

ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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C'est le corps et le corps seul qui philosophe.¹

*Thus Thales had seen the unity of all that is,
but when he went to communicate it,
he found himself talking about water!²*

I. TWO RIVAL VERSIONS OF PHILOSOPHY. THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC PROBLEMATIC

If, colloquially, we could say that philosophy seeks the “meaning of life,” we could say the same, colloquially and in a hopelessly inexact way, about religion. There is something important about this observation despite its vagueness. It could be taken to mean that there is a desperate antagonism between two “absolute” discourses; it could also mean that, in the end, philosophy and religion are *really* the same thing. Now if we were to reduce the relation of philosophy to religion to its barest essentials, we could be tempted to say, as many have, that philosophy’s task is to purify the idolatrous tendencies

¹ The last line of Didier Franck, *Nietzsche et l'ombre de Dieu*, 476.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 45.

of religious thinking to reduce the Absolute to its own concepts, a result, seemingly, of the unqualified and unsurpassable status "revelation" inexorably plays in the religious system. This is the greatest and most traditional account of the philosophical task we have. It could be called, at its most pure, the "philosophy of revelation." Such a description of philosophy could stand for the classical, that is, the Greek view (in the critique of the myths by a purified logos) as much as the modern position (in the critique of revelation by an autonomous reason). Of course, neither of these traditions can be reduced to such a simplistic scheme, but it does tell us something important: in both instances, philosophy is conceived as a critique of the native human tendency toward anthropomorphism.³ It assumes that religion, in its attempt to penetrate the sphere of truth, to reach the unconditioned, can only be thought in categories of *merely* human dimension, natively inadequate for the absolute. At best, philosophy is something post-religious, though accomplishing everything the cult attempts (as in Plato and Hegel) or it remains skeptical (as in Xenophon and Kant). But is this description the last word, the *Christian* word, about philosophy? The question before us is not whether religion, even Christianity, is hopelessly "anthropomorphic," but rather how the seemingly crude and necessary "anthropomorphism" of Christianity can assert itself as absolute. What is the philosophy that the elevation of historical revelation to the level of absolute truth requires?

II. REFLECTION ON THE PROBLEMATIC *IN NUCE*

In order to examine our topic, I offer a meditation on three epigrams, one from Edith Stein, the philosopher-saint, and two from Pascal.

³ Of course, "myth," as a theoretical category, is the result of the separation of philosophical logos from out of the cult and the turn of reason's speculative gaze upon it. Myth is cult in the terms laid out by philosophical logos. Such a logos, as we will see in Plato, *depends* upon this relation, the relation *to* myth *on* the hidden ground of cult, even as it claims to separate from it.

- A. Any word spoken about God presupposes a word spoken by God.⁴
- B. Something incomprehensible is not for that reason any less real.⁵
- C. Speaking of human things, we say that it is necessary to know them before we can love them. The saints however say that it is necessary to love divine things in order to know them, and that we only enter truth through charity.⁶

A. Our first epigram discloses the religious, theological and revelatory starting point for any truthful speech about God, and by implication all truthful speech whatsoever, insofar as truth and God are inseparable. The point I would like to make is that the thesis of such inseparability is an *eschatological* statement: only a final word can justify it. The necessity of such a final word of justification for philosophy and that philosophy cannot provide itself was anticipated by Aristotle when he noted that metaphysics or first philosophy can only be justified at the far end of undertaking it.⁷ Philosophy is always a risk.

B. Our second epigram is an attack on the “modern” reduction of reality to an a priori condition of intelligibility, as in, most dramatically, the concept of the principle of sufficient reason. In a similar manner, perhaps, to Nietzsche, Pascal discerned an implicit, self-blinding atheism at the heart of the elevation of scientific or Cartesian reason to an absolute principle. If there is in fact an atheism intrinsic to our concept of conceptuality and therefore to our philosophical attitudes in general, then what is required? Perhaps the truth of the matter, Pascal suggests, is precisely the opposite of what the universalization of scientific modality of reason presupposed. Historical thinking turns on incomprehensibility.⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, for example, in his *Certitudes négatives*, has recently shown incomprehensibility to be an implicit principle of philosophical thought, even of thinkers at the height of modern philosophy: the

⁴ Edith Stein, *Les Voies de la connaissance de Dieu: La Théologie symbolique de Denys l'Aréopagite*, 24.

⁵ Pascal, *Pensée* # 19, 55.

⁶ Pascal, *De l'art de persuader*, §3, 193. Jean-Luc Marion insightfully comments on this thesis in §25 of *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*. Cf. also *Pensée* # 864: “Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.”

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 983a 10.

⁸ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Certitudes négatives*, §1, 11-20.

certitude of *unknowing* is greater than the certainties achieved by reason, or rather, is the highest certitude of reason, and, as an *infinite* certitude, is precisely the implicit principle for the lesser certitudes of reason on which modern philosophy is erected. Does such a principle of "insufficient reason" point to the theological, the religious and to revelation as the paradigmatic case, then, for philosophical reason itself? Despite the principled atheism in his thought, Hans Blumenberg, with his Husserlian/Nietzschean awareness of the metaphorical origins of concepts, may provide the first steps for philosophy to discern a more radical path, a second and complementary vocation to that of purifying critique, a supernatural one, within which the "pagan" path finds itself to have been always already inscribed: the eschatological horizon of history.⁹

C. Our third epigram and principle for philosophy, therefore, discloses the two-fold path of thought, grounding the first path (that is, things seen from a *relatively* "natural" perspective, or reason without *explicit* grounding in revelation, as in the Greeks or the moderns) in the second and greater one, the epistemology of sanctity, where the proper insolubility or incomprehensibility basic to philosophical problems is not solved but nevertheless finds its greatest realization as incomprehensible, insoluble and therefore most fully philosophical.

