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NIHILISM ON A ROLLERCOASTER?

A Review of Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 333pp. ISBN 0-415-27693-4 cloth / ISBN 0-415-27694-2 paper.

THIS BOOK IS INTENT ON REVERSAL. Here is one way of understanding it. Its purpose, put concisely, is to help Nietzsche turn around, to go from standing on his head to standing on his feet; alternatively, perhaps to partner him in a very lively reel-dance. This reversal likewise involves helping Christians, and others, to turn around. For, in addition to Nietzsche and his avowed fans, the others implicated are all of us who are prone to overvalue how exclusion, conflict, and estrangement are needed for our identity.

Nietzsche's own "genealogy of morality" tracked nihilism back to various sources, which included philosophy as well as religion. The Socrates portrayed by Plato, and Plato himself, at least according to Nietzsche, initiated the fall of philosophy into the dualism of soul versus body, eternity versus time and ideal forms versus unreliable tokens. Christianity subsequently popularized this for the masses—or so Nietzsche would have us believe. This nihilism drives down one side of each of these dualistic pairs of concepts, in order to drive up the other side. These are the lines on which Nietzsche develops his diagnosis of the nihilism of philosophy and Christianity.

Cunningham's book is not directly about Nietzsche, except very occasionally. Rather it is a book in which Nietzsche is mainly an invisible man, present everywhere as the critical friend or dear enemy he wanted to be. For Cunningham, Nietzsche was in effect standing on his head so as to misinterpret both Christianity and Plato. Nietzsche has been followed *en masse* here by sheep-like modern and post-modern philosophers, artists and cultural critics, whose general methodological suspicion has deserted them at this point.

In Cunningham's *Genealogy*, against Nietzsche, it was Plotinus rather than Plato in whom the tradition of Greek philosophical dualism found clearer expression. Plato—according to better poised, more critical interpreters than Nietzsche—drew also on other traditions, qualifying dualistic features in his sources, as in his whole manner and style of thinking and writing. Similarly, in Christian traditions human flesh and temporality are seen as integral to the goodness of creation and as oriented towards reconciliation and resurrection into the triune peace of the God of Jesus and his people/s, especially when they are loyal to Jewish non-dualist traditions. Admittedly these traditions have been challenged, by the anti-semitic Marcion, by various Gnostic cults, by Manichean dualistic tendencies and movements of self-punishing moralism, but the heretical character of all these has been generally evident to main-stream Christian thinkers, from Irenaeus in the second century AD onwards. Reflecting on Cunningham's *Genealogy*, we can come to see how he provides a way for Christians, and others, to acknowledge and respond better to the nihilistic shadows we all cast by our ill-judged assertiveness in defense of our insecurities and precarious, because dynamic, being in becoming.

If Cunningham is right, it is not in truth Christianity which is primarily an ugly version of the nihilism generated by dualistic philosophy (even though this has sometimes appeared to be the case, in the mirrors and smoke of time and memory), but rather it is the dualistic nihilism of philosophy which is an ugly version of Christianity. Moreover, the beauty of God's transcendent infinity is to be seen in its transversal or mutual crossing with his immanent infinity within created difference without end and in his ever more full involvement in the reconciliation of this creation with himself. God's being true to us all and true to himself in the thick of things, here and now is grounded in the abyss of God's being true to God in himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God neither rivals nor excludes any finite being or finite forms of being. This God is not in competition with others, either in creation or in any other stage of the stories we are enabled to tell truthfully, along with him.

It follows that philosophies, cultures and lives, in so far as these are at odds with the good news which is genuinely Christian, are to be seen most perspicuously as being at odds, in virtue of their dualism and nihilism, with God, in virtue of his triune being and life, peace and beauty. If we are faced by, and involved with, the inexhaustible and inescapable self-giving of this God as the source and goal of all being and beings, then metaphysical dualism shows up as a type of distorted theology. But more than just this is shown up here.

For we find that both in the history of philosophy and in our personal struggles to think, dualism (Manicheanism) can collude with monism

(pantheism), just as the latter can also collude with pluralism (polytheism). Such dialectical forms of collusion constitute a dance we had better think hard before joining. For they also show their character in being equally at odds with well-formed accounts of the triune being of God. To assert the triune being and life of God is to deny that God is the god of metaphysical dualism, or the god/s of pluralism, or of their respective matching versions of monism. Relatedly, to assert the triune God with us all in Christ, is to deny that difference necessarily means conflict or estrangement, and to deny that unity necessarily means confusion or vacuousness, as recognized in effect at the church council of Chalcedon. This all indicates a rather more attractive form of dance, traditionally identified as the dance (Greek: *perichoresis*) of the triune life of God. Recent and varied critiques of “onto-theology,” by Heidegger, Levinas and others, all seem stilted, and short of breath and energy, by comparison.

