

Reply to Schrijvers

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I owe a debt of gratitude to Joeri Schrijvers, who has read and summarised *Postmodernity's Transcending: Devaluing God* with such care and sympathy. Albeit that he warns readers of the inevitable truncations and losses of nuance in a summary (and one feels he struggles a bit with Aristotle, but then so too did I), nevertheless, there is no doubt that he has attended to his task in ways that many readers will thank him for. I hope he will therefore set within the context of that gratitude the replies and questions I pose in response to him—that he will see them as provocations, not to his person or his concerns, but to his thinking.

Given the care he exercised, and with good knowledge of how well he knows the philosophical currents from out of which the book was drawn, I could not help but ask how he himself understands the questions he poses to me right at the end of his summary as arising *from within* the text, rather than added on, from outside. In response, one could say, why could a thinker not just ask what he wants to ask? Why should I expect that the questions he poses might arise from out of the central problematic of the book itself? Except that, if the book fulfils what it sets out to do, that is to throw *contemporary theological questions* into a certain relief, then to fail to ask *from out of that relief* could be argued as a failure to see the depth of the book's own critique. Or could it not be that the *book itself fails in its own task*? Indeed it could, but even here surely, the questions should point to that failure and illustrate it, rather than be added in from a general perspective.

Early on in Schrijvers' text he makes a claim which discloses a fundamental attitude, common in contemporary theology, which *Postmodernity's Transcending* self-consciously eschews and which it seeks to bring into relief. For Schrijvers says '*Postmodernity's transcending*, then, turns out to be a transcending, not for the sake of transcendence or even the Transcendent, but simply a transcending for transcending's sake—no matter who performs it, and even less 'to where' the transcending takes place. According to Hemming, however, this 'transcending', always and already presupposes a devalued and devaluated God.'

This statement is ambiguous: for it could say 'transcending always and already presupposes a devalued and devaluated God' or it could say '*here now*

(*in postmodernity, in the situation in which we take ourselves for granted*) transcending always and already presupposes a devalued and devaluated God.' The key to what Schrijvers intends (without intending) is in his redoubled 'devalued and devaluated'. For 'devalued' on its own, as the book shows (and Schrijvers shows the book showing) can be read 'in many ways'. But devaluated 'fixes' the meaning, so that we know *which* of the ambiguous readings of 'devalued' is intended: that devaluing which is not a separation from value, or a lack of connection with value, but *that* devaluing which began by taking God as set at highest value and then overpowers the all-powerful and declares it dead, and so to have no power at all.

Doesn't Schrijvers then place us firmly where we should be, in postmodernity's epoch, which shows that the epochal understanding of God is ever-changing and in flux? Or will we discover (through the questions that he asks) that he so presupposes that devaluation is our proper comportment to God, that the God we have devalued has ever been thus, and so he will read even those times when God was not set upon by value and devaluation as if they were the same as our own. The danger is not that Schrijvers has understood how postmodern we all now are, but that in having *not* understood the condition of postmodernity, he will himself turn out to be all too postmodern.

God as devaluated (not just as free from value) *is* the ontotheological God, the God who appears in the epoch of Metaphysics which runs in its phenomenological description from Plato to Nietzsche, and which is not yet over. The final question Schrijvers poses to me is 'might it not be that to expect a beatific vision that exactly corresponds to the way it is portrayed in scripture and liturgy is some kind of hubris?'. This is to exploit again an ambiguity, this time of the word 'expect'. For expectation, as Schrijvers describes it, suggests causal-anticipation: the expectancy of *Postmodernity's Transcending*, however, attempts to free God and man from every (rational, calculative, predictive) causal inference, because expectation here precisely does *not* mean preparatory-looking, anticipative knowing-what-to-look for, and yet seeks to show what is meant by being open *for* means, in a way that every preparatory expectation never can be.

And so Schrijvers' 'cap' to this question, which is not a question but a statement, attempts to foreclose the discussion. He says 'but for this, perhaps, one does not read Heidegger, one reads Levinas'. This illustrates the extent to which Schrijvers has not come to terms with the underlying critique of Levinas represented by the whole thrust of *Postmodernity's Transcending*. Schrijvers can be forgiven for this, because Levinas is barely mentioned in the text (a mere four times, and then never thematically). Where Levinas is discussed, however, it should be clear that the attitude of *Postmodernity's Transcending* is that Levinas, no more than any other of the disciples of Descartes and Husserl, is unable to free man and God from the causal relation in which since Plato they have been clenched.