3. REPETITION OF THE REFLECTION

A. So let us reflect more extensively on our first epigram.

Any word spoken about God presupposes a word spoken by God.

⁹ The debate with Blumenberg is not primarily, then, about the mythology of modernity, i.e., whether the "secularization thesis" or justified "self-assertion" is the principle of modernity. Rather it is one of discernment: Does the "principle of incomprehensibility" succeed in more profoundly elevating the principle of reason itself? Thought, the interpretation of the intelligibility of things, turns on a choice that is always already made. Plenitude or lack? All or nothing? Antinomy (as in Florensky) or the insurpassability of and the "courageous" absolutization of contradiction (as in Hegel) for reason? Perhaps the embrace of antinomy, beyond contradiction, reveals the "courageous" embrace of contradiction to be less noble than at first sight. Blumenberg sides with Hegel here, as his "metaphysical" naturalization of the absolute as nature's terrifying facticity demonstrates.

Stein's epigram, just quoted, is a simple idea, but rigorous, and difficult to think through in all of its implications.¹⁰ Of course, I share this title with a text of the great pagan neo-Platonist Porphyry, who like his early Christian interlocutors, believed that philosophy's greatest question is the question of God, for it is in God that philosophy's own soteriological quest is finally realized. And what is this quest? Is it not to say something true, to speak the human truth par excellence, indeed to embody the truth itself? Could not one even say, therefore, that the task of philosophy is *to make the word flesh*? If so, then incarnation is, according to philosophy, *the* human task. The truth par excellence is divine. Yet there is a problem for philosophy: *only* God speaks truly of God. Porphyry, for example, who, at its end, epitomizes the singular quest of classical philosophy, never gave up searching for the single path to truth, the path that unites in itself every human path.¹¹ He was of course certain that Christianity was not it. How could a fragment of history itself serve as the key to the whole of the human quest for truth, the revelation of absolute truth? Put another way: man, a creature within history, speaks of God only secondarily and at a distance from God's speech. Restating Porphyry's question, we could therefore ask: How then does man speak truthfully about God? If man's speech is inherently "untruthful" at least in the light of the divine speech (where God's Word is one with God himself), then how can God speak truly about himself to his creature? Christianity offers itself as a path for philosophy here and would seem to be philosophy at its most philosophical, even if, simultaneously, the love of wisdom must be "crucified," must become "folly," in order to find itself. A Pauline conception to be sure; and such also was the Patristic conviction about *philosophia*: Christianity was the place where the path of life and thought can truly become one. The "scandal" of reason, its inability to ground itself, to invoke the truth that it seeks out of its magical incantations, is the first condition of

¹⁰ I attempt to work through the major implications of this single idea in my doctoral dissertation, *Philosophy from Oracles: Meditations on Last Philosophy* (The University of Virginia, 2011). Here it is the paradoxical conditions that the primary data of Christian eschatology first place on our finitude that proffer a philosophical reflection that is truly "post-transcendental."

¹¹ See Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, 123-221.

reason's own rationality. Where Word becomes flesh, philosophy's quest to speak the definitive truth about man can be realized. It is here, according to Christianity, that the human task is truly undertaken.

B. This leads us again to our second epigram. This time by Pascal:

Something incomprehensible is not for that reason any less real.

God is incomprehensible; mystery is intrinsic to his nature. Yet, as Aquinas suggests, God is the most real and therefore the most *evident* reality that there is. And therefore the truth of God is the first truth and key to the discernment of the final truth of everything. Incomprehensibility – or to be less confusing, “mystery” – is therefore a sign or “indication” of the manifestation of truth.¹² This ought not to be a shock to anyone, though I still do not consider it a banal observation. But it does require us to rethink the limits and tasks of philosophy, particularly regarding the nature of its certitudes. For here, in truth, incomprehensibility carries the most force of evidence; and therefore unknowability, incertitude, is the most certain thing there is. Surely the divinity of God is the paradigm of “mystery” in this sense? The most suggestive question is to ask how this divine incomprehensibility can be approached by philosophy. Or rather, the main task is to understand how, in the light (or shadow) of the “impossible” disclosure of divine incomprehensibility, where the divine word is *fully* divine, even in history, even submitted *fully* to the conditions and limits of human finitude, that is, in the “impossible” *apocalypse* of the truth itself, human reason, *philosophia*, is offered a new vocation.

C. And thus, our last epigram. Pascal again:

¹² See Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, Inv. 1, §§1-4 (vol. 1 of English translation, 269-74). Balthasar's discussion of theophany as “indication” of the presence of the divine mystery as “kabod” in *The Glory of the Lord* VI, 9-37, is instructive.

Speaking of human things, we say that it is necessary to know them before we can love them. The saints however say that it is necessary to love divine things in order to know them, and that we only enter truth through charity.

