

**Telos and Insurrection
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When first introducing the world to his theory of dream interpretation, Freud confesses that as far as the work of analysis is concerned, the subject who brings to the session narrative material that has been produced in self-conscious contemplation is quite hopeless. Approaching self-observation with “tense attitude” and “furrowed brow,” she is unknowingly suppressing what she considers undesirable raw material, and thus unavoidably exercising an extrinsic control over the interpretive process. The subject, on the other hand, who simply observes her own psychic processes with a certain detachment, allows even the undesirable to come to the surface. An unlimited number of ideas now rises to the surface and becomes grist for the analytic mill, as all that is now suppressed is the critique itself. Dream interpretation can now begin, with the undesirable ideas that are, for the analyst, most desirable.

This dynamic, the rise of the subject via the overthrow of extrinsic control, is axiomatic for more than one strand of modern intellectual history. Freud is thoroughly within the tradition of Percy Shelley here, for whom humans can only reach perfection through an act of “insurrection” against self-imposed tyranny. So Prometheus is unbound by his own delirious verbal insurrection, which empties the throne of Jove before the spirit of the curses even arrives in the heavenly chambers. Only if the transcendent is deposed can the human telos (love, for Shelley) be achieved.

Insofar as both are modes of deposing overlords, the gap between the modern and the postmodern is almost non-existent, as the latter simply extends the revolt of the

former. To Shelley, the critical inquiries stemming from Heidegger, Horkheimer, Foucault, and Whitehead ask, “Isn’t Prometheus still bound, though, by his own concept of ‘virtuous man,’ which he promises at the end of the poem to serve?” The “subject” has now replaced the tyrant Jove, but is no less tyrannical an overlord. In regards to Freud, we’re ready with a similar objection before Freud’s gotten the theory out of his mouth (so to speak): did he fail to notice, or notice and refuse to suppress, the new and utterly dominant extrinsic force introduced into the session by the analyst himself, and the omnipotent Oedipus? So Deleuze and Guattari accuse Freud of freeing the subject from the one transcendent overlord of the id, and giving him in exchange a triune three-in-one: “mommy-daddy-me.”

Most 20th Century theology has fallen in with some variant or portion of this critique, often as a deconstruction of ahistorical sovereignty. So, for instance, it could be said that Barth’s account of revelation, and to a lesser and more occasional extent von Balthasar’s, represents a Hegelian historicity that has rescued God from a full historical becoming by a last minute half-turn back to an ahistorical Kantian sublime. If this is true, then Moltmann and even Robert Jenson to a degree simply complete the project by describing God more or less fully in terms of a temporal development. This move, parallel to that of the theological tradition stemming from Whitehead, agrees with Shelley and Freud, but follows them to a different conclusion: if transcendence = extrinsic sovereignty, then God, for these theologians, must be less than transcendent. For Hartshorne, this logic invokes the entire discourse of divine perfection: impassibility,

omnipotence, and omniscience are Athenian intrusions onto the pure soil of Jerusalem.¹

A more biblical notion of God would jettison these categories, and then, as in Shelley, restore perfection to humanity by emptying the throne of the eternal God.

What I hope to show in this paper is exactly the opposite, in fact: God's transcendence of time is a necessary feature of the human telos of union with God. Only a perfect God can give the gift of perfection. Furthermore, though this might seem to suggest just the sort of extrinsic sovereignty that Shelley and company rightly challenged, I will argue that divine perfection is likewise a necessary feature of a world with real historicity, becoming, and process.

Only a Perfect God can Perfect

I'll begin with the seemingly uncontroversial teaching of Saint Thomas that existence is a gift. It is not essential to the human race that I exist, nor to creation (as Isaac of Stella argues) that humans exist at all, nor is it necessary to God that creation exists. This amounts, for Thomas, to a difference between our "what" and our "that." *What* we are, our essence, is an idea in God's mind; *that* we are is due to God's fitting yet uncompelled desire to bestow on us the super-essential gift of be-ing. This is the central site of our difference from God: God's essence *is* his existence. His being cannot not be.

¹ A recent conversation with my friend Dusty McDonald reminded me of these issues in Hartshorne's book. I must also cite a theological conversation with my colleagues at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest on the subject of divine impassibility. Both of these conversations are hovering in my head as I hastily transcribe these thoughts on the way to this meeting. Finally, my ideas here have also benefited from many conversations, plus the editorial assistance, of my friend and student Teri Daily.

