The Prompt of Disaster: Evil as the Perversion of The Trinity

di John Milbank

This work presents a metaphysics of polarity inspired by Franz von Baader's thought and the tradition of Niccolò Cusano. Unlike Hegelian logic, being is not based on identity, nor is it based on constant oscillation, as in Schelling's philosophy. Instead, it is based on a creative tension between distinct yet united opposites, as set out in the model of the analogy of being. In the concluding section, the author addresses the problem of evil in light of von Baader's metaphysics of positive polarity and love, relating it to the visions of Kant and Schelling.

Keywords: Franz von Baader, Analogical Polarity, Love as Creativity, Mediation, Evil

1. The need for negative contrasts?

Why do human beings practice religions, philosophy and politics? The answer cannot be that this is a natural expression of animal contentment, since other animals do not engage in these things, at least to any significant degree, even if they can validly be said to possess both language and culture. If they do so, their culture is settled and exhibits no cleavage with their nature.

It follows that we are religious, philosophical and political animals because of incurable *discontent*. We wish finally to coincide with ourselves, the way other species seem to do. Yet it is not obvious how this can be achieved, and consequently there is no agreement as to who and how to worship, as to what is the true nature of reality, or how we should be socially organised. The only credible hope for a final resolution would seem to be eschatological, beyond time as we know it.

If there is such a thing as the absolute, as an objective, universal truth, both theoretical and practical, then why cannot we all discern it, and all agree upon how to live? There are materialists, and there are alternatively rationalists, who suggest that if we remove the masks of idolatry then the universal evidence, or the universal logic, will unproblematically appear. But the materialists and the rationalists do not agree within their own tribes, nor do they agree with each other. Short of espousing reductive eliminativism, all that we can collectively agree to say is that we are entirely situated within the natural world, and that all our thoughts well up within this world, and yet our entire awareness of this world, and that there is a world at all, is contained within our thoughts and consciousness to which we daily re-awake[1].

To reiterate: within all three realms, of religion, philosophy and politics, the quest for truth is an endeavour to coincide with ourselves and finally to rest content. As with any quest, the point is to end it – to ensure there need be no further dissent concerning fundamentals, and that we may finally learn the lost secret of our human animality.[2] But we know *this* day will never dawn: all we are left with are conjectures concerning the divine, truth and the right way to live – such that we cannot fall back upon practice in despair of science, because all of our specifically human practice is also ultimately pathetic conjecture.

We may seem thereby to be compounding our problems by doubling them, but possibly the circle of perplexity between the nature of the ultimate goal and failure to get there is a positive and hermeneutic one, rather than simply vicious.

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1 - This is what the young Schelling described as undecidable oscillation between objective 'dogmatism' and subjective 'criticism: F.W.J Schelling, *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism,* in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796),* tr. F. Marti, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg 1980, pp. 156-96.

2 - Cf. G. Agamben, *The Adventure*, tr. L. Chiesa, MIT Press, Cambridge 2018.

Comprehending failure might throw some light upon the nature of success, by an advance through the negative that could itself be negated. Is not 'the prompt of disaster' the key to our human search for truth in many dimensions?

After all, the Old Testament announced the true God in contrast to idols; truth, as Plato concluded in the *Sophist*, requires us to recognise the real non-being of falsity; we are only surprised by virtue and able to recognise it because of the normal prevalence of vice, and beauty only strikes us because normally we are confronted with the plain and ugly.

But the problem with this Hegelian-sounding approach is that it can make it appear that we live in a 'Zoroastrian', dualist reality. An illusory nature is proclaimed, just because a spiritual realm held to be only negatively emergent is itself finally fulfilled in ultimate self-negation which is self-obliteration[3].

These considerations applies not just to ourselves, but also seemingly to God: how would a perfectly good and all-knowing God be other than a kind of unconscious, computer-like God, lacking in that requirement of contrast which characterises spirituality and personhood?