This fine quotation has been expressed somewhere even more epigrammatically, where it is said this way:

One must first know man and human things in order to love them. One must first love God and divine things in order to know them.

We are all familiar with Pascal's celebrated doctrine of the "three orders," composed of, first, the material realm, the knowledge of which is governed by the senses; then the intellectual realm, the knowledge of which is governed by the mind; and finally, the spiritual realm, the knowledge of which is governed by the heart, the organ of divine knowledge and the fount of first principles.¹³ We ought to consider this last epigram, in its simplified form, a summary of that doctrine.¹⁴ And here, according to Pascal, there are two paths for reason to take. First, rising from the material world, through the intellectual and toward God; or, second, though not in *contradiction* to the first path, starting from divine speech (or oracles), one can come to think after these words and even within them: one's love of God opens reason to a new comprehension of the truth in which all things are implicated. According to Christianity, God's "final word," if truly spoken in Jesus Christ, does not bring reason to an end; rather, such a Word offers itself as *the* new beginning for thought. The philosophical quest, like anything else, is reordered around a new center. Reason is of course present in each of the three orders (the intellect is surely present in sense knowledge, for example, and vice versa), yet they remain fragmented the one from the other insofar as the key that unlocks their unity, buried within the impenetrable precincts of the third order, remains not simply unacknowledged, but unknown because unloved. The epistemological role of charity, the "epistemology of the saints," dissolves the "metaphysical" partition between nature and grace and

¹³ Cf. *Pensée* # 282. Cf. also *Pensée* # 281: "Heart, instinct, principles."

¹⁴ The source of such a doctrine in Pascal is most likely Augustine: *Non intratur in veritatem, nisi per caritatem*: "we do not enter into the truth but by love" (*Contra Faustum*, 32, 18.), and is, ultimately, an expression of a generally Johannine sensibility.

contradicts, even calls to account, the attitude of a priori limitations on truth's capacity to reveal itself. The "apocalypse of truth" is the event by which truth discloses itself *as it is in itself*: the eschatological paradigm of such disclosure is of course Jesus Christ. *Question*: Does Jesus give all of God to his Church? *Answer*: Yes, without reserve. But all of God is always infinitely more than all of God. Perhaps the paradox can be expressed in this way: God gives himself completely only in infinitely transcending his self-giving, for God infinitely transcends himself. To gloss a distinction at the heart of Marion's phenomenology, between givenness and appearance, let us say that in Christ everything God can say about himself is *already* given, though it is *not yet* finally manifested.¹⁵ This is why Christ, the Word of God, is the Logos, the last word, in a philosophical sense as well. The Christian mystics repeatedly teach this truth. Take the Mystical Doctor, John of the Cross, who, in *The Living Flame of Love*, discloses how in the union of mystical love with God, the knowledge of God passes over to a simultaneous knowledge of all things. As in Aquinas, the vision of God *is* the vision of all things in God, as they really are in themselves, which cannot be understood apart from perceiving (*aisthêsis*) their relation to God, that is, to themselves in God. The purifying passage of the dark nights of faith turns the soul inside out so that the body is no longer an impediment or detour through which one passes to the truth, but rather becomes saturated with spiritual light to the point of its absolute transparency to divine reality: such divinity is the end (*telos*) of materiality as the dogmas of the resurrection of the body and the unity of heaven and earth in a new and eternal creation imply. Knowledge of created things can lead you up to God, but it is only the love of God *incarnate in a life* – in other words, sanctity – that opens a new path for thought within an absolute horizon under which the various orders and domains of knowledge can be calibrated together and found mutually illuminating.¹⁶ The philosophical upshot is that the limitations of knowledge, especially knowledge of God, *are not given in advance* – finitude, for example, is not an a priori limitation of divine knowledge

¹⁵ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness*, 203. I benefit here from Rémi Brague's similar use of this distinction in our particular context in his *De Dieu des chrétiens et un ou deux autres*, 168.

¹⁶ Guardini said something similar when he theorized a "third domain" somewhere between nature and grace which comes to be illuminated for thought only by the "Übergriff" of grace. See Romano Guardini, *Welt und Person*, 1939.

– but rather its limitations are the limitations of sanctity, and sanctity is imparted by God alone. In explicating the epistemology of the saints, we are, with Pascal, on solidly philosophical ground. The mystic or saint is one who incarnates and anticipates the truth of the world to come, the last word and first principle of this world’s truth, already, ahead of the end, in the present. The implications of this eschatological reversal are massive for philosophy’s orientation to truth and even its own conception of itself, our “meta-philosophy.” Let us take the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius as a brief example: for him, as a result of the events of divine revelation, symbols paradoxically exceed concepts in their capacity to signify divine transcendence. The greatest negation comes by way of an unsurpassable immersion of reason in the material symbols and names justified by God’s actions in history, which critique and purify reason to a greater degree than reason, by virtue of its own self-purification in the modes of Platonic dialectic and Aristotelian demonstration, can achieve in itself. In other words, the divine Denys expands and radicalizes Proclus’ insight of the negative power of images – which are in Proclus still too narrowly considered *intrinsic* to the processes of Platonic dialectic¹⁷ – by means of an a priori commitment to an historical, and therefore liturgical and Scriptural, revelation as the path for the fulfillment of the philosophical quest. Here the critique of mythical anthropomorphisms is shown to be a first and lesser stage in the ascent of reason to God. The crude and archaic significations of historical revelation become bearers of an ever-greater rationality that philosophical reason must submit to and around which it must re-orient itself. Such a fundamentally Pauline position, is why, incidentally, that he takes his pen name from the philosopher-convert on the Areopagus in Athens whom Paul convinced of the resurrection from the dead in Acts 17. The pseudonym is therefore the proposition of a hermeneutic of Scripture as much as it is, reciprocally, an appeal to Scripture as the key to read his “philosophy”.¹⁸ The Pseudo-Denys shows us why Pavel Florensky’s