For the Catholic tradition, this immediate equation of essence and existence in God founds the entire discourse of divine perfections. If God's essence is To Be, then God is simple and one; not changing from many to one, from less to more, from potency to act. God eternally and simply be's what God is. Moreover, God's eternally existing essence, as simple, coincides perfectly with God's goodness, wisdom, justice, beauty, impassibility: "whatever it is better to be than not to be."

We, on the other hand, depend for our existence entirely on the ever-arriving gift in time of God's grace. This means that the perfections which God has (is) simply, we have in complex ratios, with lack and mutability built into our form. Our being also, that is to say, is a mode of goodness, truth, beauty, and impassibility, but received according to the mode of the recipient. For example, in marriage, essential share in God's attributes of faith and desire; or again, through the "double resurrection," first of the soul then of the body, we share in divine impassibility. The theological virtues especially are for us modes of sharing in the perfections. So when God shares his omniscience with humans, who gather knowledge through the cooperation of embodied sensuality and discursive reason, it takes the form of understanding in the service of *faith*: a knowing, that is to say, that acknowledges its dependence on the simple perfection of divine knowledge. Likewise, our share in divine omnipotence is our own power of active agency in the service of *hope*: a way of acting that acknowledges the excessive Sabbath of our final rest in God. And our share in divine charity is simply charity itself, the greatest and most proximate of all our modes of participation in God. Even with charity, though, because our essence is always mediated by our embodied existence, we love humanly: with bodies, across distances of space and time, and, as long as we are only approaching

apatheia, we love as passible beings. All God's attributes are shared: this is the cohesive point made by the essence/existence distinction. We are the being of God, in a creaturely mode.

As to the challenge that these divine attributes are unbiblical, current scholarship simply doesn't bear this out. While the J/E strata of the Torah seems to describe a mutable and passible God, this is harshly critiqued within the Torah itself. Yahweh of the priests is so transcendent as to revoke any share that the Israelites might stake in his holiness. Sin offerings, for the Levites, are no longer pleasing smells that entice God to forgive, since only a mutable God could be so enticed; burnt offerings are commanded to be eaten by the priests, and bowls are placed empty on the altar, articulating God's lack of neediness in relation to his people. All these priestly revisions critique not only the imperfect revelation of Elohim to the Patriarchs, but also the immanent and mutable gods of the Canaanites, who were always going around consuming sacrifices and having their minds changed.

While post-Levitical writings in the Old Testament intentionally modify this starkly transcendent God in order to allow more sharing in God's holiness, an observable gap remains: the apocalyptic visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel should be read as attempts to involve the almost absurdly transcendent Yahweh in the affairs of Israel---and these attempts are not entirely successful. (So heaven has to *close* on the terrible vision of wheels and cherubim before Ezekiel can hear the voice like that of a man speaking to him.)

This is to say that God of the Old Testament is too perfect: too impassible, too immutable. It's only, in fact, when these texts are brought together with the Platonic

dialogues, as especially happens in Clement, that God's perfection is seen as fittingly including a sharing of that perfection ad extra. Something like a Christian doctrine of perfection is already at work in Plato, though not at all in the sense that Hartshorne supposed: the attributes of the Gods are both abstracted from and critiqued by the virtues of the polis, as later will be true for the church. And significantly, the Platonic polis itself is ordered around liturgical cycles and hymns to the Gods and heroes. In short, Platonic participation, in Christian hands, was made to temper the sheer "Greek" perfection of the Hebrew God.

Very briefly, let me add that Clement's work of gathering Athens and Jerusalem into Christian theology, in order to argue that the perfect God shares perfection, is already begun in Christ's Sermon on the Mount and Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, and that it is taken further much later by Denys, who refines the already somewhat Christianized Neoplatonism of Proclus in order to craft an ontology of celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, posited entirely for union with God. I owe to Nathan Jennings the reminder that the ecclesiastical hierarchies are not constructed primarily of persons or even offices, for Denys, but rather of sacramental actions---made higher, then, only to invite ascent. The sort of extrinsic sovereignty that Shelley was challenging is entirely absent here, as the whole structure is based in gift: the gift of God that makes our constantly arriving existence into Jacob's ladder, inviting, illuminating, and aspiring what is below to rise to what is above. In fact, though shades of extrinsic sovereignty can be glimpsed in Middle and Neoplatonic ontologies, that sort of debased hierarchy is for the most part a late medieval and modern invention. Climbing to the heavens is for Christians not an

insurrection, or rather, it is an *essential* insurrection, one always already given by the gift-sharing Jove, as the gift of our existence.