However, need contrast always be negative? We are conscious persons only because we constantly are aware of ourselves as not entirely conscious, but also as embodied beings, and of other things that are only there for us in their objectivity which is unconscious, at least in this respect.

2. Contrast without Negation

The latter phenomenology of conscious personhood begins to suggest how we might have positive contrasts that could save the integrity of the divine, truth, good and the beautiful without need for negative contrast with their opposite properties.

We can try to list these contrasts as follows: first, the set of contrasts afforded by time: the past vanishes and is in part forgotten. There is consequently a phenomenon of contrast that would have been manifest even in Eden, as John Milton details: for Eve there is surprise in every new day and its beauty that is there, when previously it was not.

There is secondly, as already indicated contrast of consciousness with the unconscious and what we are conscious of, whether in ourselves or in other things or other subjects. Therefore, there is a polar difference between unconscious nature and conscious spirit that is not a contrast defined inherently by negation. Insofar as

3 - Cf. S. Žižek - J. Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ. Paradox or dialectic?*, The MIT Press, Boston Mass 2008.

there is mutual negation involved, and a real 'is not', then this is not an 'is not' of lack or culpable failure, but simply the gulf that has to be traversed by difference.

For this reason, in the third place, we can allow that there is truth even in the absence of falsehood, to the extent that this is the spiritual recognition and realising of natural differences, whether qualitative or quantitative, and however they may be also and inevitably grasped in terms of their belonging together or unity. If beauty is significantly aligned to a temporal re-emerging into presence, then truth is significantly aligned with a geographic traversing of space, insofar as both pre-existent space and the traversing are necessary for truth to occur.

In the fourth place, there is the question of an intensive increase that may not be from fault to perfection, but rather from perfection to greater perfection. This can apply to the ethical as well as to the aesthetic – in either case an intensification of power and impact of manifestation does not denote progress from lack to fulfilment, but rather further reaching of a *telos* that was itself enabled by an earlier phase that had its own degree of perfect incompletion. The later does not fundamentally abolish and subsume the earlier to create hierarchy by negation, but rather fulfils the earlier while letting it remain.

In all these regards, one can identify positive contrasts which would allow the paradisal persistence of transcendentals and of marriage in difference of spirit with nature. Negation is a secondary matter and ultimate absence is not a precondition of ascertainable presence. The unity in disjunction of conscious spirit and unconscious nature is not itself consciously comprehensible, by a negative dialectics since the arising of consciousness and of reason cannot be thought: it leaves an ineliminable difference, or an 'indivisible remainder'[4].

Therefore, we have cases of positive and contingent transitions that cannot be fully grasped by abstract reason. The influence of spirit on nature and vice-versa appears 'magical', and to belong to a realm in which the imagined can truly affect the real. The impact of causality across time and space seems equally 'magical', insofar as one thing affects another without always shattering its integrity and therefore appears to operate from the 'middle' of a causal factor to the 'middle' of an effect, by a kind of quantum leap that is not manifestly mediated – as when a plummeting stone creates a temporary whirlpool in the water, or a struck stone gives rise to a flame[5].

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4 - For example, F.W.J. Schelling, *Ages of the World,* second version in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World,* tr. J. Norman with a preceding essay by Slavoj Žižek, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1997, p. 167; S. Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, Verso, London 1996.

5 - Cf. Nagarjuna, *Nagarjuna's Middle Way:* The *Mulamadhyamakakarika,* tr. M. Sideris - S. Katsura Wisdom Publications, New York 2013.

Qualitatively different things are strung together and emerge from each other without it being possible to say that this solidarity and emergence is itself qualitatively essential, since qualities pertain to substantial things. For this reason, Schelling supposed that difference itself and the holding together of differences is 'quantitative' in a higher Pythagorean or Platonic sense: differences are degrees of intensity of being – else everything would fall apart[6].