In this Levinas and Nancy both fail to understand the import of Heidegger's term *Mitsein*, hence my extensive discussion of *Mitsein* in the sections towards the end of my introductory paper offered for this collection. *Mitsein* is that which I come to see and understand, when, and as, I extract myself *off from* the manifold that *Mitsein* names, in order to discover myself to be *oneself*. Levinas, like his appointed master Plato, announces the 'true' taxis of counting as *from one to two*

and to many.¹ This is the opposite order from the genuine, originary phenomenological experience of number, as Aristotle strived to say (and which *Postmodernity's Transcending* discusses at length).

How are we to discriminate the 'genuine and originary' from the posited and so already theoretically 'always already' true—true therefore, not from the rigorous discipline of phenomenological encounter, but just taken to be true 'for all time', as eternally true as God is said to be himself eternal? The answer to this is given in the emphasis that *Postmodernity's Transcending* pays to the phenomenon of time, of *what precedes and succeeds what*. It is this which I want to name as a discipline. Above all, as a discipline of thinking: not a discipline that thinking 'thinks' and so learns or discovers or acquires, mere technical proficiency, but rather the discipline that thinking *is*. This discipline which is thinking can be uncovered in its meaning by encountering thinking through self-thinking (the medial voice again!). This means through bringing thinking into an encounter with its self-essence, that reveals the genuine taxis or order of number: *from the unthought manifold through to the dual* (if we can still think with the Greeks) and thence to the one. Even this is a short-hand or a truncation, for thinking is *not* numbering, but numbering is the easiest way for us to discover, and so name, for ourselves the ways in which thinking *is*.

When we ask whether Schrijvers' questions arise from *out of* the matter at hand, what we are asking is: can he bring out before himself *for himself* the matter of thinking, the discipline of *thinking itself*? Am I being unfair? Why can't Schrijvers simply *juxtapose* his questions next to mine? Isn't this what Levinas does—juxtapose the other next to the same and then *construct* a relation between them that is so gripping a causal bond that taking it seriously becomes an imperative of ethics such that it is said to precede in importance even being itself? The phenomenon of *Mitsein* shows that these juxtapositions are *already there*, and as they become apparent, as thinking thinks them, then things begin to change (in how we think them), but they can never be *constructed*. Worse yet, every construction of them will cover over the fact that they already exist, and so plunge into darkness and oblivion what actually is to be brought to light.

In contrast to what Schrijvers takes for granted, *Postmodernity's Transcending* attempts an elaboration of transcending that does not 'always and already' presuppose a devalued and dead God, but that illustrates how *now* in postmodernity, transcendence is *self-evidently* in consequence of the death of God. It is only when we begin to think, to evade the self-evidences of ontotheology, that we can even hope to attain to the 'before and after of man', the place (which is no where) wherein we can be readied for the outspeaking of God and the gods. Man transcends, and that is the least of things (to echo a correction once uttered by Jean-Luc Marion to a work of his own),² but in gaining a proper phenomenological under-

¹ Cf. Levinas, E., *Altérité et transcendance*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1995, p. 9. The epigraph to the book, found here, states 'La philosophie est platonicienne'.

² See the *Preface to the English Edition* by Marion of Marion, J.-L. trans. Carlson, T. A., *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991. This *Preface*, which is a real 'hors-texte' of a kind precisely understood and commented on so well by Derrida, regulates and explains the rest of the text whilst claiming to be 'outside' it. Here Marion says that 'God is, exists, and that is the least of things' (p. xix) despite the fact that the rest of the book tries to say the complete opposite. Authors

standing of transcending, of the timeliness of the being of being human, *in* man's transcending, the divine may yet itself unfold (if God should so choose).

In note 25 Schrijvers says that 'the reader should be reminded that it is precisely this understanding, which is so closely related to Plato's anamnesis and Socrates' maieutics, that has set Levinas' thinking of transcendence in motion, adding '[Ethical] teaching is a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics.' This ignores the way in which when pedagogy teaches it does not simply confront the student with what he does not know, that he should then, in sublime shock, recognise its truth and fall before it: pedagogy proceeds *from* what is known *to* the unknown. There is always an element of the known in the uncovering of the unknown. Even the Greek gods knew this, which is why in order to say *unanticipated* things to mortals they appeared in *anticipated* forms. Often it is only later that the human recipient of a divine appearing in myth discovers that he or she has received a visit and a message from Olympus. Even the divinity of Christ is attested in the Gospels by his conformity to what is prophesied for the messiah – it is not enough that he should have known for himself that he was the Son of God. The lunatic asylums are awash with sons of God with this sure knowledge, alongside new Napoleons, their corresponding Wellingtons, and all the rest.

