

CONCLUSION

The New Imperative of Relationality

This essay has argued that only a theological metaphysic can overcome the perennial problem of individuation — *what* it is that *makes* an individual an individual — bequeathed by antiquity and left unresolved by modernity. By refusing the binary opposition between the one and the many, Christian Neo-Platonist theology provides an account that mediates between unity and multiplicity by locating being in the realm of the ‘between’ (Plato’s *metaxu*) which is itself positioned within the relational hierarchy of the Trinitarian Creator God.

To begin with Plato is paramount, as it subverts from the outset the predominantly Aristotelian ‘categorical’ grammar of ancient and modern theories of individuation. Indeed, most accounts deal with the problem of what individuates composite things in purely philosophical terms and within the realm of strict immanence. As a result, such treatments locate the source of individuation in the individuality of substances or in the links between their constituent elements — either matter or form or both at once (as Aristotle himself does). Since the Stagirite removes the First Mover or God from the actualization of the sublunary world and all things therein, we can trace a genealogy to late medieval scholasticism, early modern philosophy, and even postmodern ontologies of pure immanence. For all of these perspectives insist that individuals are ultimately generated by other individuals and that individuality is somehow constitutive of both being and knowing. Thus, the main dividing line of rival solutions to the problem of individuation is between those who provide an account in terms of a transcendent source and those who limit it to an immanent source — even if they do so for transcendent reasons.

As I argued in chapter 1, Aristotle’s priority of substance over relation

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foregrounds the severing of the Prime Mover's actuality from the generation and evolution of all individual substances. The separation of transcendent principles and ends from immanent causes and effects has both metaphysical and political implications. Metaphysically, it assumes the preexistence of matter and does not explain why the form-matter realm comes into existence or why it is sustained in being. Aristotle simply presupposes a kind of drive of material potentiality towards the final *telos* for which his idea of matter as pure potency offers no rationale. Politically, this account divorces action or activity, which is the prime mode of perfecting one's particular form, from the actuality of the final cause. The ultimate *telos* is therefore eliminated from the goods that are proper and internal to specific practical activities. Such a conception shifts the emphasis from relation and participation to auto-generation and autonomy. This is why Aristotle celebrates self-sufficiency and sovereignty, both at the level of the *polis* and the individual. Notwithstanding the perpetual risk of anachronism, Aristotle's theo-ontology foreshadows the late medieval shift from metaphysics to onto-theology and in this sense anticipates much of philosophic modernity.

Indeed, Aristotle's original rejection of Plato's ideas on relationality, participation, and mediation — coupled with other shifts within theology that displace Aristotle's metaphysical language of act and potency — reinforces the passage from a metaphysics of creation and individuation to ontologies of generation and individuality. Here Avicenna and Gilbert Porreta are pivotal, as chapter 4 suggests. Avicenna's onto-logic of necessity and Gilbert's 'mathematical Platonism' radicalize Porphyry's logicized Aristotelianism in the direction of a primacy of logic and semantics and a more immanentist construal of individuation. Instead of individual substances being seen as participating in the transcendental unity of God's being and goodness, created being is now seen either as a transcendently necessary logical category or the product of divine volition — disconnected from inner divine reality and denied a limited 'share' of divine unity.

Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Jean Buridan — followed by Francisco Suárez and Benedict Spinoza — elaborate variations on these twin themes (as detailed in chapters 6-8). Once creation is no longer seen as participation in the relational hierarchy of the Trinity, it is gradually reduced to efficient causality, which means that particularity is regarded as either a simple result of a divine *fiat* or as something brought about by an individual thing itself under a transcendental compulsion

(or both at the same time). So either individuation is intelligible to blind faith alone or else it is coterminous with being and knowing and thus ultimately inexplicable, because it is simply assumed that this is how transcendently everything exists and is known. Following Suárez, the object of metaphysics is being insofar as it is, i.e., an individual 'thing' that is in itself prior to any relations with other individual 'things.' Whether or not it is caused by God, individuality is now seen as pertaining to essence and not itself participating in the unity of the divine transcendent source of being. Paradoxically, it was a series of theological shifts that brought about the more 'secular' accounts of individuation, stretching from (elements in) Aristotle, Porphyry through Gilbert, to the formalist-fideistic onto-theology of Duns Scotus and the nominalist-voluntarist variant of Ockham. Since these accounts rest on dubious metaphysical arguments, the theological approaches to individuation from late Antiquity to early modern scholasticism can be questioned on objective philosophical grounds.