Yet *no* implication of univocity is necessarily involved here[7]. Emerging differences always arise as opposing pairs and without some common measure of contrast that allows this opposition, no differences would ever be apprehended. But we cannot readily grasp the 'magic' by which these differences are combined within their very mutual refusal. Every polarity is in this sense a 'magnetic' polarity, and every series of compounded and often converging and overlapping polarities is 'an electric current'[8]. There is no background univocity of being because the 'flow' of this current only occurs, consists in and is sustained by this series of differences, and in every particular case, besides every compounded case, what we are presented with are combinations that are at once distinguished but held together[9]. Not simply distinguished in one respect and combined in another, but paradoxically distinguished just to the extent that they are held together. So, neither equivocity nor univocity would seem ultimately to prevail.

The polar tension is therefore also, one can argue, a coincidence of opposites, beyond the comprehension of the law of contradiction that governs finitude, for even the structure of our finitude involves a kind of baffling recursion whereby disconnection is also connection without resolution, and so the impinging of the infinite at the core of the limited. The paradoxical coinciding of likeness with unlikeness that refuses either univocal or equivocal is analogy, radically understood as paradox beyond the sway of the Law of Non-Contradiction in the lineage of Nicholas of Cusa[10].

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6 - Cf. F.W.J. Schelling, *Presentation of My System of Philosophy,* and *Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy* (1802) [Extract], in *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence (1800-1802)*, tr. M.G. Vater - D.W. Wood, SUNY, New York 2012, pp. 141-205, pp. 206-225.

7 - This is assumed, for example, by, C. Alderwick, in *Schelling's Ontology of* Powers, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021. But this book is generally excellent.

8 - Cf. Schelling, *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, cit.

9 - F.W.J. Schelling, *On the True Concept of Nature and the Correct Way of Solving its Problems*, in B. Berger - D. Whistler tr. and (edd.), *The Schelling-Eschenmeyer Controversy 1801: Essence and Identity,* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2022, pp. 46-62.

10 - Cf. J. Milbank, *One in Three and Two in One: The Double Coincidence of Opposites in Nicholas of Cusa*, in E. Peroli - M. Moschini (edd.), *Why we need Cusanus/Warum wir Cusanus* brauchen, Aschendorff, Münster 2022, pp. 43-89.

As we shall see, Franz von Baader, not Schelling, understood polarity in this way that entirely salvages 'quantitative' linkage and generation from any imputation of univocity. Schelling did not so much marry categorial univocity to instantiating difference as rather posit an unresolved tensional 'rotation' between identical and different in every instant of being, despite affirming an irreducible connective polar tension always present, and despite a clear denial of any incipient and always prevailing nihilistic dissolution.

In the case of both thinkers, polar connections of differences and intensive potentiation which generates differences in a rising hierarchical series are understood as an electromagnetic pulling and pushing, attraction and reserve[11].

In each of the instances of positive contrast, this polarity is at work. Beauty manifests as day out of darkness; truth arises in the series of things across space and time, and in all the links of this series what differentiates is at once what withdraws into itself and what emanates beyond itself as something separate, or else is drawn out of itself by something already separate in space, or about to become separate in time.

That which withdraws itself into an impenetrable darkness of self-containment is the relatively real; that which is externally emergent or added or encountered by interpretative prehension is the relatively ideal, for as soon as there is manifestation, there is also difference, and therefore difference is also inversely manifestation, a kind of shining form that is *inherently* apparent, and not just apparent to a conscious subject. In this sense there is already truth within reality as its accompanying ideal dimension and, according to Schelling, we can only regard subjective spirit as a further intensification or 'potentiation' of the real, an acute instance of the third, binding power which combines, in tension, holding back and pouring outwards[12].

