

# *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*

## INTRODUCTION: THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND “THE POLITICAL TURN”

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**I**t has been the very great merit of Radical Orthodoxy (RO) over the years to have presented itself as a staunch defender of all forms of authentic thought (and of the true spirit of western philosophy more generally) in an age dominated by thoughtless instrumentalism, banal materialism and a stultifying “narcissism of minor philosophical differences.”<sup>1</sup> As a philosophical response to this (on-going) philosophical catastrophe, the intriguing beauty and

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult, today, to state with any certainty the precise extent of the RO constituency. This is because its influence now spreads way beyond theology (and even beyond the confines of the academy; currently into the realms of political strategy and public policy). Clearly, the original founders of the movement, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward are still vitally important, as is the contribution of younger members such as Conor Cunningham and Adrian Pabst. However, there are many, many more who would identify themselves with RO in terms of its overall dispensation, far too many to mention here.

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intellectual bravery of RO has stemmed from its willingness to contest the intellectual legitimacy of the contemporary neo-liberal order, not via a standard “postmodern” aesthetics of unreason, nor in terms of a reconstituted conception of Enlightenment formal/procedural rationality, but, rather, in the name of another, *grander*, more substantive ideal of reason; one that, in opening thought out into realms beyond the “merely cultural” has managed to avoid the many and various conceptual *aporias* associated with the post-structuralist moment.<sup>2</sup> The philosophical question of human nature, what might be termed the anthropo-metaphysical question, has loomed large in RO scholarship in this context, and in academic spaces increasingly dominated by capital and state-logics, where anti-humanisms of various kinds seem to be both thriving and multiplying, RO has called for a return to a metaphysics of Christian humanism; one that recognizes that there can be no knowledge or self-knowledge in isolation from a metaphysical conception of the good (thus beginning the long process towards a viable idea of “ethical knowing”, the only epistemology that can, in the last Marxist analysis, save our late modernity from itself).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Through a double politicization of theology and politics, RO theologians have begun to transform the way that we understand the nature of modernity, often through revisionary thinking about the nature of knowledge, the city, nature, technology, politics, culture and society. In this way, ROers have shown us why metaphysics must be conceived as part of (and essential to) any attempt to understand modern social reality in its full complexity and radical ontological uncertainty. Unusual within the academy of today, RO is a movement that *is widely noticed*; and with good reason. By way of anecdote, my experience of RO-related conferences and seminar events has been one of an experience of a profound non-dogmatic openness to the contemporary moment; one that supports a wide-ranging and inclusive conversation—not grounded in fashion—founded upon an appreciation of the perennial need for serious reflection on the metaphysical dimensions of serious issues of the day. In a spirit of “true radicalism,” RO has stood for the enactment of a universalism expressed as an embodied hospitality—what might be termed *a true cosmopolitanism*—and a *contra sec* attitude to all forms of intellectual inquiry.

<sup>3</sup> As is now well known, in modern positivism the methods of experimental science were widely understood to have provided general criteria for a final demarcation between “authentic theoretical knowledge” and what is “merely expressed or shown.” As a consequence, in positivist thinking all forms of ethical reflection and judgment were relegated to the subjective realm, and any talk of “ethical thinking”—or “ethical knowing”—were seen as “category mistakes.” Thus in the positivist’s epistemological universe, where “the ethical

In this way, RO has also recently emerged a cultural signifier for a non-reactionary, theologically-informed, conception of *politics*; one where a Christian understanding of the significance of worldly life is recognized as the necessary theologico-political anchor required of any project of radical social change.<sup>4</sup> Thus, importantly, for those, like myself, who still identify with the political ideals of the “old left”, RO now stands as an important resource for all those wanting to expose the *philosophical* errors of the neo-liberal era, an era that, in denying the reality of the social—a reality of ontological relation and relatedness, that is ultimately also a reality of belonging and participation—denies the truth of the human condition and its possibilities for collective betterment.<sup>5</sup> In response to the philosophical emaciation of the orthodox left, RO has pointed out that only a re-Christianization of political action can begin to repair the damage done to the social fabric of western modernity in the last 40 years. In its attempts to provide contemporary intellectual life with “another orthodoxy”—one simultaneously more theological and more radical in its willingness to

