind. Ra-

¹⁰ Nichols, *Great Philosophical Debates*, 43.

¹¹ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner and Sons 1994), 3.

¹² Paul Bloom & Skolinick Weisberg, ‘Childhood Origins of Adult Resistance to Science,’ *Science* 316 (2007), 996-997.

¹³ Nichols, *Great Philosophical Debates*, 33-37.

ther, free will implies that our minds are free from external coercion only. But the presence of internal compulsion, including our desire and disposition, does not negate free will.

ARE INTENTIONS ALWAYS CONSCIOUS?

Marcel wrote, 'Many psychologists seem to assume that intentions are by their nature conscious.'¹⁴ Bargh and Morsella call it 'conscious-centric bias.'¹⁵ They pointed out that until quite recently in the history of science and philosophy, mental life was viewed as mostly conscious in essence. This view is manifested by Descartes' cogito (I think therefore I am) and Locke's 'mind first' cosmology. In reality, actions resulting from unconscious thought might precede the conscious mind. In other words, action precedes reflection. Similarly, Schlosser argued that actions yielded from free will are not always consciously initiated. Every conscious event may have unconscious precursors.¹⁶

Mele illustrated the unconscious mode of intentions by using an everyday example: He goes to his office almost every morning. When he intentionally unlocks his office door, he's operating in the auto-pilot mode. He does not need a conscious decision to unlock it. However, if he hears a fight in the office, then he might pause for a moment to decide whether he should continue to keep his door unlocked or leave.¹⁷ Mele criticized that Libet and his followers were confused between urge (wanting, wish, or desire), intention, and decision. In Libet's experiment, the participants' physical tendency to move a finger might be considered a desire, but it is not an intention at all. As explained before, there is a subtle difference between intention and decision, and the former does not require full consciousness.¹⁸

In Mele's view, the readiness potentials discovered by Libet should be treated as an urge, not an intention or a decision. In addition, Mele pointed

¹⁴ Anthony Marcel, 'The Sense of Agency: Awareness and Ownership of Action,' in: Johannes Roessler & Naomi Eilan (eds.), *Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2003), 48-93, esp. 60.

¹⁵ John A. Bargh & Ezequiel Morsella, 'The unconscious Mind,' *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3 (2008) 73-79, esp. 73.

¹⁶ Markus Schlosser, 'Free Will and the Unconscious Precursors of Choice,' *Philosophical Psychology* 25 (2011), 365-384.

¹⁷ Alfred Mele, *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 168.

¹⁸ Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

out that in Libet's experiment the subjects were told in advance not to move their fingers, but to prepare to move them later. This preparation might have created the so-called readiness potentials. Interestingly enough, Schlosser offered a similar counter-argument: the subjects in Libet's experiments made a conscious decision to participate in the study and follow the instruction. Schlosser called it 'distal intention' because the action following the intention is not immediate. However, the conscious decisions made at the beginning of the study 'work their way' into the motor control system.¹⁹ Schlosser argued that most of our decisions have two components: what to do and when to do. The former is more important than the latter because the when-decision, concerned with how to implement a what-decision, is made after the what-decision. The author of this article would like to use this example: if a woman says 'yes' to her boyfriend's proposal, this is certainly a what-decision. What happens next is concerned with deciding when the wedding and the honeymoon will take place. In a sense the wedding and the honeymoon are 'pre-determined' by the what-decision earlier. Following this line of reasoning Libet's study at best implies that certain when-decisions are tied to physical dispositions, but not what-decisions.²⁰

The history of science is full of examples about how innovations and problem-solving emerge from unconsciousness. Many times the scientists made a conscious commitment to solve a particular problem, and this decision 'worked its way' into the unconscious side of the mental structure. For example, Kekule found the solution to the problem of the structure of a benzene molecule while watching the snake-like dance of fire in his fireplace. Indeed, the solution did not pop up 'suddenly.' Long before the vision at the fireplace, Kekule had seen a gold ring consisting of two intertwined snakes biting their own tails. By citing the example of the benzene ring, Seifert, Meyer, Davidson, Patalano and Yaniv speculated that the final steps on the road to insight may be subconscious.²¹ Had the brain of Kekule been scanned by modern medical equipment, we would have observed that before Kekule solved the problem, the image of the snake had already activated certain sections of his brain. However, it is problematic to say that Kekule should not be

¹⁹ Schlosser, 'Free Will,' 369.