Spiritual existence is not just an increase in the ideal, but also an increase in the insistence of the real, or of the material. A plant is rooted in earth, but grows towards and is attracted towards the pole of ideal manifestation. An animal carries

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11 - These conclusions of his earlier *naturphilosophie* writings are assumed and built upon by Schelling in the crucial 'mid-period' writings, of his post-identity philosophy phase. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom,* tr. J. Love - J. Schmidt, SUNY, New York 2006 and *The Ages of the World*. Besides the second edition, already cited, there is a translation of the third by Jason M. Wirth, SUNY, New York 2000. For the place of the philosophy of nature in Schelling's overall system, see F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Philosophy in General and of the Philosophy of Nature in Particular* (1804), in *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three essays,* tr. and edited by T. Pfau, SUNY, New York 1994, pp. 139-94. In the case of Franz von Baader, the crucial text is his most important work F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis (1822-1825), Ausgewählte Werke* 3, Brill/Schöningh, Leiden 2024 (french tr. by E. Susini, Albin Michel, Paris 1985).

12 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Ages of the World* (Wirth), cit., 89-100.

its soil within itself; it is uprooted, but it can be considered to be the earth itself in motion. In the human being, its greater variety of self-motion, which will teach it to fly, also in one dimension represents its still greater dark self-containment, such that from the outset we had no real idea that we would one day be able to fly, even though this ability wells up from within us, like all our inventions and imaginings and our thoughts themselves.

Within these thoughts we are reflexively set apart from ourselves, as ideally but problematically self-manifest. The human subject knows itself only through endless additional predicates of attached qualities, building up her habitual character through these attachments. Without the attachments or habits, the person would be wrapped up inside herself as an intensified objectivity. The subject can be neither obscure withdrawal, nor outgoing bestowal, but must be both at once, according to a third and linking potency which somehow synthesises inherent capacity with an always unfinished series of its instances. The power by which it achieves this cannot be comprehended by any logic – this is what Schelling insists against Hegel[13].

As both intensified reality and ideality, the subject is not qualitatively different from the object. The difference is one of position and degree, such that some element of subjectivity can already be glimpsed in everything that is apparent and moves, affects and is affected. Conversely, the most idealised subject must also augment his rooting in objectivity, such that the human character is the most definite, marked and irreplaceable thing there is.

In terms of inherent direction of the present moment to future, rather than to the past, what is currently good is always increasing its goodness and looking to do so, else it would repent its option for generosity and sink back into a malicious withdrawal. The good is a quality that is forever intensifying itself, and can advance from lesser to greater good without necessarily advancing from a lack of goodness to its presence.

This same inherent link of goodness to growth and development (*bildung*) involves always a further self-disassociation, as Sean McGrath insists in his reading of Schelling: our past selves are not disavowed, and remain latently within us as a source of future inspiration, yet we must continually embrace new developments of our personality if we are to be 'true to ourselves' and true to our ultimate hidden and natural 'pre-past'[14]. For this Romantic perspective the unconscious is primarily a creative source of new inspiration, not suppression, as

13 - Cf. P. Dews, *Schelling's Late Philosophy in Confrontation with Hegel,* OUP, Oxford 2023; S.J. McGrath, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Late Schelling: The Turn to the Positive,* Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021, pp. 86-109.

14 - S.J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the* Unconscious, Routledge, London 2012, esp. 120-79.

it is for Freud and Lacan, assuming an inherent tension between material nature and spiritual culture, rather than a teleological continuity[15].

In all three instances of 'positive contrast' concerning the three transcendentals of beauty, truth and goodness, the overriding positive contrast and yet 'magical' linkage of nature and spirit is at work: the endless transition from obscurity to light and from unconscious sleeping spirit to a conscious identification with the objective in its relative circumscription, rather than vague and unending fluidity[16].

In the wake of von Baader, if all of being consists in this polar oscillation between dark and light, then all of being consists in creativity and love and the two things are ultimately indistinguishable[17]. The beautiful is what is creatively manifest as uniting the coherent and self-necessitated with the fluid and free, or the apparent with a lurking source of inspiration that we cannot quite isolate. In self-expression we have to love the new thing we are seeking, and in this non-reflecting mirror of ourselves we may truly admire ourselves in surprise at what we have done, and in gratitude for the identity that flows through us and in which we only partake.