¹⁷ See Daniel Cohen, *Formes théologiques et symbolisme sacré chez (Pseudo-)Denys l’Aréopagite* (Bruxelles: Editions Ousia, 2010), p. 90.

¹⁸ As he says in the *Divine Names*, 640a: “If there exists a man who is completely rebellious to the teaching of the Scriptures, such a man will be a perfect stranger to our way of philosophy.”

statement in his mesmerizing opus, *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, can be expanded to become a new principle for philosophy itself:

The more massively and metaphysically crudely and archaically we conceive religious concepts, the more profound will the symbolism of their expression be and *therefore the closer we will come to a genuine understanding* of strictly religious experience.¹⁹

The task would be to understand *philosophia* or Christian *theōria* (the name we can give to that thinking in this “wilderness” where philosophy and theology are not clearly demarcated the one from the other) as a *philosophy* “from above” by contrast to what we can term, somewhat misleadingly perhaps, as “pagan *theōria*”, which could also be called a *philosophy* “from below” (the principles of which are abstracted from the concrete context of (sacred) history). This distinction ought to clarify, and what I propose in fundamental agreement with Pseudo-Dionysius here, that this “pagan” way of thought, “from below,” is not essentially bad in itself: remember our first epigram, and Porphyry’s agreement with it – and besides, the critique of “mythical” thinking, of the idolatries of thought by concepts surely more adequate to the divine, is of perennial importance. Such is just not the *final* task, the eschatological and therefore the defining task of philosophy. Inasmuch as we still remain within history and must think from within it, and cognizant of the limitations that history imposes on us, we ought to become avidly aware that the logos of philosophy itself becomes idolatrous when it considers its first path of the critique of idolatries to be absolute, especially if philosophy has a task after the Word is made flesh, after the consummation of its task is inaugurated before its very eyes (the castigation of philosophical negation as inevitably “idolatrous” is the upshot, let us observe, of the great pagan Damascius’ radically apophatic critique of his own neo-Platonic tradition). Conceptual idolatry, the absolutization of philosophy “from below” is from this perspective the highest and most pernicious of idolatries since the instrument meant for the purification of thought becomes suddenly and terrifyingly implicated in the very idolatry it can no longer hope to escape – Only a divine Word, spoken fully from within history and yet bringing history to its full term, can lead us out of the self-referential tangle created by our concepts.

¹⁹ *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 63. Emphasis added.

As necessary as our concepts are, they only lead us away from the thing itself: with the dialectic of reason we sacrifice proximity (the “sacred” proximity granted by myths) for the sake of clarity and distance. The problem arises not only when this clarity and distance of purifying reason comes to be considered as a replacement for mythical proximity, and the foundation for a new “certainty” lost to reason since its foundational crisis in its initial separation and liberation from the myths, for the very same thing happens whenever reason considers its liberation from mythical thinking complete: think of the Church Fathers’ critique of pagan philosophy *by reference to historical event* in the definition of dogma, which becomes exemplary in the Cappadocian debate with the Eunomians. Here the debate was precisely about whether the definitive revelation of God in Christ snapped the “pagan” link between the cosmos and the Origin of its intelligibility, as it did for the Arians, who considered the creation to be the product of an “instrument,” the Son, who is in essence dissimilar from the Father.²⁰ It was irrational, and a crime against philosophical reason, and therefore idolatrous, to consider the Son, the *Logos* and creative principle of the cosmos, to be wholly on the divine side of the Creator-creature divide. The Cappadocian genius was to demonstrate how the infinitude and absoluteness of the divine nature was not compromised in the hypostatic descent of God (and therefore the ascent of man), but, to the contrary, was revealed to be all the more divine, since “the descent of God is the excess of power” and even that the “power of going against his nature” is the greater “proof” of the divine power itself.²¹ It is in the *very flesh* of Christ that the Christian revolution of philosophical reason takes place. Given this, it is all the more important to take as of first importance that fundamental to the Christian revelation is its self-conception as the “last,” that is, that it is the final word of God about himself, the *dénouement* and fulfillment of every human aspiration towards final truth, toward God. It is, in other words, absolute. To fail to understand this is to fail to understand Christianity and its specific *ratio*. The origins of the critique and

²⁰ On the pertinence of the patristic fashioning of orthodoxy in the Christological and Trinitarian debates to the iconoclastic debates and then to what will later become articulated at the font of modernity in the language of “nature” and “grace,” see Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *God’s Human Face*, 3-13.