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cannot know”, modern science asserted its own counter-ethics: that we should refrain from all ethical terminologies when making epistemological claims, as they cannot be accommodated within a conceptually “unified science”, and replace them with the *mathesis* of measurement. Against this, RO has taken up a distinctive hermeneutic position that views scientific knowledge as the result of a prior ontological illumination (from above). Seen thus, modern science provides us with knowledge, but it represents, as many pragmatist philosophers recognized, “only *one* type of knowledge” that “cannot be taken as the canonical standard for all forms of knowledge.” See Bernstein “Introduction,” 9. In this way, RO rejects Heidegger’s claim that “science does not think.” Science certainly thinks but only by dint of the illumination of its object realms by the good. Without this prior illumination, that is at the same time a “metaphysical relation”, science would be little more than a useful fiction and a cognitively blind instrument.

<sup>4</sup> What is needed today is an “innovative” philosophical realignment of political forces, and in order to achieve this some significant conceptual revision, perhaps even an entire new metaphysics, will be needed. RO has been at the forefront of such calls.

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, as a new alliance of orthodox theology and what remains of the orthodox, “pre-culturalist” and “pre-individualist” left, RO has emerged at the centre of a new social and political agenda, one that is attempting to reclaim, in a new Christian political vision, the vacated “social-democratic” intellectual territory once occupied by Keynes, Rawls and Habermas. When viewed by these lights, one of the most egregious problems of the last forty years (in political terms) has been the result of a left posing as “a radicalism without a tradition.” Its wrong-headed flirtation with social and political liberalism can be seen as symptomatic of this.

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challenge the “false conventionalization’s” modernity—RO has offered us the possibility of another *Ausgang*, an exit from dislocated Enlightenment ideals in the name of a broadly Catholic metaphysical vision. In so doing, it has pointed us towards an ethical and political critique of the modern metaphysical order of birth, predation and death in the name of *another universal*—a creedally orthodox Christianity.<sup>6</sup> This orthodoxy is not some conservative, semi-superstitious, drag on progressive thinking. A creedally orthodox Christianity is “always and already” potentially transformative with respect to all social and cultural phenomena and so, for RO, it remains the ineliminable core of any western-oriented progressive political project.<sup>7</sup>

Thus RO reminds us that any theology (and metaphysics more generally) always articulates itself into the “social” and “the political.” This was true of Plato and it remains so today (as Badiou has rightly pointed out). And this is an idea whose time has, again, now come (RO, as already suggested, recognized the importance of all this early on).<sup>8</sup> In RO styles of social critique, politics can no longer be viewed as an attempt “regiment” an increasingly recalcitrant polity, but should always be conceived as something that satisfies the deeper ontological demands for home, community and social participation; framed, as always, by metaphysically-sanctioned ideas of the common good.<sup>9</sup> Modernity’s Machiavellian codes

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<sup>6</sup> In RO discourses there must, of necessity, be an “outside” (or a beyond) as there is no *quidditas* without a constitutional transcendent. Seen thus, a Leibnizian form worldhood is not only impossible but also radically counter-ethical. Ethics, we might say requires a conception of being that is always something more than the philosophical articulation of “being as system.”

<sup>7</sup> As John Milbank has pointed out (here, through his involvement with the setting up of this journal).

<sup>8</sup> For RO, the decay of the political in the age of neo-liberalism, and its emergence as “managerialism”, can only be addressed by means of a theological vaccination of the social. In this way, RO’s political vision is distinctive, and differs from those on the left who believe that the social is in itself “self-transforming.”

