

# Eschatological Being

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## 1. Phenomenology as a philosophy of immanence

The critique of ontology defined twentieth-century philosophy in both the Anglo-American and the European traditions. In Europe, the most generative form of this critique was phenomenology, which sought to be true to what can appear and be known to humans from within their cognitive apparatus – in other words, to be true to humans' structures of intentionality, their ways of relating themselves to others and to objects. In the hands of thinkers like Martin Heidegger, this phenomenological method meant a bracketing of metaphysics (which now appeared formulated from a spurious God's-eye view), and with it, ultimately, a bracketing of any talk about God. Because God was, for Heidegger following Kierkegaard, of 'infinite qualitative difference' from humans, coming to humans (if at all) wholly from without, philosophers cannot responsibly speak of him.

This begins as an epistemological argument; but like Kant, Heidegger underpins it with a logical one. What God might give humans – the gift of grace as a participation in divine plenitude – is not in fact thinkable. To think it results in an existential antinomy similar to Kant's antinomies of reason: the very 'eschatological unrest' that defines human existence – its dynamics of desire – cannot in fact find 'completion' without ceasing to be what it most deeply is: life as movement and striving. This was already noted by Kant and even by Hegel.

Death plays both an existential and a logical role here. It bounds our life existentially: at the very moment when we could say, 'now I am fully myself; I no longer have actions and passions ahead of me that will shape and define who I am', we no longer are. The moment of completion is also the moment of death, of no longer knowing ourselves at all. In this role, death, for Heidegger, also serves as a logical symbol of the impossibility of plenitude.

For Heidegger, as we know, this results in a vision of humanity that is defined by an ethical imperative: the imperative neither to deny the pull of plenitude, nor to surrender to its illusion. He gives us, in other words, an ethical inflection of the (Kantian) problem of metaphysics, centring

on a morally charged description of ‘the human’ as defined most vitally by the tension between ineluctable finitude and the equally persistent desire to transcend it. The aim of philosophy is here no longer to aspire to a transcendent ideal, but to sustain an ‘authentic’ human existence by refusing to collapse this constitutive tension into either a metaphysical meta-narrative or an apathetic denial of its allure.

## **2. Diastatic and diathetic responses to this challenge**

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two main theological strategies developed for responding to Heidegger’s challenge from within a phenomenological tradition; call them the diastatic and the diathetic. By ‘diastatic’ I mean arguments against the exclusion of God from phenomenological description which focus on the implications of *desire* as a basic mode of human intentionality. By ‘diathetic’, I mean arguments which focus on the human openness to identity-shaping experiences that come from outwith their own structures of intentionality.

First, the diastatic. Catholics such as Henri de Lubac (here following Maurice Blondel), Edith Stein, and Karl Rahner argued that rather than naturally bracketing any speculation about a supernatural origin or end to human existence, phenomenology in fact fails in its core task of describing human intentionality if it ignores the inalienable presence within human self-consciousness of an orientation towards the supernatural. The Catholics parse this inalienable presence in different ways: Stein as the infinite towards which finite human consciousness ‘breaks open’<sup>1</sup>; Rahner as the horizon of all human acts of knowing<sup>2</sup>; but most influentially, de Lubac (after Blondel) as a ‘natural desire for the supernatural’. Although Blondel stressed that only God could reveal himself as the fulfilment of the God-shaped ‘blank spaces’ naturally felt,<sup>3</sup> these existential ‘needs’<sup>4</sup> themselves were an inalienable part of human experience, and therefore could not be excluded from an existential phenomenology. De Lubac shifts Blondel’s terminology of ‘need’ to the more affirmative one of ‘desire’, and argues that the experience of desire is not a mere recognition of lack, but itself already an indication of an identity-defining divine call.

Stein, Rahner, Blondel, and de Lubac all trace their responses back to Thomas Aquinas. In other words, the challenge posed by phenomenology spurs them to re-read Thomas (as well as Augustine, Bonaventure and others<sup>5</sup>) in a phenomenological light, seeking in the ancients’ discussions of anamnesis, divine illumination, etc. veins of experience that would not be ruptured by the phenomenologists’ razor.

Secondly, the diathetic. Instead of trying to accommodate an openness to the transcendent in human structures of intentionality (such as desire), later French philosophers including Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Yves Lacoste reject the frame of ‘intentionality’

altogether, arguing instead that the most important phenomena, even of everyday experience, are those that claim or overwhelm us from outside our own intentional movements. It is precisely those irrupting phenomena – for Levinas the face, for Marion and others the saturated phenomenon – by whose affect we are constituted. For the theologian, this means that we are not in fact making a phenomenologically *exceptional* case for God when we claim that he irrupts into human experience from outside human categories or intentionality: many kinds of phenomena do so. As with the diastatic approach, talk of God is saved from the phenomenological critique by a re-staking of phenomenology's bounds from within.

Theologically, these two strategies can crudely be said to map onto familiar divides between theologies of glory and theologies of the cross: the first assumes a connatural stretching towards God, the second the irruption of a radically other God from beyond our structures of knowing.

Ontologically, the first conceives God (analogically) *as* Being; the second conceives Being univocally, and God as beyond it.

### **3. Desire and participation**

It is, unsurprisingly, the first, diastatic strategy of overcoming the phenomenological challenge from within which has most shaped the work of *ressourcement* and Radical Orthodoxy. This is because that language of desire dovetails with a renewed, Catholic characterisation of God not primarily through appeal to infinite qualitative difference, but through appeal to his indwelling in our innermost depths. In other words, these responses are metaphysically underpinned by the assertion of a participation (whether neo-Platonic or analogical in emphasis) in the Trinitarian ground of being. This participation in plenitude also, as John Milbank has often written, calls for a different logic: a logic of gift and excess.