²¹ I quote here St. Gregory Nazianzus, from his *Catechetical Oration 24* (PG 45: 64).

material refashioning of philosophical concepts in revelation means that philosophy, the attempt of reason to say something definitive about man, must take such "absoluticity" into account – most especially when it seeks to understand itself. Eschatology, in other words, ought to play the role of the implicit and concrete horizon of our "first philosophy," our "metaphysics." What do I mean? Permit me to refer to Yves Congar's remarks about the importance of eschatology for ecclesiology from 1949 and expand them into a working principle for philosophy, once again:

Eschatology is becoming, in theological thought, once more what it is in scripture and the Fathers, *namely the true significance of history, a significance which, elucidating the whole mystery of the Church, acts as a ferment in the present order of things, and this order will only be understood fully in its final outcome.* This sense for the eschatological element is what is most lacking in ecclesiology since the sixteenth century. Without it, men looked on the last things not so much as the end and fulfillment of the entire order of creation, but as an accumulation of "things," somehow present behind the curtain of death and which could be studied like the "things" of the earth. They asked: *Quid sit ignis purgatorius? Utrum visio Dei sit per speciem?* [What is the fire of purgatory? Is the vision of God had through a concept?] Just as they inquired, in physics, into the nature of fire, or in epistemology into knowledge through a species. In short, they went in for a kind of physics of the last things.²²

Such a confusion of ontological orders is equivalent to a literal reading of the Apocalypse of St. John. It is simply bad philosophy that permits such confusion. But I assert that it is bad eschatology that defines bad philosophy as much as it creates bad ecclesiology. The passage to be taken is from a "physics" of the last things, to a "meta-physics" of the last things, from the last things.

4. ESCHATOLOGY AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY

So, what if one were to set himself to the task of answering the vexing question of the relation of philosophy and theology in the Christian tradition from the vantage of such a "last philosophy"? I contend that he would quickly

²² Yves Congar, "Eschatologie," 463. Emphasis mine.

find this question to be virtually insoluble. He would know, therefore, that, according to philosophy's own standards, he was on the right path. He could then propose to himself that it is the content of eschatology, understood as providing the first distinctions absolute for reason, that could cut a path through the thicket. This question of the proper relation of philosophy to theology here quickly becomes only a path into a much bigger and more elemental problem about the eschatological nature of reason itself.

A. THOUGHT MADE STRANGE

Eschatological reflection in this way leads to the strangest thought. I would like to articulate this thought by reference to Nietzsche. I find myself having to agree with Rudolf Carnap (of all people), the logical positivist, who, in his scathing critiques of Heidegger in his essay, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language," as we all know, concluded that Nietzsche is the best metaphysician precisely because his philosophy was unfolded solely in a poetic register: if metaphysics is an inadequate substitute for art, Nietzsche "almost completely" avoids the confusion.²³ We could say something similar, if for fundamentally different reasons. Through exploring the question of philosophy from an eschatological starting point, one should conclude that philosophy itself ought to, and in fact irreparably does, function within an irreducibly figurative horizon. I would describe therefore the activity of reason itself as irreducibly metaphorical: meta-phor, which, when broken down into its fundamental etymological parts means simply "to transfer", or better, "to bear across", is actually a rather good description of the nature of philosophical conceptualization itself. In other words, metaphor is at the heart of reason; reason never really escapes the regime of the symbolic. This means that religious symbols are much more than material bearers of a transcendent rational signification that concepts can reach more adequately. This is an obvious result of a theological a priori that is unsurpassable: what I have described above as

²³ Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," 60-81, esp. pp. 80-1.

revelation's absolute demand on reason. But understanding such a demand is the real challenge for philosophy today. Ricœur's famous epigram, that "the symbol gives rise to thought," accounts for much here, even if we would have to go beyond even Ricœur in order to do full justice to the radical rationality of the symbolic in the last horizon of eschatology, in the first utterance of the final word for philosophy.²⁴ But what of Ricœur's other epigram, that "between absolute knowledge and the hermeneutics of witness, it is necessary to choose"?²⁵ Is the claim or at least commitment to revealed truth as absolute equivalent to "absolute knowledge"? The answer lies, again, in eschatology, that is, in the a priori commitment to the apocalypse of truth in history, inasmuch as it provides the distinction as its appearance as absolute and last, is yet only in inaugural form. Here hermeneutics becomes the reception of this paradoxically inaugural-and-waiting-to-be-consummated truth, involving the invisible "call," if you like, and its manifestation in the "response" of absolute commitment to its still hidden absoluticity within history, indeed as the very meaning of history itself. But again, this means that the action of holiness in the world is the enactment of the truth and therefore the (highest) evidential power of the truth as far as Christianity is concerned.²⁶ Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologies*, put it this way: "A philosopher is one who has knowledge of divine and human matters and follows every path of living well (*Etymologies*, VIII, vi, 1). And hence, that which Ricœur sought by way of the hermeneutical prioritization of metaphor and symbol is realized only by way of the incarnation of final truth that the life of sanctity manifests in the world, and hence the priority of "absoluticity" over hermeneutics, which follows after it. And this means that the definition of the ever-elusive "naïveté" sought by philosophy is simply the unification of word and deed, doctrine and life. Philosophy, as the path of human life, starts where such a naïveté is materialized.

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, conclusion, 347-ff.