The same applies to later theories. Erasing God from the internal constitution of the world opens up a gap between the transcendent and the immanent that continues to govern modern and postmodern ontologies. Spinoza is first to abandon the idea of creation *ex nihilo* altogether and invent a realm of pure immanence where the oneness of the substance determines the diversity of finite modes. In the natural order all finite modes are equal and there is no hierarchy. But both his ontology of single substance and his politics of plural democracy are defined on essentially negative grounds. The single substance is infinite and auto-productive, but this begs the question of why it would choose to express itself in finite modes. Likewise, democracy is a necessary consequence of the nature of individual knowledge — the limits on human understanding according to which individuals ignore their own particular station in the communal order and fail to grasp the universal fixed laws of the eternal universe. The result is that individuals confound their own self-interest with the common sharing in the substance. In order to avoid the formation and consolidation of oligarchic clusters of power, only a democratic regime can diffuse power and cancel out conflicting egotism. Democracy so configured seeks to regulate the opposition and conflict between 'natural enemies' (Spinoza). This conflict mirrors the nature of finite modality, which is at once a necessary reality and a contingent illusion. Only the sages transcend this aporetic condition and can understand the commonality of the substance below and beyond the individu-

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ality of finite modes. Neither free nor good, Spinoza's vision of politics oscillates between a *de facto* autocracy of the wise and a *de iure* democracy of the ignorant.

Other modern theories of individuation are similarly trapped in the aporia of the one and the many and the dilemma of monism and dualism. Monist and dualist elements are present in all the proposed solutions by Descartes, Leibniz, Hobbes, Locke, Wolff, and Kant — none of them can escape the transcendentalism and positivism which in the final instance collapse into one another, as I argue in chapter 9. The shift away from a transcendent Creator God towards an immanent absolute principle marks the final exit from metaphysics and the rise of the modern science of transcendental ontology. However, once any objective limits are removed on ontological and political individuality, relations amongst particular things are governed exclusively by sovereign volition (divine or human) or sheer, unmediated power — or a sinister combination of both, as in the case of the modern (not medieval) absolutism of the divine right of kings.¹ Without any transcendent objectivity that orders individuals and situates them in mutual relations, there is in the end only Nietzsche's will-to-power.

In response, the 'postmodern' flight into an infinite flux promises to unsettle the fixed foundations of rationalism, empiricism, and transcendentalism. However, now that the 'death of God' and the 'end of metaphysics' have so conspicuously failed to secure emancipation and universal prosperity, radical ontologies of pure immanence are once again in question. The 'postmodern' fixation upon the 'totally other' is but the mirror image of the modern turn to the solipsistic self. Thus, contemporary culture hovers between a subjectivity that is absolute and an objectivity that is arbitrary. Instead of pursuing the common good, politics serves little more than the power of the market-state and private self-gratification. Fundamentally, my argument is that the individual, understood as a constitutive category in both philosophy and politics, is a modern invention that can only be understood as a shift within theology that eschewed the patristic and medieval vision of relationality in favor of abstract individuality.

By contrast, Plato construes the 'individuality' of a thing metaphysically as its positioning in relation to other things, mirroring the mutual

1. See John Neville Figgis, *The Theory of the Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896).

interlinks of forms and the Good as the form of all forms. And since the Good is the author of all things in whose ecstatic 'self-giving' everything participates, there are in Plato's metaphysics adumbrations of horizontal and vertical relationality, as the second half of chapter 1 argues. This priority of relation within Platonism is the single most fundamental reason why — as Pope Benedict has also argued in the widely misunderstood and misrepresented Regensburg address — the hellenization of Christianity was never a distortion of biblical revelation but instead a development of Jewish and early Christian ideas on creation and the Trinity (partially intimated in the Hellenized Judaism of Jesus and the Apostles). Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity tends to accentuate the priority of relation over substance, as evinced by the work of Latin and Greek Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Boethius, or Dionysius the Areopagite (discussed in chapters 2 and 3). Creation *ex nihilo* newly brings matter itself within the scope of originating asymmetrical relationality, while the supremacy of relation over substance in the case of the Godhead itself is demonstrated by Augustine in the *De Trinitate* and further developed by Boethius.