We see this in many places throughout the corpus. Catherine Pickstock wrote (now twenty years ago) that the Christian desire for the good 'does not lack its object in the ordinary sense of lack, but attains its goal in and through the act of desiring.'<sup>6</sup> And John Milbank puts it, describing Henri de Lubac's position, which he shares, as follows: 'Spiritual beings in their deepest identity are lured to unity with God – even in some sense already possess this unity.'<sup>7</sup>

Catherine sees this participation as proleptically realized in the liturgy. Through acknowledgement of our brokenness and limitation, she thinks, we can yet break through, in this hallowed space, to participation in the heavenly realm, in which time is turned to peace: 'The request for peace can only be made authentically from within peace, from within the heavenly realm which we now do not merely impersonate'.<sup>8</sup>

My critical point is directed both at this participatory response and at the diathetic response of Marion's theological recipients, but it is the former I'm more invested in, and so address primarily. I feel the need to say that the work of re-constructing an ontology of finite reality by participation in the Trinity – whether experientially mediated by desire or the reception of saturated phenomena – is vital, but also dangerous.

The danger is hinted at, for example, by the fact that accounts of participation characteristically refer back to a time that never was, an idealized medieval era in which the participatory ontology the writers sketch was real. That's because such an ontology needs to be instantiated to count for anything, and yet it's manifestly not instantiated now. There are, of course, always witnesses to experiences of participation – but these are deeply fraught. They are vulnerable to disconfirmation ('what I thought was plenitude was really manipulation'), to over-narrating, and re-narrating (ask anyone whose family has fallen apart). Narratives of plenitude are also hard to shield from the construction of political utopias, or the over-valorization of perceived instantiations of Trinitarian participation. More seriously, ultimately, participatory ontology finds it very hard to avoid some form of pantheism.

## **5. Desire and eschatology**

Heidegger has to be taken more seriously here. Human temporality and mortality cannot simply be outpaced towards participation in plenitude, whether in knowledge or being. Participatory ontology is too often over-realized eschatology.

The phenomenological critique, therefore, demands an eschatological dimension to Trinitarian ontology: a theology of participation that takes more seriously the eschatological preliminariness of human knowing and being. Attending to a phenomenology of desire is essential to this. Because Heidegger is right: the desire we might feel for God is precisely the desire for something that could not be given in our spatio-temporal existence: it is an existential aporia.

The object of our desire for plenitude, in other words, is impossible to determine from within. This is partly because desire is always mediated by imagination, while the fulfilment of desire is strictly beyond our imagination. We can never fully escape the Feuerbachian and Derridean critique that desire and imagination may simply project its own image. Of course we have knowledge of God in Christ – God is not an entire eschatological unknown – but what we see in Christ is not, for the most part, God in glory. As George MacDonald says, "The door into life generally opens behind us," and "the only wisdom" for one "haunted with the scent of unseen roses, is work", i.e. the imitation of Christ.

This doesn't mean that we should give up on desire. Thomas Aquinas, in a remarkable passage in the *Summa Theologiae*, even suggests that such desire might increase a capacity for beatitude:

[T]he intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly; and he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more love; because where there is the greater love, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more love, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.<sup>9</sup>

But it is vital to remember that desire is, as I've just said, for something that could not be given in our spatio-temporal existence. This is, I suggest, because our very mode of knowing now is merely an image, a preliminary, to the mode of knowing in which alone we could experience plenitude.

We know all things now partly by self-reflection – by taking into ourselves, as the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition puts it, the thing known in the mode of the knower. But the New Testament suggests again and again that this is 'return to self' that will be broken. 'Now I see in a glass darkly; but then I shall see face to face'.<sup>10</sup> 'Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is'.<sup>11</sup>

To be created in the image of God, in Christ, means that we cannot know or be ourselves until we see him face to face. Contrary to the assumption of a basic and immediate epistemological access to the self which is prerequisite to all other knowledge, or the ability to take into ourselves all things known, St Paul here projects knowledge (or vision) of *God* as the most direct form of self-knowledge. In the eschaton, St Paul suggests, humans will know themselves not by reflecting on themselves but by beholding God and being beheld by him. This cannot mean a taking of God into ourselves, for he is infinite; it must mean a being taken of ourselves, somehow, into God – an entirely eccentric mode of knowledge of which our entire mode of knowing, here and now, where God is still hidden, is merely an image.

But this means that we can live our being-towards-death as a being towards self-surrender, a surrender that's not merely incidental to our entry into plenitude, but part of it. This is an epistemological inflection of Mark 8.35: 'For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.' Being-towards-death, for the Christian, simply is being-towards-God.

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Stein, *Der Aufbau der menschlichen Person*, ed. Beate Beckmann-Zöller, Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe 14 (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2004), 32.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma* (London: Harvill Press, 1964), 160; see also Francesca Aran Murphy, 'The Influence of Maurice Blondel', in Jordan Hillebert, ed., *T&T Clark Companion to Henri de Lubac* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 57–92.

<sup>4</sup> Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, 157–58.

<sup>5</sup> These are the three de Lubac singles out in *At the Service of the Church*; see Murphy, 'Blondel', in Hillebert, *Companion to Henri de Lubac*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 13.

<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Pickstock, *After Writing*, 237–38. For a more extended engagement, see Euan Grant, 'An Eschatological Critique of Catherine Pickstock's Liturgical Theology', *New Blackfriars* 100, no 1089 (2019), 493-508.

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1.12.6.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 13.12; see also Judith Wolfe, 'Eschatology and Human Knowledge of God', in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 157–65.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 3.2. See also Colossians 3.3-4.