²⁵ Paul Ricœur, the final line of "L'herméneutique du témoignage," 35-61. Cf. also his essay "Appropriation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 193, which simply drops the word "witness" from the above quotation. Likewise: "Between finitude and absolute knowledge it is necessary to choose" ("Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 74).

²⁶ Hence Christ's words in Matt. 7:14 and parallels: "By their fruits you shall know them." Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," 181-209.

B. A VALUABLE DUPLICITY OF THE PLATONIC REVOLUTION

The metaphorical process of conceptualization can be seen in Plato's paradigmatic philosophical transposition of the concept of *theōria*, which, as Andrea Nightingale has suggested, originally was the word for a religious pilgrimage culminating in a sacred spectacle. The concept depends, for its own conceptual force, wholly on the power of the original, "ordinary" (or rather, "extraordinary") meaning of the word.²⁷ Philosophy, in its initial "pagan" mode of conceptualization, is here discovered to be parasitic: the elevation of philosophical conceptualization to primacy depends on the covering over of its own meta-phorical origin. Its roots lie in another order. And further, such conceptualization, as I just indicated, is a metaphorical process itself: involving the transfer of meaning from one realm to another; conceptualization is itself simply the passage from the better known to the lesser known – a looking at something *by means of* something else (did not Aristotle already describe the most genuine method of reason in precisely these terms?²⁸). Paradoxically, then, the most direct thought *is* indirect thought. The metaphorical process disclosed as absolute is found even at the heart of "pagan" *theōria*, in its self-emancipatory critical turn toward myth. Pagan "theōria" is the passage of reason from *mythos* to *logos*, of which we are all familiar through textbook descriptions of pre-Socratic philosophy, where reason was first "emancipated" from the stultifying darkness of the anthropomorphic veils in the myths. It no doubt was. But when such a passage is absolutized, that is, when it is what it is apart from any further possible apocalypse of the truth, even a final apocalypse, then truth is considered to be most adequately found by concepts; truth becomes reduced to a mere *logos*, a

²⁷ Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 1-39.

²⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, Bk. 1, 1, 184a.

concept, a speculative abstraction.²⁹ For what I think to be evident reasons (deriving from the apocalypse of truth in the Word made flesh of eschatology) we should begin a reversal of this process, a return to the original primacy of the symbolic and figurative register, where reason is at its most potent. Here philosophy does not bracket revelation – philosophy is only as good as its metaphysical assumptions – but rather *wholly* assumes revelation as the final word and therefore the starting point for an adequate philosophical orientation to the world. Philosophy therefore achieves its proper integrity and “autonomy” like everything else does, that is by receiving its own tasks from what revelation gives to thought. And that which revelation first gives to philosophy is an eschatological horizon, i.e., history, albeit a history between the inauguration and consummation of the Kingdom of God. If theology seeks to articulate the intelligibility of revelation, philosophy subsequently asks after the meaning of this intelligibility itself as the last word and therefore first truth of reason itself. One would find that eschatology, first as a fundamental horizon for thought and then also in its fundamental content (from the starting point of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which means that the end or *telos*, the final meaning of history – the *apocalypsis* of the *mysterion* – has already appeared in the middle of history, *as* a strange and startling fragment of history), is actually itself the sufficient condition at least for the distinction between philosophy and theology as two “ultimate” discourses that can exist irreducibly if also from time to time strangely overlapping and seemingly blending into one another. Their fullest encounter is found in what Jean-Yves Lacoste has rightly termed a “wilderness.”³⁰ But such a proper awareness is hardly the most significant, as reason at its most densely rational. In short: if one were to take eschatology, as examined and described by theology, as the fundamental orientation for thought, then one must think the primacy of image, symbol and narrative, the fundamental modalities of the historical regime, as philosophically most significant. One must in other words be prepared to think the “mythic” in a wholly new way: in this “absolute” order where “myth becomes fact”, where

²⁹ Is philosophy, defining itself as the realization of the mythic quest but only by veiling over its hidden figurative processes, not in danger here of falling prey to what Whitehead called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”?

³⁰ See, for example, his preface to *La phénoménalité de Dieu*, 9-11.

logos takes on flesh, the historical always only in an ever-greater way exceeds the order of reflection and of speculation. The apocalypse of truth performs an eschatological reversal where philosophy is turned inside out. Or better: eschatology reveals that such a reversal is the end of philosophy anyway: so actually the “pagan” situation where a pagan mythos gives way to a pagan logos is eclipsed. It is accepted, and even radicalized, for its elevation of the question of truth in itself as the central human question, but critiqued for its reduction of truth to its own *conception* of it. Does not the resurrection of the Word made flesh require even philosophical reason itself to submit to a new primacy of *incarnate* word? The resurrection is the justification of philosophy, as well as the call for a new vocation for reason. For here philosophy must now inquire into the meaning of this eschatological revolution for reason itself (theology, on the other hand – *if* we continue to find it useful to retain the modern distinction – seeks simply to explicate the *content* of revelation).