Other Platonist elements are also present in the theology of the Church Doctors, notably Aquinas, as chapter 5 documents in detail. For example, 'individuality' is linked to transcendental unity, such that God himself is hyper-individual in such a way that God himself is supremely singular. Therefore, it is not the case that general being somehow creates particular being. Instead, God's infinite mode of united 'definiteness' (*yliatim* for Aquinas in his commentary on the *Liber de Causis*) imparts a share of its singular unity to created being according to a finite mode. Here the theological metaphysic of Christian Neo-Platonism outflanks both monism and 'postmodern' pluralism based on a certain mediation between the one and the many — already present in Plato as the interplay between the One and the Dyad. Moreover, the world of things reflects both the 'horizontal' participation among forms and their 'vertical' sharing in the Good that positions everything relationally. Far from being exclusively metaphysical, Greek and Latin Neo-Platonist theology also offered a political vision that gave rise to Christendom in both East and West — a shared vision that the *cosmos* is sacred, that virtues preserve and perfect natural law, and that all creatures stand in indissoluble relations with each other and with their Creator within the relational and hierarchical order of God's creation.

Even though the ecclesial and political edifice of Christendom even-

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tually dissolved, it is argued in this essay that Christian Neo-Platonist theology was never refuted.² On the contrary, it has provided an alternative not only to the late medieval and early modern proto-secular structures of thought and practice but also to the questionable use of theological categories in contemporary phenomenology and political thought. As such, the Christian theological vision of relationality outwits in advance the modern and late modern oscillation between the one and the many in both philosophy and politics.

While the primary object of this inquiry is the metaphysical problem of individuation, the essay has also suggested some of the political implications of the shift from a theological metaphysics of creation and individuation to a pure ontology of generation and individuation. The removal of God from the political sphere is itself grounded in the metaphysical removal of God from creation as such. Thus from Aristotle through to Suárez, I have shown how the individual substance prior to primary, embodied relation generates a politics of either individual or collective autonomy, deficient in any true sense of a sharing in a common good. Only the primacy of a specific set of relations and reciprocal duties over individual rights can prevent institutions and actors from descending into a formalistic, procedural, and managerial mode whose abstractness is empty and blind. A polity not acknowledging its relation to God (in receptivity and gratitude) will prove a polity without true human relations, bound either to disintegrate or else to submit to an enforced tyrannical unity (in a more or less democratic guise).³ Even in the case of Spinoza, a democracy of the many is but a desperate and second-best device designed to make the competitions of ignorant individuals balance each other out, as I have already indicated. In various ways, this can be extended to the Cartesian city of abstract individuals, Locke's apology for commercial market relations, and Kant's case for a liberal *cosmopolis*

2. As indicated in chapter 1, my argument differs from David Bradshaw's in his very important book *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

3. In addition to recent work on biopolitics (already cited), there is also a growing literature on illiberal liberalism and authoritarian democracy. See, *inter alia*, Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 1-69; Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Emmanuel Todd, *Après la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). Cf. my "The Crisis of Capitalist Democracy," *Telos* 152 (Winter 2010): 44-67.

where there is an unresolved tension between individual rights, national sovereignty, and the *ius gentium*.⁴

These arguments extend into the arena of contemporary political theology, particularly with respect to the post-Schmittian theory of sovereignty and debates on democracy and capitalism. Given that secular liberal democracy and unbridled ‘free-market’ capitalism have so clearly failed to deliver universal freedom and prosperity, it is perhaps no longer surprising — though no less significant — that Pope Benedict XVI’s argument on the impasse of modern secularism and the Enlightenment is changing the terms of debate. This is most clearly evinced by his dialogue with Jürgen Habermas,⁵ in which the latter recognizes that we have in some sense moved into a postsecular phase of history when religious traditions should no longer be confined to the private sphere but instead be able to intervene in the public square. For Habermas, however, the norms that govern public, political engagement between religious and nonreligious traditions must remain strictly secular and liberal (procedural and majoritarian).⁶ The Pope contends that secularism brackets the substantive common good out of the picture, which perpetuates the late scholastic separation of pure nature from the supernatural — bequeathed by Suárez and enthusiastically embraced by neo-liberal/neo-conservative Catholics such as Michael Novak and George Weigel. This logic is wedded to early modern rationalism and fideism which can be opposed on objective metaphysical grounds. Josef Ratzinger, who further develops *nouvelle théologie*, argues for a new form of constitutional corporatism against modern liberalism, which is closely connected with the fundamental metaphysical relationality of all beings and the indelible role of basic social units above the level of the individual. Benedict’s paradoxical argument is that a post-secular politics requires a pre-secular metaphysics. Linked to this is a recovery of the mediating role of the ‘few,’ a notion that

4. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. Gary L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003).

5. Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), English translation: *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

6. Habermas’s distinction between procedural and substantive democracy ignores the ontological problem of elevating representation over above participation. It also posits the normative primacy of modern, abstract secular values like tolerance or the will of the majority over nonmodern virtues embodied in civic practices such as justice governed by notions of the good rather than merely fairness.

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for Plato, Aristotle, and Christian Neo-Platonists refers to virtuous elites who strive to uphold standards of excellence and promote notions of truth as a more important principle of politics than the sovereign power of the 'one' or the democratic will of the 'many' or both at once.

Historically, the political 'right' and the political 'left' have defined themselves variously either in terms of the 'sovereign ruler' versus the 'sovereign people' or the market versus the state or the economic versus the political — or indeed all at once. These and other binary relations are rationalist, spatial constructs that fuse ontological nominalism with political voluntarism. The realism of Neo-Platonist metaphysics and politics rejects the empty universalism that underpins the liberal blending of political absolutism with moral relativism under the guise of individual freedom of choice and the tyranny of mass opinion. A theological politics of paradox is concerned with real, primary relations by emphasizing social bonds of reciprocity and fraternity that are based on universal sympathy and mutualist in outlook.

Thus, this essay raises the question whether our politics of 'right and left' remains caught within shared secular, liberal axioms — axioms that are *also* those of theocratic fundamentalisms since they too deal in a politics of the indifferent will, inherited — as is equally the case in the end for liberalism — from the theological voluntarism of the late Middle Ages. This is not at all to search for a new political center; on the contrary, it is to search for a way that cannot be charted on our current conceptual map. It is to investigate again notions of fundamental relationality, of the common good and economic reciprocity, and of principles that can determine appropriate 'mixtures' of government as between the one, the few, and the many; the center and localities; political government and prepolitical society; international community and nations; education in time and government in space; absolute right and free decision; economic freedom and just distribution; and finally, secular and religious authorities. In short, it is to explore whether we are seeing the emergence of a politics of paradox beyond modern, secular liberal norms.

In summary, the tradition of Christian Neo-Platonism described in this essay retrieves and extends the legacy of theological realism and intellectualism developed by the Church Fathers and Doctors and defended by Aquinas against the nominalism and voluntarism of radical Aristotelians in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The emphasis on a hierarchical and relational ordering of transcendence and immanence eschews both transcendentalism (in both materialist and ide-

alist variants) and immanentism. In this manner, the theological metaphysic this essay defends gestures towards a pluralist universalism that avoids the enduring metaphysical dilemma of either monism or dualism and the similarly enduring ethical temptation of either absolutism or relativism.

Finally, the focus on relationality has a strongly contemporary dimension. Both the natural sciences and humanities are seeing the emergence of different relational paradigms attempting to theorize the widespread recognition that reality cannot be reduced to self-generating, individual beings, and that the outcome of interactions between various entities is more than the sum of parts (whether these be more atomistic or more collectivist). For instance, in particle physics it has been suggested that there are ‘things’ such as quarks (subatomic particles) that cannot be measured individually because they are confined by force fields and only exist inside certain particles (hadrons) that are themselves bound together by strong ‘substantial’ interplay with other hadrons.⁷

Likewise, recent evidence from research in fields such as evolutionary biology and neuroscience shows that modern ontological atomism and the spontaneous spirit of possessive acquisitiveness are at odds with more holistic models of human nature. Indeed, the human brain is in some important organic sense connected to the world and responds unconsciously to the social environment within which it is embedded. Such an account of selfhood contrasts sharply with the dominant modern conception that the self is a separate, self-standing agent that makes conscious, rational decisions based on individual volition.⁸ Linked to the naturally given social embeddedness of the self is the argument (substantiated by findings from a comprehensive, global survey) that fundamental moral distinctions are somehow ‘hard-wired’ in human beings and that virtuous habits such as cooperative trust or mutual sympathy

7. This goes back to nineteenth-century ‘field theorists’ such as Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell, whose research shaped Einstein’s theory of relativity. See Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (New York: Crown, 1961), Appendix V. Cf. Einstein’s “The Mechanics of Newton,” in *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Bonanza, 1954).