<sup>9</sup> Orthodox sociological accounts of the rise of the modern have neglected to take into account the way in which modernity’s most significant organizational form—the modern state—legitimized, and continues to legitimize, itself by means of the re-invention and

of politics forget this, and RO continues the tradition of Christian Humanist opposition to the Machiavellian politics of manipulation (a theme that was powerfully articulated in the work of Erasmus). Moreover, as RO theologians have often pointed out, the consequences of a politics without a guiding metaphysics are always deeply nihilistic, revealing the extent to which modern politics has undermined its own attempts at a (manipulative) worldly self-founding—because, in the end, all such attempts only engender the, now universal, modern pathology that “nothing is inherently worth doing” and that there is a “terrifying emptiness lurking beneath all things.”<sup>10</sup>

For RO, then, any progressive politics, any attempt to engage with the world and transform it, presupposes a metaphysics and ultimately a *theology*.<sup>11</sup> It may sound odd to some to view as both “radical and critical” a movement that is conservative in theological orientation, but Western

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redeployment of orthodox religious values, symbols and institutions. As such, the modern state cannot be conceived as religion’s “more functional” secular replacement (as Hegel famously claimed). It is, in fact, more usefully conceived as founded upon “quasi-charismatic factors”—to the extent that the modern state, and *mutandis mutandis* modernity itself, must be seen as a new theological-political reality. Seen thus, the event of modernity did not give rise to secularizing movements *as such*, but rather to new theologico-political configurations where religious factors and forces were more subtly, but no less centrally, significant. Secularization in many ways involved the recuperation of religion and its subtle redeployment as an a political instrument within much wider social and political projects; to the extent that modernity can be seen to require its own, ersatz, religion as a necessary but sometimes “dangerous” supplement to its political projects. Nationalism, consumerism, and, more latterly, media cultures can be viewed as ersatz modern religions in just this sense.

<sup>10</sup> See Taylor, *Sources*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> We must mention here RO’s relationship to the so-called “Red Tory” phenomenon, and its associated idea of “the Big Society”—as developed with verve by Philip Blond in recent years. This was a high Tory version of RO politics; a tradition that has always been implicit within the political trajectories of RO, where notions of political aristocracies and wise elites have formed central planks in a wider critique of the modern. In essence, Red Toryism amounts to a Chestertonian critique of neo-liberal globalization in the name of Catholic Social Teaching (combined with very particular ideal of Englishness). Importantly, David Cameron’s conservative party, I suggest, would not have been elected without a supporting framework provided by Red Tory ideas and arguments (that are now, perhaps, passing into the realm of ideology). What must be said here is that RO is almost certainly, overall, much better positioned as a version of “Christian Socialism”—to the extent that Red Toryism now appears as a “practical theologico-political experiment” that reveals the practical-political limits of any attempt to “Christianize” the contemporary political terrain.

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societies are changing very rapidly and old allegiances and historic animosities are shifting at a pace<sup>12</sup>—and in many ways RO today now presents itself as a cultural and political movement *à la gauche*, occupying the space of what used to be called “the left” in the name of another, counter-Hegelian, conception of history and polity.<sup>13</sup> It is with great pleasure, then, that we can announce the next phase of Radical Orthodoxy; one that, in building upon these prior theological initiatives, is now beginning to explore, in a more systematic and purposeful manner, the way in which an alternative Christianized metaphysical account of the modern (and its pathologies) can provide the basis for an *alternative modernity*: one based on the “real universals” of the common good and the ennoblement of the individual. Through this new on-line journal *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy (RO:TPP)*—and its yearly print sister-publication, *The RO Annual Review*—RO will continue to work at the interface of theology, philosophy and the social sciences in an open, imaginative and non-dogmatic way with a view to developing a Christian alternative to an increasingly hollow (neo)liberalism. Through this journal, it will now express its distinctive theological voice in order to address a variety of pressing social and political concerns, especially the theological and philosophical dimensions of the contemporary crisis of capitalism (and the West more generally). This is the first edition of *RO:TPP* and we hope that you are excited about this initiative as we are.<sup>14</sup> A few words

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<sup>12</sup> Western economies and politics are in crisis, with no obvious long-term solution in sight other than labor intensification and heightened forms of social control. The slow corrosion of a liberal version of modernity that began in the 1930s (seen in the rise of a politicized paganism) has now begun to affect modernity’s liberal ideological core, rendering classical liberalism a busted historical flush (despite numerous ideological offensives). However, politically voided voices within the academy remain eerily silent on the wider significance of this “event.”