So, God's perfections are nameable for Christian theology precisely as they are shared, and both the sharing and the naming imply a God who simply is perfect. By contrast, we might ask whether any real telos is possible, theologically, if God is subject to temporality, and so somehow receives his own being. If the flow of time shares in nothing but itself, it seems, any named telos within time, even if intrinsically generated, would necessarily confront the flow which generated it as a limited moment of history. And yet, as confronting history itself, this telos would be one that proclaimed itself to be somehow less limited, momentary, and historical, than the rest, thus denying the fabric of its own historicity. In other words, if God both becomes in time, and is also a telos within time, then God can only be a false ahistoricity: a deceitful tyrant. Surely Deleuze is the more honest of the immanentists here, when he celebrates Whitehead precisely because in the latter he is able to claim that any actuality at all is a violation of the virtual, so even a nameable existence within an immanently changing ontology is always in some sense a lie.

Only a Perfect God Allows Real Process

Let me quickly move on to my second and final point. The statement from Anselm, that God is whatever it is better than not to be, connotes the contingency of any Catholic treatise on the divine perfections. Knowing what things it is better to be than not to be requires some experience of these attributes, not simply as abstracted names for the

eternal God, but as names ascribable within the created order. Having lived without knowledge, we can discern that to know is better than not to know; having seen beauty, and known goodness, we can say that this is better to be than evil and grotesque. On the one hand, the divine names and attributes are vertical, eternal abstractions from horizontal, temporal experiences. On the other, however, the abstracted names exceed their divine ascription and return again to color our experience. So justice, goodness, and beauty are names that coincide perfectly in God's simple being, making them divine synonyms, even if for us they are distinct. But the very fact that we contemplate their participation in God's simplicity means that even in the temporal realm they must entail mutually emergent and coinciding dynamics. A justice that is not somehow approaching truth and beauty cannot be real justice, for the one who contemplates divine names. For the Catholic tradition, rather like Plato, God is always only named at a diagonal: a materializing track that both descends kenotically from the divine and ascends liturgically from the earth below.

If the contemplation of divine names from below—that is, looking into the divine being through the lenses of participating attributes, can be called “a diagonal,” what might we call it from above—that is, looking at the participation through the divine being itself? Here a final Thomistic distinction (slightly transposed into a 20th Century Russian key), parallel to the essence/existence distinction, though not identical with it, might help us say one final word about creaturely becoming. In spite of the doctrine of divine immutability, Thomas says that there is movement in God, registering as divine procession: the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, and the Son's procession is also a begetting. God also moves *ad extra*, and infiltrates the very growth and becoming of

the world in a movement that Thomas calls the Missions. David Bentley Hart has given us a grammar for this distinction by suggesting that there is an “analogical interval” between the processions and missions. What happens in the moving of God in the world is an analogy for what happens in the moving of the trinity within the Godhead, and still, it can be coherently maintained of the relation of the one to the other, across the interval, that God is immutable.

And what does this procession/mission distinction give us? In the intra-divine movement, the Spirit illuminates the Son simply, eternally, and perfectly. In time, which is the created fabric woven by the uncreated Missions, this act of the Spirit’s illumination of the Son happens gradually: the Logos must gestate in Mary’s womb, grow in wisdom and stature, be driven by the Spirit into solitude. Even after his arrival, the Son keeps arriving. The perfect relation of the Father to the Son, in other words, is always shown partially, gradually, through a glass darkly. Even when he is gone, he says, the Spirit will have to lead us into all truth, and so Pentecost is only the continuing Mission of the manifestation of the Son. In short, through the Spirit’s work of historical illumination, we can become the perfection that, on the far side of the analogical interval, exists eternally as the Triune God.

By contrast, again, if becoming is an end in itself, not only will the “ends” always be sinister and tyrannical, as I have said, but the becoming will be as well: without a transcendent giver of being, becoming is a false name for a virtual flux that is the only possible truth of being. In the end, we may conclude, only a perfect being can grant perfection, and this gift is granted only through becoming. Only a God who does not become can offer becoming as a perfecting gift.