If knowledge of God is always based on what we do not yet know, why does this make knowledge of God an ethics (as Schrijvers has Levinas do here)? Is it because it is only with the *force* of the ethical that the unknown can be enforced as true? Does this not expose once again Levinas' own sublime thrill at enforcing the effects of mere juxtapositions, and that his ethics is not ethics at all, but yet another appeal to an uplifting, commanding, sublime? The genuinely unknown, appearing in the realm of the familiar is what Heidegger called the 'uncanny'. About this uncanny I have written elsewhere that it is 'something which is not either monstrous nor immense nor minute, but simply that which cannot be measured, or calculated, or reasoned about or away; nothing, Heidegger says, that can be "grasped by the fangs of the will", but rather the way being itself shines out into the everyday—something so simple that it "belongs so immediately to the 'canny' that it can never be explained on the basis of the familiar". The uncanny – the demonic – is therefore what surrounds everywhere and makes possible the familiar, which, before it became familiar, was itself proffered as uncanny.'³

Already in Schrijvers' characterisation with respect to light—the light we get from some thinkers, and darkness we find with others, an entirely *metaphysical* attitude is betrayed. Rather we should say that the greatest darkness (from Plato) obscures the greatest light. We, who are barely even able to enter into what Plato has to say, are correspondingly barely in a position to discard him so easily, despite what Schrijvers suggests. These are the *truncations* of thought – which a summary inevitably is – making everything 'easier' and so more accessible. Is philosophical thought easy? If it is, why should we even bother with it?

are still trying to rub this extraordinary statement away and save the text itself—how Derrida might have smiled.

³ See Hemming, L. P., *Heidegger's Atheism: The Refusal of a Theological Voice*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame University Press, p. 71. See for Heidegger's extensive discussion of the uncanny, Heidegger, M., *Parmenides in Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 54, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1992 (1982), esp. pp. 147–155.

Although we must concur fully with Schrijvers' elegant presentation of the transition in thought that I claim occurs from Parmenides to Plato – that is, to the Plato we all recognise – we need also to remind ourselves that *this* Plato, the Plato of the school-room, the Plato of Aristotle's polemic is the Plato we have received. To what extent is it really faithful to Plato himself?

And here we come from the last to the first of Schrijvers' questions, when he challenges me to answer 'first, that a rhetor can speak of being/beings "as what it really is" seems to neglect the Heideggerian/Aristotelian adage "that being can be spoken of in a manifold of ways"'. Although Heidegger discusses this phrase, it is no adage of his own, but is rather Aristotle's assertion 'τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς'.⁴

Schrijvers suggests that I posit that the rhetor can speak the *singular, one* form of the thing that a thing is (if the rhetor is doing what I say he has to do). He reads 'being is said in many ways' as *a* being can be said in many ways. But what is intended here is not *a* being, but *the being of beings*: beings in their being. He attempts to set me apart from Aristotle and Heidegger by suggesting I have asserted that every self-identical thing has only *one* identity. In this Schrijvers haunts me with the postmodern claims to plurality—that things have many ways of being spoken (and suggests that Aristotle and Heidegger would have concurred). We have to ask: what kind of plurality is Schrijvers counterposing to my supposed *hen*, my claim to the unitary oneness of each phenomenon? He has missed the point, and missed how carefully *Postmodernity's Transcending* explains that each time the rhetor speaks, he must speak the being of what he speaks *anew*. The being in question could be a battle, an appearance of a god, or a case against a person or the state: it could be all manner of things. I say in *Postmodernity's Transcending* that 'the rhetor [. . .] names, not what has a *word* for a name, but what must emerge anew each time – and so come into presence' (p. 62). Schrijvers has, paradoxically, made the mistake of assuming that the word πολλαχῶς has a single *unitary* meaning, at all places and in all times.

Not only has he missed, therefore, that it is *being* and not *beings* that can be said in many ways, but even more, that *beings can also* be said in many ways. What does τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς say essentially? It says *essentially*, that is philosophically, that *beings, no matter how they are said, have a restriction to being*. This is the *essential* meaning which Schrijvers has overlooked completely. Surely he should have seen that the whole of *Postmodernity's Transcending* works through an understanding that words are *unstable*, that their meanings shift, smear and blur, and flip somersault from one thing to another constantly (no matter how often philosophers, Canute-like, 'define their terms' to 'fix' the meaning of the words that are their stock in trade). That *words* always mean the same everywhere and at all times is as much a pretension of ontotheology as that *things* have a unitary determination (in the mind of God).