<sup>13</sup> See Milbank, “The Grandeur of Reason,” 367.

<sup>14</sup> The first issue demands that we reflect on the nature of RO today – it forces us to interrogate a deeper question of identity. What is RO in today’s world of global economic crisis? Clearly, in broad terms an agent of catholicization (broadly construed) but also a space, perhaps the only “space” where intellectuals and scholars from theological, philosophical and

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from the start about our editorial policy. *RO:TPP* as a journal will address contemporary theological, philosophical and theologico-political issues via a unique combination of the academic and the current; the intellectual and the popular. The editorial team also wishes to maintain the democratic spirit of intellectual liberality and non-partisan inquiry that has defined RO over the years, and we sincerely hope that the journal can function as a new philosophical forum—an opening onto an engagement with the secular world that is mutually informing. We welcome submissions from scholars working in/with any religious tradition, as well as from atheists and agnostics wishing to contribute (or critique) what we think could well amount to the emergence of a nascent post-neoliberal *zeitgeist*. The journal will appear online, four times a year, through a mix of standard and special issues. We especially encourage submissions from younger scholars and we would hope that the journals can function as a nursery for the development of young academic talent.

This augural double issue comes in four parts. The first part is a special section on the metaphysics of life, the second a non-thematized selection of academic papers, the third a series of interviews with political figures, philosophers and theologians who we believe have crucial things to say about theology, philosophy and politics as well as the usual review section. The papers in the first (special) section were originally delivered at the Centre of Theology and Philosophy conference in Krakow in June of last year and are all, some more explicitly than others, dedicated to an examination of the wider significance of the new vitalist moment in contemporary philosophy. All explore, in their own way, the question of relationship between the metaphysics and politics—the question of how an understanding of what life *is* conditions our specific claims on how it should be lived both personally and collectively. Some attempt this via consideration of the theological, philosophical and political significance of

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social-theoretical backgrounds can explore the nature and limits of contemporary intellectual controversies in a spirit of fraternity.

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the neo-Bergsonianism; others through a critique of modern naturalism and biologism; others still, by attempting to forge a break with scientific metaphysics in a way that makes human life more redolent with significance (that points the way towards another idea of modern *life*). Taken as a whole, the papers in this section address the issue of how a metaphysical conception of life impacts upon the wider social, cultural and political conditions under which we, in the West, now live; and why today, a theologically informed conception of life offers a clarity and real sense of intellectual illumination in a late-modern intellectual terrain that for many appears to be thicket of impenetrable obscurity. The discussion of this issue is ongoing, but we hope that these papers represent the beginnings of a new appreciation of the way in which Christian theology, in tandem with contemporary philosophy, can begin to contribute to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the ethics, politics and metaphysics of life in a modernity than clearly needs a new philosophical identity and a renewed sense of theological direction.

In this first section, William Desmond, in his piece, explores the philosophical dimensions of life through his now-widely celebrated-idea of *metaxu*, "the between." Desmond's perspective is in many ways inspired by Heidegger, in that he emphasizes the importance of the "happening of being" and the poetics of an "originary coming to be" in an openness that suggests the need for metaphysics beyond a univocal givenness. As such, he takes Heideggereanism beyond its Husserlian preoccupations with "the thing" into a genuinely innovative metaphysics that views things as "spaces" open to the possibility of transcendence. In the piece published here, he develops this perspective in relation to the philosophical problem of transience and surfacing. Surfaces, he argues, are an important example of a metaxological relation, as they are porous openings through which we are "given to be." Surfaces thus open onto a series of "other relations", to an order of creation that is more primordial than that of evolution. This is an order of being that is more to do with passion and relation than to



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the Spinozist metaphysics of self-preservation—thus showing the extent to which the modern liberal striving to be, to preserve oneself in the face of Hobbesian “war of all against all”, is in fact a flight from oneself, from the true source that allows one to be. In order to appreciate the importance of life on the surface, Desmond suggests that we acquire a different sense of mindfulness, one that recognizes that surfaces are in fact the depths, thresholds between “the above” and “the below.” Surfaces, we might say, force us to recognize the importance of the “ontology of the vertical”—an ontology that the horizontal metaphysics of modernity cannot conceive (an important theme in RO discussion over the years) and an ethics and politics that is always open to “a beyond.” In this way, Desmond shows us to bring the modern back to the surface, from its buried forgetfulness in the mine, a modernity where, as Freud recognized the truth can only be excavated, dug out from below.