8. Mark Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (London: Ecco, 2006). This needs to be complemented by the argument that a proper ethics surpasses the classically modern dichotomy between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in the direction of an outlook towards the virtue of justice and the transcendent reality of goodness. Such an outlook is a fusion of natural desire and supernaturally infused habit, as Christian Neo-Platonists in East and West have tended to argue.

precede the exercise of instrumental reason or the interplay of sentimental emotions.⁹

Relational patterns and structures are also moving to the fore in a growing number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. For example, in anthropology it is argued that the idea of a purely self-interested *homo oeconomicus* in pursuit of material wealth (central to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*) reduces the natural desire for goodness to a series of vague, prerational moral feelings (as set out in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*). As such, it marks a radical departure from older ideas of 'political animals' in search for mutual social recognition through the exercise of virtues embodied in practices and the exchange of gifts — instead of a mechanical application of abstract values and the trading of pure commodities.¹⁰ For these (and other) reasons, individuals cannot be properly understood as separate from the relations that bring them into existence and sustain them in being. Instead, individuals are best conceived in terms of personhood, defined as the plural and composite locus of relationships and the confluence of different microcosms.

Similarly, in sociology, cultural studies, and cognate fields, the past decade or so has seen a growing body of research on human cooperation, creativity, and connectedness framed by the concept of relationality.¹¹ Closely connected with these themes is a renewed interest in rival conceptions of ontology. Here the focus on social relationality in the social sciences coincides with a growing focus on metaphysical relationality in philosophy and theology. In turn, this is linked to a fresh concern with a theological metaphysics that rejects the late medieval and modern primacy of individual substance over ontological relation.¹²

9. In this context, Matt Ridley's claim in his influential book *The Origins of Virtue* (London: Penguin, 1996) that human virtue is driven by self-interest and closely connected to the division of labor uncritically accepts the modern dualism of egoism and altruism and also the premise that morality is grounded in a purely immanent account of human nature.

10. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000; orig. pub. 1944), pp. 45-70; Marcel Hénaff, *Le prix de la vérité. Le don, l'argent, la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), pp. 351-80. See my "The Paradoxical Nature of the Good: Relationality, Sympathy, and Mutuality in Rival Traditions of Civil Economy," in *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Pope Benedict XVI's Social Encyclical and the Future of Political Economy*, ed. Adrian Pabst (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 173-206.

11. Pierpaolo Donati, *Relational Sociology: A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2010).

12. E.g., F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical*

As part of this growing literature on relational paradigms, this essay seeks to make a metaphysical intervention that moves notions of relationality to the center of debates in philosophy and politics. The real, true account of the human person is not about unbridled freedom in the marketplace or about our obedient dependence on the state, but about our social bonds which discipline us and make us the unique persons we all are, as David Hume and Antonio Genovesi argued in the late eighteenth century and as Pope Benedict has recently reaffirmed in his social encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. At their best, the social bonds of family, neighborhood, local community, professional associations, nation, and faith help instill civic virtues and a shared sense of purpose. Concretely, this means solidarity and a commitment to the common good in which all can participate — from a viable ecology via universal education and healthcare to a wider distribution of assets and other means to pursue true happiness beyond pleasure and power. Christian conceptions of God stress the relations between the three divine persons of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the belief that we are all made in the image and likeness of a personal, ‘relational’ Creator God translates into an emphasis on the strong bonds of mutual help and reciprocal giving. For true Christians, charity is never about handing out alms to the poor and feeling better about oneself. Rather, it is about an economy of gift-exchange where people assist each other — not based on economic utility or legal obligation but in a spirit of free self-giving, receiving, and returning by members of a social body greater than its parts, grounded as it is ultimately in the mystical union of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ.

Turn to Relationality (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).