²⁰ Schlosser, 'Free Will,' 369-370.

²¹ Colleen M. Seifert, David E. Meyer, Natalie Davidson, Andrea L. Patalano & Ilan Yaniv, 'Demystification of Cognitive Insight: Opportunistic Assimilation and the Prepared-Mind Perspective,' in: Janet Davidson & Robert Sternberg (eds.), *The Nature of Insight* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995), 65-124.

praised for the discovery because it is ‘determined’ by his brain or the gradual built-up of the solution is unconscious.

The invention of the polymerase chain reaction by molecular biologist Kary Mullis followed a similar path. Mullis said, ‘The revelation came to me one Friday night in April, 1983, as I gripped the steering wheel of my car and snaked along a moonlit mountain road into northern California’s redwood country.’²² Again, it is unlikely that the solution emerged ‘suddenly.’ Like the participants in Libet’s experiment, Mullis had decided to conduct research in biotechnology and this distal what-decision ‘worked its way’ into his cognitive system. But unlike Libet’s subjects, Mullis virtually had no control of the when-decisions. Rather, certain areas of his brain had definitely been activated to pave the way for the solution.

FREE WILL IS NOT FREE OF INTERNAL COMPULSION

To a certain extent the study conducted by Haynes and his associates is a more serious challenge to free will than Libet’s study. The former has no component relating to response readiness, and thus the counter-argument based on distal what-decisions and when-decisions becomes irrelevant. In Haynes et al.’s experiment, subjects could decide to choose pressing one of two buttons with either the left or the right index finger.

However, at most Haynes’s study implies that our decision is confined or influenced by our physical condition of the brain. Haynes could predict a left or right button press with 60% accuracy only. In other words, there is a 40% chance that the subject could override the physical tendency. Indeed it is harder to defend absolute determinism than free will. The probability that X will happen or X will be ‘chosen’ must be 100% in order to call the event ‘pre-determined.’ However, if there is just 1% probability that X will not happen, it has left sufficient room for free will to act. Consider this hypothetical scenario: There is a country that has been ruled by a dictator for more than half a century. In this nation information is tightly filtered and controlled. As a result, all citizens are brainwashed to unconditionally support the regime. The population of this nation is 10 million, but out of these 10-million people there are a few dissidents who dare to promote democracy, liberty, and hu-

²² Sunny Auyang, ‘Chance and the Prepared Mind in Drug Discovery,’ *Creating Technology: Engineering and Biomedicine* (2012) [<http://www.creatingtechnology.org/biomed/chance.pdf>].

man rights, and speak against the regime. One may argue that the majority of these people are 'pre-determined' to be submissive, and they have 'no choice.' But as long as there is the probability that one out of a million people could choose otherwise, free will prevails. In probability and statistics there are many different forms of distributions, such as Chi-square distributions, *t*-distributions, *F*-distributions, and Poisson distributions. In short, every event has a distribution and even extreme cases (outliers). Uniform outcomes across all the members in a sample or a population are not realistic. Naturalists or materialists maintain that everything is subject to natural or physical laws. Following this line of reasoning, probability and statistical laws, which tell us that not everyone has exactly the same response or action, are also part of natural law.

Haynes demonstrated that our will or mind has a physical basis, but his notion is indeed fully compatible with the philosophy of 'embodied mind.'²³ In other words, free will should not be equated with the absence of any constraints or influences, including our bodily constraints. Simply put, the notion of embodied mind rejects the mind-body dualism that has been prevalent in the Western culture for several centuries, and faculty psychology that has been misleading psychologists for a century. Lakoff and Johnson wrote, 'The architecture of your brain's neural network determines what concepts you have and hence the kind of reasoning you can do.'²⁴ In this view, our perception is equated with our conceptualization, and vice versa.

Take our concept of colors as an example. The perception of color is based on human internal neural structures and the external physical conditions (e.g. wavelength). We perceive that a banana is yellow even under different lighting conditions.²⁵ This color consistency results from our brain's ability to compensate for variations in the light source. As a photographer, this author is well-aware of the interactive nature of our perception. If we take an indoor photo under fluorescent bulbs without a flash unit, the picture will be flooded with green light. There is nothing wrong with your camera. In fact, the camera sensor and lens capture the exact lighting. In a room we 'see' white light instead of green because our brain compensates for the 'incorrect' color. In short, our color concepts have a strong physical base. Al-

²³ George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York, NY: Basic Books 1999), 16-44.