In Graham Ward’s piece, RO-style critiques of the errors of “autonomous reason” are carried over into an examination of theological significance of contemporary research in the neurosciences as well as the wider philosophical and political significance of *embodied affect* (especially the so-called ‘affective turn’ in contemporary thought, brought to a certain fruition in many ways by the work of Gilles Deleuze). In this regard, Ward explores the importance of the meaning of “experience”—defined more broadly than “mere sensation”, as the sense of something “experienced,” a connotation that implies feeling as much as it does perception—for the way in which we understand human life. For Ward, experiences are never solely “our own but singularities that exist apart from individuals”—and hence are necessarily fluid and mobile; can be given and received; owned, shared, perfected or destroyed. Ward frames all this in terms of a wider series of reflections on the theological problem of the formation of the soul, especially the question how to understand the processes involved in its sanctification. In Ward’s view, the sanctification of the soul is fundamentally an affective process that

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bypasses and predates both cognition and action. This process, he argues, takes place across the entire life span—a process that involves transforming “hearts of stone” to “hearts of flesh.” More theologically, this shows that for Ward radical incarnation operates at the level of somatic experience, and this, in turn, creates the demand for a new theology of affective life. Clearly, situating our conception of ourselves in terms of “affective life” shows the extent to which philosophy and theology can no longer begin from the assumption of the self-contained individual of modern liberalism (such a perspective will clearly demand a radical rethinking of the economic ideal of the “possessive individual” too).

Louis Dupré’s paper explores the historical dimensions of the idea of a natural desire for transcendence, a view that suggests that human life must be understood in relation to a goal naturally desired yet fundamentally unattainable. This is a desire that anticipates the attainment of a goal that surpasses human powers and shows the extent to which human nature wills itself to be “more than itself,” a notion that clearly has profound implications for our conceptions of ethics and politics. Dupré points out that nominalist philosophy rejected this idea of a natural desire for God and deemed God’s decisions to be irrelevant to our expectations—thus paving the way for the modern conception of “true desire” as one of worldly adaptation (the basis of psychoanalysis and the modern therapeutic). In modernity, knowledge of God was now deemed to fall outside of philosophy—and in response philosophy attempted to define its own idea of God, “the God of the Philosophers,” via an idea of divine creation grafted upon the more limited conception efficient causality (although, contra Lutheran objections, this was not the result of an Aristotelian debauchery of the theological terrain, as Dupré observes). In this way, Dupré shows not only why the idea of a desire for God is hard to conceive of from a modern philosophical vantage point but also why thinkers in the Middle Ages would have found it hard to imagine nature without a transcendent warrant, suggesting a certain relativity vis-à-vis the

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metaphysical orientations of these two epochs. Dupré goes on to contrast the modern idea of creation with that of Aquinas. For Aquinas, creation was conceived something quite different from efficient causality as he conceived it as a quasi-formal causality (an idea that has been resurrected recently by the new Whiteheadians). Moreover, according to Aquinas, all creatures seek a similitude with their creator that corresponds to their nature—and so for intellectual creatures the highest desire is desire for the highest knowledge. In this scheme, all human spiritual activity thus already implies a transcendent goal and it is this that gives human life what might be termed its “intellectually adventurous quality” (another theme explored by Whitehead)—an idea that again should form part of any adequate politics of the modern. More recently, Dupré observes, the natural desire for transcendence has reappeared as an important theme in contemporary philosophical thought and here he notes that Heidegger is the central figure. After Heidegger, the question of the natural desire for an infinite ideal, constantly pursued yet never attained, re-emerges and thus opens up a space for new articulation between the theological and the philosophical. In this way, Dupré argues that contemporary philosophy has exceeded Kant in its commencement of a reflection on experience no longer constrained by fixed ideas of the a priori. Metaphysics reappears in this context, as an active inquiry into the transcendent horizon of being—something that reinstates the natural trajectory of the mind towards a transcendent terminus.