What is the structure of truth in this new order, where the Logos is immersed in and elevates the mythic, the material, the earthly to new heights? We could make a first approach by observing that Hans Blumenberg, with his “metaphorology,” takes us to the limits of “pagan” philosophy as defined by the emergence of a free *logos* from a constraining *mythos*. For Blumenberg, the philosophy of “nonconceptuality” (*Unbegrifflichkeit*) investigates the metaphorical/historical origins of concepts. For him the key metaphors that perennially haunt the pages of philosophy bear a “half-conceptual” status that reveals traces of the “life-world,” the pre-rational origin of all signification. Blumenberg’s philosophy of metaphoricity hallows and underwrites the simple narrative of *Logos vom Mythos*. With the historical revelation of God, philosophy is elevated beyond such a limited narrative; here *logos* and *mythos* are, in themselves, seen to be on the same side of “idolatrous” reasoning in need of transfiguration (even as such “need” is only clearly seen after the event of revelation). Revelation nevertheless offers philosophy a new task in the eschatological horizon created by the Word made flesh: here philosophy seeks to understand the new structures of reason, of meaning and truth that the events of revelation have created for the world. In the disclosure of the world’s destiny, philosophy finds a new vocation: to plumb the unfathomable depths of incarnate reason. If Blumenberg offers a “metaphorology,” seeking to discern the

metaphorical origins of philosophical concepts, and therefore their limitations and historicity, then the new vocation of philosophy is beyond such limits. Though finding it immensely valuable in itself, the reverse is the case for Christian *theōria*: not a -logy or science of metaphor but a reversal is required, a reasoning as meta-phor, a reasoning the principle of which is the *eschatological transposition of thought*; the transfer of meaning of the metaphorical process is discovered as more basic to reason itself. The challenge for philosophy is that definitive and universalizable events have made history the locus of an ever-greater realism, for which, paradoxically, figurative expression is more rationally adequate.

C. PHILOSOPHY AFTER THE DEATH OF THE CONCEPT

Resurrection follows death. The “concept” of apocalypse, a concept that breaks every conceptual constraint, is the name for this passage of reason itself. The ancient genre of apocalyptic is a form of writing meant to embody the disclosure of the heavenly secrets behind earthly events in history, revealing the “mystery,” that is, God’s providential designs – *oikonomia* – behind the enigma of history, which are unintelligible apart from such a disclosure. As such apocalypse, as mystery, as the disclosure of absolute truth in the ever-greater enigmatic form of symbol and metaphor, is alone sufficient to the “literal” truth of things themselves.

One way to speak of this new reasoning, after revelation and from the oracles, this last philosophy, is to call it a “new mythic” reasoning. Perhaps we could also use St. Paul’s term, from his letter to the Romans (12:1), of “*logikê latreia*”: reason (*epistême*) here finds itself to be one with worship (*doxa*), where the word comes to be embodied in the flesh; the origin and end of the task of thought is found in the practices of *latreia*, the liturgical offering of the material world to God through human lips and human hands.³¹ Sacrifice is the paradigm

³¹ I am indebted here to the Pope’s all-too-brief indications in the second volume of his *Jesus of Nazareth*. Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, vol. 2: Holy Week*, 236-7.

philosophical act.³² Here *doxa* is no longer merely the “opinions” of the myths or various schools, but instead itself exceeds *epistême*, relativizing it by virtue of its realization of the union of life (*vita*) and word (*doctrina*): *ortho-doxa* recovers its primal sense, not simply “right opinion”, but rather a “straight path” (*orthos*) to “glory” (*doxa*).³³ Liturgy becomes the act through which the philosophical task of saying the essential, where life becomes transparent to word, is realized. The human task par excellence, which philosophy claims to be, is *logiké latreia*, to make of one’s entire self a word of praise to God – to saturate the life one lives in the body with the divine word, thereby bringing the body and the entire material order to a new union with the heavenly and spiritual, even to the point of manifesting the invisible world to come, already, from within the present order of things.

In these summary reflections, I only come to end here, at the eschatological beginning for thought. I conclude, like Simone Weil, that sanctity is the place where philosophy’s insoluble questions can become soluble, not by answers so much as through the realization of the human vocation towards truth:

Human life works in such a way that most of the problems that are posed to all men without exception [that is, precisely, the problems peculiar to philosophy] are insoluble outside of sanctity.³⁴

In sanctity, I conclude, the human aspiration for truth, even divine truth, is realized. Yet here what we understand to be the meaning of knowledge and truth must be fundamentally transformed, in an analogous way to the passage from pagan to Christian *theōria* or from concepts to images. Here knowledge is

³² The transformation of sacrifice that resulted from the Judeo-Christian “conquest” of the Hellenistic world, bringing to fulfilment the fundamental impulses of classical philosophy, only *underlines* this very point. One would have to compare this view with Guy Stroumsa in his remarkable book, *The End of Sacrifice*, esp. ch. 3, 56-83. The difference, here, is between a view that sees Rabbinic Judaism as the ultimate lens through which one reads the phenomenon (Stroumsa), or that of Christianity, particularly the liturgical offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

³³ For a further elaboration of this archaeological recovery of the concept of “orthodoxy,” see my *Philosophy from Oracles*, ch. 4, 130-63.