²⁴ Lakoff & Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 16.

²⁵ Lakoff & Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 13-14.

though the theory of embodied mind did not arise from the context of the free will-determinism debate, it is still highly relevant in the sense that our mind is never independent from our physical configuration. But does it mean that we are not free? It depends on how we define free will.

One of the classical definitions of free will is that it requires the absence of constraint (coercion and interference). But this definition does not specify whether the source of coercion and interference is internal or external. If my action is caused by external compulsion, I have no free will. For example, if I am a slave, my labor is not freely chosen. But what if I am an alcoholic who is driven by my internal urge to indulge in binge drinking? Did I lose my free will? Am I still responsible for my obsession? The same question can be asked about drug addicts, compulsive gamblers, and even psycho-killers. By common sense we might say, 'They are still responsible for what they did in spite of their internal compulsion or physical disposition though they may not be fully responsible.' Yamada (personal communication) went even further to assert that 'free will has more to do with the ability to overcome or nullify constraints and to institute and enforce new constraints, than it does with the absence of constraints.' When the author talked to several recovered or recovering gamblers during a short term mission trip in Panama, it was observed that many gamblers and ex-gamblers go back and forth between the old and new lifestyles. The most effective way to overcome obsession is not trying to free oneself from the constraint by will alone. Rather, the person must build a new healthy habit as a replacement of the old one. In short, exercising free will is making self-imposed constraints, a new type of internal compulsion. You make habits and habits make you!

Hence, free will might not be as dichotomous as most people thought (either your choice is totally free or your behaviors are totally determined). Rather, it should be viewed as a continuum between two polarities. In Haynes's experiments on the average there is a 40% chance that you could do otherwise, but there is a distribution or within-group variance. Some people might have a high degree of internal compulsion and some may have a weaker one. In the perspective of within-subject distribution and free will/determinism being a part of a continuum, perhaps free will and determinism are compatible.

DISCUSSION

In summary, if we do not confine free will to conscious decisions and extend free will to boundless freedom without any internal disposition and compulsion, then it seems that Libet's and Haynes's studies cannot decisively negate the existence of free will. Nonetheless, by recognizing that our mind is embodied and our will is influenced by the neural structures, free will and determinism are better considered as a continuum instead of a dichotomy.

The challenge to free will introduced by Libet and Haynes is not new. Its scientific root can be traced back to as early as the 17th century. Based on Newtonian physics, French scientist Laplace claimed that everything in the universe is determined by physical laws. If there is an intellectually powerful being (called Laplace's demon) that can fully comprehend Newtonian law, and knows the position and momentum of every particle in the universe, then he could definitely predict every event in history. Originally Laplace's determinism was applied to the realm of extended, spatial, material substances only. Later this type of determinism was expanded to the realm of psychological events. Under determinism, there is only one necessary outcome in the causal chain.²⁶ Interestingly enough, like the bond between modern determinism and atheism, Laplace's determinism is also associated with a naturalistic tendency. When Laplace presented his scientific theory to Napoleon, Napoleon wondered how God could fit into the theory. Laplace answered, 'I have no need of that hypothesis.'²⁷

Today determinism and this type of alleged predictive power switch the foundation from physics to neuroscience. However, later the probabilistic worldview of quantum mechanics overshadows the Laplace demon. According to quantum mechanics, there are infinite possible universes. Physicists found that in the subatomic world, events are not the inevitable and unique solution to single-valued differential equations, but are the random expression of a probability distribution. The present state limits the probability of future outcomes, but does not determine a definite fixed result.²⁸ Heisenberg's uncertainty principle shows us that we cannot measure the position and the momentum of a particle at the same time, and thus Laplace's demon is physically impossible. Laplace's view emerged at the dawn of modern physics (Newtonian mechanics) and needless to say, his assertion was premature

²⁶ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 1992).

²⁷ Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1908/2010).

²⁸ Roy Weatherford, *The Implications of Determinism* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

and over-simplistic. Bluntly speaking, neuroscience is a fairly new discipline, and after all, Libet and Haynes only studied a very simple form of awareness and decision-making: moving the finger. However, if someday neuroscientists could predict whether a college graduate would continue on to graduate study or which stock an investor would buy, then we would have to take a fresh look into this area of study. For now any bold statements or strong inferences out of these experiments should be interpreted with caution.²⁹

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