Beáta Tóth, in her piece, examines the paradoxical nature of the relationship between “life” and “eternity” in theology and philosophy. Life, as she points out, seems at first glance to be the antithesis of eternity, as it is deeply implicated in the natural processes that lead to death. However, she also points out that in Christian theology the relationship between earthly and eternal life is far more complicated than this, especially once we recognize the importance of the idea of a “living eternal God” in scripture—and she explores how ideas of life and eternity

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intersect at many points in Christian theology. In this regard, Tóth contrasts how the relation between these two temporalities has been conceived in the Thomistic tradition, with the conception found in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Here, Tóth shows how, for Aquinas, the idea of eternal life does not function as an organizing concept as it is always subordinated to ideas of divine immutability. For Aquinas, rather, eternal life was conceived in an “intellectualist” way, via the eschatological promise of a future beatitude in the contemplation of the beatific vision (showing how one of the key issues to be addressed by any contemporary metaphysics of life is the metaphysical status of the “the intellect”; the question of whether the intellect, as something living, possesses a special ontological status within life, with God conceived as a the highest and most perfect intellect). Against this, Tóth contrasts Balthasar’s soteriological conception of eternal life. She points out that Balthasar is responding here to what he perceives as a lack in the Thomistic tradition; the importance of understanding eternal life in relation to Christological mediation, as through Christ Balthasar claims that eternal life has entered *earthly life* once and for all. In this way, Christ fills earthly life with eternal content and Tóth suggests that Balthasar permits us to understand eternal life in full continuity with earthly life, and in so doing allows theologians to recuperate a more significant idea of life (again, the wider ethical and political significance of this should be immediately apparent).

John Milbank, in his piece, examines some metaphysical issues associated with Darwinian evolution. He notes that Darwinism is founded upon a Newtonian-Malthusian metaphysics— one that is both mechanistic and hyper-competitive—that shows that in many ways Darwinism is in strange collusion with its Christian fundamentalist enemies (even though its key idea that “life evolves” does not, strictly, imply a rejection of any theologically orthodox metaphysics of creation). Thus Milbank tries to sidestep what he terms “the fight between two fundamentalisms” and

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searches for an alternative vitalist neo-Bergsonian conception of evolution, one that rejects as “mystification” the idea, central to all forms mechanistic metaphysics, that life is epiphenomenal. In this vein, Milbank points out that to date Darwinism has begged the question of the ontological status of the living agent—for what is it, exactly, asks Milbank, that seeks to survive in the survival of the fittest? More generally, he asks why should there be unities in nature at all (rather than just the meaningless *glissando* of a perpetual organismic fluidity). This may suggest that a conception of evolution in line with a Bergsonian idea of *élan vital* would be sufficient in this regard. However, Milbank rejects any immanentist conception of vitalism, in that for him all such conceptions are secretly dualistic and hierarchical. Milbank also draws out the wider political consequences of unreconstructed Bergsonianism and shows how, in their radical non-relationality, they reduce the position of the creature to one of passive subservience in the vital flow, where the only salvation is a Stoic *amor fati* and ultimately “self-abolition” (a critique of the modern Stoic conception of ethics and politics that has been central to RO over the years).

Adrian Walker examines why human beings must be conceived as “original wholes” that art and technology cannot replace (but to which only stand in a mimetic relationship). Drawing on Goethean ideas of life as the primary phenomenon, and Aristotle’s conception of life as motion and rest, Walker explores what the originality of life, especially human life, consists in. For him, it is an original imitation of the divine. More specifically, life, for Walker, is essentially God’s self-communication to the extent that in his view even the humblest form of life is a window in the heart of God who causes it in its original wholeness. Here we have another theologically-inspired critique of technological voluntarism and reduction, and a glimpse of what an alternative mimetic conception of life might look like.