Heidegger wants to indicate that already the term πολλαχῶς has *degenerated* in Aristotle into metaphysics, and taunts Aristotle that despite this recognition, Aristotle's attempt to fix this *being* that could be said in *many ways* through the categories, it could never be so adequately grounded—and inasmuch as it was

⁴ See, for one example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1026 a 33.

never grounded by Aristotle, nor was it ever by Kant.⁵

Schrijver's entirely postmodern citation of the *πολλαχῶς* – his haunting suggestion that in the light of the death of God and so because the 'true' meaning of a thing cannot be fixed by reference to its being causally generate from the mind of God – has to be counterposed to what Aristotle actually meant by this, which is quite different. But where I would concur with Heidegger – what I tried to bring out with respect to this word *anew* – is that the genuine originary unitariness of the rhetor's work is because *for those for whom and to whom the rhetor speaks, he speaks not a unitary thing, but a thing which emerges out of a unitary world*. This is why the rhetor can *tell* the 'truth' of the thing, because truth here does not mean the true *against* the false (the one meaning which shows up the wrongness of all the others), but truly-disclosingly (*ἀλεθεύειν*) the rhetor discloses the thing in its world, *in the world in which he and those for whom and to whom he speaks, and which is thereby as a singular world made available to him and to them*. He has to do this *each time he speaks*, hence he must speak being in many ways because he is not *constructing this world* but *disclosing it as giving him to be each time*. 'Each time' here means *anew*, an essential part of the phenomenon of time.

The rhetor speaks *the essential restriction of the being in its being*, which means he speaks the world—and this means the character and being of the *time* and the character and being of the *place* out of which the being (of which he speaks) arises and comes to be. Two things are in play: not just the *ones who, through the rhetor, address the being (in its being)*, but also *the being (in its being) which addresses the ones co-presencing in its coming-to-be through the speaking of the rhetor*, i.e. those beings (in their being) whom the being (in its being) addresses. *This* has a singularity of time and place, a historical 'where' and 'whence' and 'whither'. *This* is what the rhetor says *once only each time* he says it—else he is no more than a parrot.

This resolves, in passing, the question which Schrijvers raises at note 22, where Schrijvers rightly notes that everyone from Aristotle via the Latin Averroists to Husserl, Levinas and beyond 'has not always been able to avoid the positing of a one, single transcendental ego' where the word *ego* and *soul* are interchangeable, while exposing why they could not resolve the question. In each case they were looking at the singularity of the *thing* and not the wholeness of world which is in each case *one*, from out of which the thing presences.

But this unity also resolves for us (*contra* Schrijvers) why the human being is not an 'epiphenomenon of the eventuating of being'. His attempt to make this suggestion into a moment of horror (he calls it an 'horrific picture') in his text, an ethical transgression in the order of philosophy, has not with sufficient depth understood man's restriction to world, and how man must uncover and speak in many ways the world to which he is restricted. Man needs no other world than the one which is his (and should keep his nose out of any other he thinks he has rights of access to, lest he be distracted). Understanding this (when man is so often tempted to other worlds, to those beyond, and those to which he can virtually have access) is the discipline and rigour of philosophy, a discipline which cancels all speculative expectations and which, did man accept it, would ready him for

⁵ Cf. Heidegger's discussion of Aristotle's phrase τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς at Heidegger, M., *Aristoteles, Metaphysik Q 1–3* in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 33, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1990, esp. p. 29ff.

God's utterance, God's word, when and where it given.⁶ Man should know his place, and know what place is his.

For my being-in-the-world can never be extracted from me (as a sort of horrid threat). Restriction to world is not a repression or limitation, but the generosity of the worlding of world, it is how world fits man to be himself. This is the very restriction of beings to being from out of which the philosopher must learn to be disciplined *to*, as much as the restriction that the rhetor (and philosopher) must learn to speak *of*. World is the basis for presencing/presence all the way down, as long as world remains interrogable for me. And when I finally lose my being-in-the-world, either through accident, senility or death, how am I to know that world persists beyond me, except by inference, by means of a postulation, a projection from the world-rich place I *now* inhabit? When will we learn to take more seriously Parmenides dictum 'τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν, τε καὶ εἶναι'.⁷

Schrijvers is to be commended for his appreciation of *Postmodernity's Transcending*, but I would ask him: if he can summarise the argument it makes, can he find his way in to the discipline which made it?

⁶ And would even ready man for heaven when he heeded God's calling of him to it through His Son, for all the cries against me of 'immanentist' from the theological epigones who have yet even to begin to understand the world in which they dwell, but nevertheless speak as if they had already secured and occupied their celestial vantage points and speak from them right now.

⁷ Parmenides, fragment 5 in Diels, H. (ed.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 1922, vol. 1, p. 152. 'For the same is (indeed) for thinking as is for being.'