³⁴ *Cahiers*, vol. 3, 298. Text in brackets inserted.

not first a conceptual grasp, but rather a creative immersion in the transcendent truths themselves. Truth and knowledge of absolute things, of divine things in the event of their apocalypse, are, within history, very far removed from what *mere* philosophy itself considers truth and knowledge to be (a clear idea, a conceptual grasp, an adequation, unconcealedness, etc). This truth, this new approach to truth, has hardly yet been attempted by philosophy. When we deny the philosophical significance of an inaugurated eschatology, we finish with Hegel on the one hand, for whom the end of history arrives through speculative reflection, and Nietzsche on the other, for whom, as Didier Franck points out, the eternal return of the same is meant definitively to replace the resurrection of the dead as the justification of God³⁵ – that is, we end with either the ultimate denial of the possibility of a final and definitive word being uttered (hence nihilism), or a “realized eschatology”, which is impotent against nihilism’s absolute rejection of being’s final meaningfulness.³⁶ It is interesting that despite their differences, Nietzsche and Hegel both fully agree that the eschatological hope in the resurrection of the dead has absolutely no philosophical pertinence. In fact, it could probably be shown that the history of modern philosophy is the history of attempts to evade the requirements of ortho-dox eschatology. We could describe the modern turn in philosophy, whether a subjective turn or the linguistic extension of it, as fundamentally rooted in the refusal of the pertinence of eschatology for philosophy. This is precisely, of course, what happened, at the birth of the modern university in 13th century Paris: philosophy became the science of reason itself, which it did precisely by erasing the eschatological horizon of theology from its account of reason. Philosophy was no longer at its most philosophical – the “straight path” (ortho-doxy) of Christ (as it remains in the 14th c. *The Life in Christ* of Byzantine thinker Nicholas Cabasilas, and even still in the West in Erasmus’ works, which were a desperate attempt to recover what was lost). We could observe that this transformation at the origin of modernity repeats the ancient Greek one of the emergence of a purified and abstracted *logos* from the narrative horizon of the myths. However, eschatology,

³⁵ Didier Franck, *Nietzsche et l'ombre de Dieu*, part six, 375-ff.

³⁶ For these last remarks see Jean-Yves Lacoste’s interview with Tarek Dika and Chris Hackett, in the collection *What is Living and What is Dead in Phenomenology? Interviews* (Forthcoming).

philosophically considered, would suggest that the better-known (*notior*) aspects of experience on earth (the “already”) are grounded in and conditioned by the “lesser known” of divine revelation that comes from heaven that we receive paradigmatically (and therefore in a determinative way) by way of the biblical horizon of narrative, symbol, metaphor and parable. The goal and hence origin of every meaning, value and truth is the consummation of heaven and earth in a world without end of resurrection life (the “not-yet”). Here the “last word” is the “first principle” for thought. Christian *theōria* must be able to hold the already and not-yet of absolute truth together without collapse. Such a structure of antinomy is definitive of reason for it is only there, in the hope that incarnates truth in a life lived, that the path of Christian *philosophia* is revealed.

5. THE SYMBOL SANCTIFIES THOUGHT

Both Zeno and Kant observed a similar thing with their radical critiques of pure reason: the regime of conceptuality leads to irreducible contradictions when concepts are expanded and elevated to the level of eternal verities broken off from their origins in the *humus* of empirical experience.³⁷ Philosophical concepts, when made absolute, become feeble and irreconcilable with one another. Let me suggest then that my conclusion here is therefore rather Kantian (I confess I continue to find this startling): practical action is the proper place of reason.³⁸ The greatest thought, the most far reaching and penetrating thought, is embodied thought; the flesh of metaphor, symbol and narrative continues to speak more and further where purified abstractions have long become impotent. Put another way, the proof or justification of truth is found in its embodiment in life. Think of, finally, Kant’s fundamental distinction between the understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*): If the task of the understanding is to unify the disparate aspects of experience into a coherent world, reason, the metaphysical

³⁷ See Nietzsche’s comments in his *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 84-8.

³⁸ I intend this with heavy Blondelian overtones: that is, action as a unificatory and self-transcending movement which is the playing out of reason (a reality with a heavenly term) in the material realm (thus disclosing its destiny) and which unfolds in the narrative of the desire at the base of every thought and act of will, aspiring towards the meta-phorical unity of word and flesh.

“faculty,” lies wholly outside of the world in its quest for unconditioned principles. In light of this, as Rémi Brague has recently pointed out, in his third critique Kant comes, at least to a degree, to resolve this dualism on which his critical philosophy turns.³⁹ Here he comes to see beauty as a “symbol of morality,” a sort of incarnate manifestation of the moral law, the unconditioned principles of reason, which cannot be conceptualized by the understanding. For Kant the fact that we can experience a disinterested pleasure before the beautiful shows that these two parts of us, that heavenly part that resides in the world of eternal verities and the earthly part immersed in the world of the senses are reconcilable and indeed meant for each other. What Kant anticipates here, I suggest, is the proper passage of reason in the sanctity of thought: the passage is the way of the symbolic which bears the reality that it signifies if only in an impenetrable way, that is, a way fit for the divine and sacred things themselves. Kant anticipates an expansion and intensification of rationality, even, one could argue, in a quasi-eschatological manner. So what can philosophy say? Brague expressed the upshot of all this in following way, and here I will conclude: for now we humans reside only in the forecourt of reality. Yet even so, our presence in the forecourt teaches us that we are indeed welcome in the house.⁴⁰ Let me extend the metaphor: the path from forecourt across the threshold is by way of the host, who shows us the way: *philosophia Christi*.

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³⁹ *Les ancrés dans le ciel*, 28-9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

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