Cunningham's *Genealogy of Nihilism* (hereafter *GN*) is another book in the *Radical Orthodoxy Series*, edited by John Milbank (until recently at the University of Virginia, and now at the university of Nottingham, UK, where Cunningham is now also to be working), Catherine Pickstock (University of Cambridge, UK) and Graham Ward (University of Manchester, UK). Readers of the series will recognize how *GN* follows the general strategy of Radical Orthodoxy as anticipated in Milbank's (1990) *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. There, Milbank set out the strategy of arguing that key thinkers of modernity and postmodernity, particularly but not only those seminal for social theory, were theologians of some kind whether they knew it or not. For if they were contributing to a ramified ontological narrative of violence, regimented by dualistic and hence nihilistic metaphysical narratives and assumptions, then their thinking was not oriented by the Christian theological ontology of peace, as elaborated by Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas and congruent Christian thinkers. In principle, all thinkers were to be understood as tending either towards (or from) the theology of the peace of the triune God, or towards some counter-theology or counter-theologies. The latter, in a final analysis, celebrate the metaphysics of violence and the violence of metaphysics, with their dualisms and polytheisms, and their collusive pantheisms.

This is the general strategy that Cunningham assimilates and extends in *GN* with his own distinctive voice and voices. In *GN*, however, we find more clearly that even the counter-theologies which constitute versions of nihilism can themselves echo and reflect glimpses of the light and sound of the theology of peace. (Here “*of*” is in italics, to recall how often “*of*” can be intended as both a subjective and an objective genitive: “the love of God,” for example, hinting at love both for and from God, and perhaps only for God if from God. Careful readers of *GN* will notice how “*of*” appears in italics in the version of its sub-title, used as the title for part two of *GN*, on pages ix and

167). Even the vanishing nothing of our nihilism, of our would-be being as consistent nihilists, can be something, since to be is to participate, to some degree, in some way, in the peace of infinite being. Analogies of peace, which is what we all are as creatures, superabundantly, “boiling over” as Meister Eckhart liked say, allow for differences as well as similarities. Thus analogical being or analogical participation makes it possible that theology can learn from nihilism, as well as nihilism from theology. I think we can say the following in this context. Against dualism, theology celebrates similarities. Against monism, theology celebrates differences—including different kinds of monism. Against pluralism, theology celebrates both similarities and differences. To be fixated on differences could suggest a deeper obsession with monism. Analogical being in relationship, as well as simple logic, requires differences and similarities equally.

Part One of *GN*, called “Philosophies of nothing,” begins to work out these and related themes in some detail, with reference to European philosophy and some of its pre-European sources. Plotinus has the mixed honor of appearing at the start of this genealogy of nihilism. He is followed by Avicenna, Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. Spinoza has a chapter to himself, as do Kant, Hegel, and Derrida. With a certain poetic justice, Martin Heidegger and Paul Celan have to share a chapter. Part Two, called “The difference of theology,” is more overtly theological. Along with more on Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Aquinas, this part also includes discussions of Sartre, Lacan, Deleuze and Badiou, and many others, familiar and strange, in passing. How far the philosophical sketches from the development of nihilism match the versatility and erudition of the rest of the discussion will need more time, insight and expertise to evaluate. However, I suggest that such concerns are less important, all things considered, than trying to get clearer about the overall strategies of argument. If the book is not a consistent virtuoso performance (and it may be close to that), in my judgment it is at least an intermittent virtuoso performance.

Part of what makes *GN* difficult, perhaps more difficult than it needed to be, is the cracking pace at which Cunningham needs to travel for much of the time to cover so much ground in such depth. The book is a research program in itself, on which many could work for some time. This is not to forget that *GN* also contains some limpid simplicities, as well as some only apparent simplicities. One nightmare which afflicted this reader, while struggling with *GN*, was of being on a rollercoaster, a fair-ground switch-back ride, in the form of a giant Möbius strip, and in the company of wise-cracking post-structuralist Hegelians, relatives of Derrida. That would, of course, be a hugely unfair travesty of this remarkable book, even from someone who might have resented having to work so hard at reading parts of it. If other readers do find themselves anticipating affliction by any such nightmare, I would recommend a short and helpful vacation in the form of reading the

occasional papers in Turner (2002), another groundbreaking Cambridge theologian and philosopher, who is thanked in Cunningham's acknowledgements.