Agata Bielik-Robson examines the claim that ‘denaturalization’ is the main point of demarcation between Greek and Jewish thought, as the

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latter stands of the signifier of an exodus from humanity out of its bondage to the natural order. However, she points out the relationship here is more complex, “dialectical” even—as can be seen in Nietzsche’s quasi-messianic conception of nature that views the natural order as one of perpetual self-overcoming. Robson points out that for contemporary Jewish philosophers—from Benjamin to Harold Bloom—this cyclical, self-enclosed, idea of nature is “simply boring”, and in response they offer a “messianic vitalism” that goes beyond mere life “for the sake of life”—into what Derrida termed “life beyond life.” In this way, in contemporary Jewish thought denaturalization is not, contra Nietzsche, the basis for a vengeful hatred of life, but rather the very possibility for life’s enhancement—an agonistic eros within which one recovers a more authentic idea of the natural (and one’s spontaneous needs) for the purposes of a higher will and an experience of life as a series of “tender yeses.” In this way, the Freudian “sadistic superego,” although fundamentally a site of an historic, ontological, trauma, is not merely destructive or degrading but fundamentally ontologically productive—empowering and creative in relation to the blind and inhuman repetition of natural life. In viewing life as more than “mere nature,” this piece shows that another life, beyond that of mechanistic repetition, is possible.

Stratford Caldecott, in his piece, asks whether, along with the three scholastic transcendentals of “the good”, “the true” and “the beautiful”, we can legitimately conceive of life as a transcendental. In this way, he explores the intuition that everything possesses a certain quality of “aliveness” – to the extent that the entire cosmos can be seen as in some way “alive.” Caldecott answers in the affirmative here, proposing a conception of living beings that views all existents as internally and not externally related. Drawing upon the ideas of Aquinas and Balthazar, Caldecott suggests that the idea of “self-giving kenosis” can be viewed as analogically present throughout creation, to the extent that, ontologically, the true existence of a thing, its “real,” must be viewed as “the giving of

itself.” However, given the deathly reality of the fall, Caldecott recognizes that everything cannot be alive *now*, showing the extent to which life is peculiar *eschatological* transcendental.

Chris Hackett explores the difficult (for him “vexing”) relationship between theology and philosophy. For Hackett, Philosophy has generally understood itself a critic of the religious tendency towards anthropomorphism. However, he points out this cannot be the last word on what philosophy is, and he shows how, as Porphyry pointed out, the question of God remains philosophy’s greatest issue. Moreover, Hackett suggest that philosophy does not only aim to reveal an impersonal truth, but to realize this truth, to make us *live it*—to make it flesh. Hackett points out that Christianity provides us with a model for philosophy here, as it presents us with a way, as the Patristic recognized, where “truth” and “life” become one. As such it can be seen as philosophy “at its most philosophical.” For Hackett, love of God, in Christ, opens up the possibility a new rational comprehension of the truth and new beginning for thought—a mode of thought revealed from above that, paradoxically, allows the philosopher the philosopher to “plumb the depths” in an apocalypse of truth where the word is made flesh. Philosophy, we might say, speaks only of “first things”, and its critique of anthropomorphism is simply a first moment in a wider trajectory within an eschatological horizon where theology speaks to us of ‘last things’, the sanctification that is the true pre-condition for knowledge and understanding.

In the first paper of the second section, Evander Botto, addresses the relationship between metaphysics and politics through a discussion of Pope Benedict XVI’s interpretation of Catholic Social Teaching. Bottom points out that in Benedict’s theologico-political vision, Catholic Social Teaching positions itself in the interstices between faith and the political arenas shaped by the modern state in order to find a justification for Catholic social philosophy outside of, and beyond, ecclesiastical space. In his view, this offers the possibility for the re-articulation of Church

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teaching into the modern-political as such—something to that amounts to a re-valorization of contemporary modernity, albeit now articulated from a different metaphysical starting point. In this way, according to Botto, Benedict offers us a conception of politics that recognizes the need for truth and, more importantly, a need to preserve a “sensitivity to the truth” in an age where truth is often caricatured as the enemy of liberal tolerance. Against this, Botto informs us that for Pope Benedict, politics should be founded on the truth of human nature and rights understood as more than merely natural, as an expression of a conception of universal personhood (a conception that is nothing if not metaphysical)—showing again the need for a deeper intertwining of metaphysics and politics.