Before looking at what in Part One Cunningham calls the logic of nihilism, it may be useful to look at how this is transformed when it is revisited in Part Two. He writes: "Being is not something, it is nothing—nothing but love. Here we see theology's dialogue with nihilism; for being *is* after all nothing *as* something although in a manner beyond nihilism's imaginings" (p.265 italics in original). Such passages need frequent rereading. I offer a paraphrase, at risk of incurring both wrath and ridicule for my flat-footedness. Being is different from beings or things. Being lets beings be. Hence being is not one thing or one being amongst others. Hence we can say being is no thing, or no-thing, or nothing. In this sense, we can say being as no-thing is the equivalent of love. For love lets beings be. Hence being and love converge in meaning. Nihilism imagines it can reduce being to beings, and reduce love to cravings. After all, "nothing but" is the signature-tune of that reductionism which is parasitic on dualism and so part of the nexus of nihilism. For Christian theology the infinite nothing of love does become a finite being, in Jesus Christ. Infinite love creates beings out of nothing and resurrects beings to renewal and new being out of nothing. Nihilism cannot imagine such matters except perhaps as imagination, not as reality. Nihilism imagines nothing as something differently. This is explained in Part One and elsewhere, as indicated in what follows here.

Elsewhere we learn from Cunningham how nihilism imagines something as if it is nothing when it imagines being or beings reductively or dualistically. If I have not missed something, I suggest Cunningham needs to explain further the links between reductionism and dualism, to render these links more evident, at least for some readers. He does, however, provide examples of reductionism which may go some way to serving this purpose.

Nihilism, then, can perform its own reverse black art and imagine nothing as if it were something. This happens when various beings we have treated reductively (through abstraction, isolation, exploitation, or other forms of damage) we then try to treat as if all were well, according to our own flickering lights, and so treat them artificially, sentimentally, superstitiously, or unjustly in other ways. For example, we first treat the natural world as a stock-pile of useful resources and then try to reanimate these, as if we could make reparation by attributing occult or anthropomorphized powers; or we treat the brain as nothing but a meat-based computer and then feel the need to treat it as a little person hidden inside the head; or we treat other animals as if they are there just for our exploitation, and then seek to humanize or sentimentalize them.

Now it is time to turn back to Part One and to Cunningham's introduction, in which he first writes of what he calls the logic of nihilism. We can now perhaps see better how this "of" is also an ambiguous "of." It is not just a matter of a logic which is imaginable *for* nihilism; it is also a matter of a logic which is imaginable *by* nihilism. Cunningham writes:

... This leads me to define the logic of nihilism as a sundering of the something, rendering it nothing, and then having the nothing be after all as something. Indeed, each of the philosophical dualisms involved above can embody this logic... [xiii: A note explains that this "as" should be understood to mean "as if."]

Nihilism as sundering means dualism, but also reductionism. This renders beings as if they were nothing, since dualism and reductionism arbitrarily and unjustly gerrymander meaning and value, as well as beings and being, and those who can love and be loved, as well as love itself, not as an abstraction but as the concrete particularity in which the divine logic becomes human. Compare Paul in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 13, especially verses 1-3, on how, without love, we are nothing. At least two other passages in Paul's letters can cast some light here on nihilism. The opening sections of the same letter appear salient (especially chapter 1, verse 28), as does the section of his *Letter to the Romans* (chapter 8, verses 31-39) which refers to how nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and to the various recognizable forms which this "nothing" can take.

In general Cunningham does not wish to appear to be invoking the authority of the Jewish and Christian canonical scriptures in the context of *GN*. However, these scriptures are clearly enough there in the background. As with Radical Orthodox writings in general, this background role leaves readers to do the work of making more overt connections. Of course, this will be more difficult for some readers than for others. So far as I know, Radical Orthodox writers have yet to address in any depth questions about how their work may or may not relate to very different religious traditions, even though the outlines of how they are likely to address such questions can be discerned by those with some empathy. Here, also, Cunningham's work takes "radical orthodoxy" forward, as suggested in part by the final paragraphs of this discussion.

The philosophical dualisms to which Cunningham refers at the end of the previous quotation link with the earlier discussion of dualism in this review, but also, of course, to the analyses in Part One of his book. He sees in the philosophical tradition an impossibly imperious monism or pantheism which regularly expresses itself, or hides itself, dualistically in a metaphysical strategy of "divide and rule." For example, Spinoza has the dualism of God or Nature, but these two aspects disguise their being aspects of monistic Substance. However the One substance can only express itself in these two

aspects and depends on these for recognition. Cunningham argues similarly for Kant, Hegel and others. As a simple example, Cunningham uses Jastrow's well-known duck-rabbit figure. Is it really a duck, or is it really a rabbit? Or is it really an ambiguous figure? Cunningham sees these aspects of the logic of nihilism as inherently violent, given how co-dependent aspects and co-dependent background are seen and experienced as mutually exclusive rivals, and indeed are constituted as such in such a treatment. It is important not to forget, that this is the logic of idolatry, which is self-forgetful and self-deceptive. To this extent, we may be inclined to suppose that the different dialectical patterns spun by Hegel and by Heidegger, to mention perhaps the most obvious cases, may have a partial justification.

More positively, Cunningham wants to suggest some benefits from this newly perceived closeness of nihilism and Trinitarian theology. It is as if nihilism might be able to make some contribution to our awareness of being balanced precariously on a tight-rope above an abyss. Is this the abyss of nothingness in which all meanings and values vanish? Or is it the abyss of divine love which shows us both the distance infinite love comes down into our predicaments, and its infinite distance beyond us, distance embraced within the triune peace which recapitulates itself in this crossing? Do we have to choose here, like Herakles at the cross-roads, or are we able to hope and trust and even celebrate that the latter abyss includes the former? Is it only in our nihilistic dreams that all this gets reduced to nothing but playing clever or silly games with words?

Can we conclude this is not a book for beginners, when there is an important sense in which we all remain beginners? It would be good to be able to conclude that there is something significant here for everyone. I think this true, in at least two senses. If we are ready to work at reading Cunningham, we may both seek and find, and find in seeking. As for the other sense, recall how this review began with attention to reversal. Recall how ancient and pervasive is the appeal of the "You also" (*Tu quoque*) form of argument. Recall how king David was told by the prophet Nathan that David was the man in Nathan's story whom the king had just condemned unwittingly out of his own mouth. Recall the simple story of the cage in the zoo, labeled "The most dangerous animal in the world"—and containing a mirror. What can be recognized in writing such as Cunningham's *Genealogy* does depend on who is reading. Yet this is not to give the last word to some banal subjectivism or relativism.

For, I suggest, Cunningham's logic of nihilism can be clarified as follows. First, recall that he "defines" the logic of nihilism as:

A sundering of the something, rendering it nothing,

And then having the nothing be after all as something. [xiii: layout changed here.]

My suggestion is that this can be best understood in terms of three levels of interpretation.

At level one, every advocate (A) for every *something* (S) interprets the suspicious or rejecting other (O) as *rendering* S as “nothing” as insignificant, or lacking in the meaning, value, weight and identity apparent to A. Thus O *sunders* S from A and in this way *sunders* A’s understanding of S. Conversely, every O relates likewise to A. *Tu quoque* rules at its crudest. Thus, at this lowest level of interpretation, both A and O, while wanting to mind how they use their minds, relate or misrelate to each other more like mere bodies which can only compete for being in the same space and time. This is like a lower level version of a double-bind situation. Each exclusive being becomes something of a mirror image of the other. Transition from level one to another level (two or three) may be precipitated by individual or mutual recognition of the absurdity or insufficiency of interpretation at this first level.

At level two, the interpersonal or social and cultural dualism of level one now appears also, and predominantly, in personally internalized versions of dualism. Now typically O, as epitomized by Nietzsche, takes the *tu quoque* strategy to a new level. O now *sunders* S with reference to A by diagnosing how A’s highest values and concepts are raised up at the expense of what should be seen as complementary concepts and values. The “eternal soul” is promoted by demoting the “temporal body,” and so on. Thus for O, A unwittingly and inevitably devalues their highest values, by failing to appreciate the interdependence of higher and lower values. However, this strategy only works where the relevant higher and lower values are assumed by A (and perhaps by O?) to require a dualistic rather than complementary identity. Thus O is prone to attribute to A some necessary and inescapable commitment to dualism. Thus O *sunders* A’s S, *rendering it nothing, and then has this nothing be, after all, a something*. Moreover A can return the compliment, by criticizing O’s assumption of the inevitability of dualism, at least for A, if not for O. This is like a higher level version of a double-bind situation. Transition from this level to the next may again be precipitated or enabled by recognition of the insufficiency or absurdity of interpretation at this level, or at both levels one and two.

At level three, there is mutual recognition and acknowledgement of the absurd insufficiency of the would-be sufficiency at levels one and two. This is the level, I think, to which Cunningham’s genealogy aims to guide us, and from which he aspires to celebrate his Trinitarian theology of the peace of God. Both A and O can now freely see and respond appropriately to their

mutually collusive *sunderings*, and *rendering nothings*, and to their mutual attempts, even then, to have their mutually attributed identities, values, meanings and concept *as nothings, as if something*. To give some specific application, Christian in this case, God's peace, in God's self-giving to and for the world in Christ, means that we can and do have difference, we can be different without conflict or estrangement, and correspondingly, can and do have unity, can be at one, in peace, without confusion or vacuousness. This is like liberation from all versions of double-bind situations. As Paul recognized, we try to make one another and ourselves as nothing, as we close ourselves down against this love; but these nothings become something in creative and renewing liberation up and out into this love.

If the above interpretation, in terms of three levels, is on the right lines, then Cunningham's genealogy is complex, not just because he is aiming to address so many different readers but also because, in so doing, he is aiming to interpret, to read and to be read, at these three levels. That he takes us so far, towards convergence between his logic of nihilism and the logic of the triune God made flesh, shows us how hard thinking can also be ecstatic thanking.

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