In the second paper of this section Neil Turnbull, contests the received sociological image of science derived from Kuhn’s pseudo-Hegelian philosophical reflections. He shows how in the Kuhn-inspired Social Studies of Science—a movement that was positioned at the cutting edge of social theory and philosophy in latter part of twentieth century—suggest that experimental science is essentially a social practice that constructs the world in theoretically-salient ways. This image views science as an institution consisting of professionals guided by taken-for-granted paradigmatic assumptions. However, Turnbull contrasts this with a technology-centered philosophical account derived from the phenomenological reflections of Heidegger and Bachelard. Here, he shows how their conception of experimentation, as a form of world-disclosure *via media* of instrumentation, shows that science can be more usefully be seen as an “instrumental encounter” with the unknown rather than a social construct (the former conceived by as a late-modern version of the Kantian noumenon). He goes on to show how, in combination, these accounts suggest an image of science that is more theological than sociological in that they imply an image of the experimental scientist as “seeker” and an image of scientific practice as grounded in what he terms “a mysticism of the instrument.”



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Christopher Ben Simpson, in his paper, wonders where we should position William Desmond's work in the contemporary intellectual field – as a philosopher or as a theologian? With this mapping intention in mind, Simpson shows that there are real and strong affinities between Desmond's conception of the divine and those expressed by numerous Christian neo-Platonists. Like such neo-Platonic thinkers, Simpson argues that Desmond believes that Philosophy and Theology can relate to each other in terms of a constructive porosity—in way that is metaxological; “other” yet “together.” Simpson goes on to suggest the Desmond, in many ways assumes and Plotinian conception of God, as a kind of an original generous plenitude, but avoids many of the heterodox tendencies of the latter. In this way, Simpson points out that Desmond manages to construct and “orthodox neo-Platonism,” by short-circuiting certain pantheistic tendencies in heterodox neo-Platonism in a recognition of the mediated nature of the absolute itself.

Marcia Pally, in her piece asks how we are to begin the work of developing an alternative economic model in the context of the contemporary (“financial,” although this is clearly a misnomer) crisis of capitalism—and here she turns to the theory and practice of America's “New Evangelicals.” According to Pally, these new evangelicals reject the habitual knee-jerk association of evangelical Christianity with a full-throated neo-liberalism, in that they advocate an anti-authoritarian ethic of civic responsibility that is in many ways fundamentally at odds with the basic precepts of American civil religion. More specifically, for Pally, drawing here on the results of her own empirical research, America's new evangelicals propose a social gospel that advocates a striving for a more just global world through a conception of service derived from scripture. As such, the new evangelicals, we might say, have eschewed the slide into a narrow minded nationalism in their advocacy of a more viable “cosmopolitical” individualism. This is a politics that is anti-statist (and thus not likely to defend American “liberal” ideals) but, as a politics of trust,

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fundamentally collective-minded; especially when we consider its theology, one that links salvation with ideas of agapeic giving.

In the round, what all these papers show is the extent to which metaphysical questions dominate contemporary intellectual and political agendas. They show that any adequate conception of personal and political life today will clearly need to transcend the often raw and always self-defeating naturalisms of modern philosophy. Each, in its own way, recognizes that our late-modernity cannot be understood in terms of flat ontologies, because theologico-philosophical reflection on the status of the human and its purposes will always upset the modern naturalistic applecart. As such, they begin to move philosophical reflection, and reflection on the nature of contemporary life, away from an idea of a constitutive subject/language/culture onto a terrain where modernity is conceived as metaphysical (a metaphysics that all modern agents presuppose (yet typically forget)). The recovery of the metaphysical dimensions of modernity not only begins the process of inaugurating a new dialogue between theology and philosophy—one of RO's trademark contributions to contemporary intellectual debates—but also allows for a new conception of the modern to emerge; one that recognizes that its deeper rhythms are not those of mass-productivist/consumerist routine, and that in conceiving of human life as essentially metaphysical, as a participating together in the one universal life, endorses an “alternatively modern” idea of what it means to be human.

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