Through the self-giving that is the creative act and is thereby any act whatsoever, we come to understand that we are ourselves situated only in this flow of generosity which commences before us and which ensures that we ourselves are only the gift of ourselves to ourselves, if we are entirely creatures. Ultimately, we have to appropriate God's rejoicing in us, as in all his creatures, as our own self-rejoicing, simply because any self outside this would be indeed the pure autonomous self, sunk in the illusion of pure self-origination without supplementary predication and as likely to hate itself as to love itself in the course of this performance[18].

Self-creation is therefore already creation of something other, and is already love of this other, and conjoined to this inevitably also a love of ourselves. There is a truth of making involved here that is inherently a truth of emergence and mediation, not an illusory truth of immediacy. There is also a truth of encounter linked to a becoming aware of all other self-developing realities, since our encounter with what arrives through us has to be situated within our encounter with what already lies outside us.

Here the polarity of the real and the ideal is also present and in a double direction. As a spiritual subject I experience identity with the known thing via an

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15 - *Ibid.*, pp. 56-9, pp. 93-5.

16 - For Schelling's most mystical understanding of this transition, and his relating of it to questions of hypnosis, somnambulism and the afterlife, see his novella F.W.J. Schelling*, Clara, or On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World,* tr. F. Steinkamp, SUNY, New York 2002.

17 - F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis,* IV. pp. 21-22 and ss.

18 - Cf. J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled,* Routledge, London 2003, pp. 1-25.

abstracted form of the real object, and my concrete imagining of that object: the Thomist 'conversion to the phantasm'. But as a real embodied objective subject, I experience all the subjective promptings, or emanating messages from the other objects around me, with which I am in a surface, fleshly continuity as a 'direct' encounter with all that resists me and with all that I can also enter into a mutually conjugating combination[19].

For although we do not invent the things we encounter, we have to imaginatively and rationally reconstruct them inside us if we are to know them at all, as realised by Kant, Schelling and Coleridge. If there is an 'esemplastic' power at work in nature, then in art this is also at work even in our theoretical knowing, as what Coleridge called 'the primary imagination' of recreating what we see in order to see it[20].

Thus the made truth remains also a seen truth, since neither nature nor the human artist (every human) knows what she does before she does it, and only does what she does in order to see that which emerges – which was, in some sense, as Plato realised, already there, and is now actively 'recollected'. Thus Schelling from early on described the imagination, the *einbildungskraft,* as a radically *passive* capacity, just *because* it is the furthest reach of action: 'imagination could be defined as the faculty of putting oneself into complete passivity by full self-activity'[21]. We are confronted and led forward by internal phantasmic images, even though these arise at the prompt of our seeking: 'Imagination *actively produces* an object by putting itself in complete dependence upon that object, into full *passivity*.'

This seeking is a seeking in love and desire for what is lacking and yet not necessarily lacking as deficiency; rather always the seeking of excess through an actively productive reaching towards that excess. This will meet its *acme* at the point where it appears to the maker that what is made speaks back to him, returns his gaze with a kind of mute love, since it offers something to his benefit.

In the case of our encounter with others in truth, this effect is hugely compounded. To know another in truth presupposes a willing attention, and therefore in some degree a gaze of love, since otherwise refusal or withdrawal is always a certain dosage of hate. And as the other object or subject opens itself towards us, with a benign gaze that does not withhold its own beauty, some measure of love is always being shown to us in the phenomenon of knowability – such that, as Augustine taught, every cognisable thing is also in itself a mode of

19 - M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Intertwining - The Chiasm*, in *The Visible and the Invisible,* tr. A. Lingis and edited by C. Lefort, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1969, pp. 130-55.

20 - S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1992.

21 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, cit., p. 190, starred footnote.

cognition: the residing of truth in reality, just because every reality is to some extent subjective and spiritual[22].

Spatial truth of converging differences is also truth of compounded loves. In the emergence of self and reason, we extend our bodies through construction, and in the compounding of loves we compound also this 'propositional' ontology of the self, by merging all individual predicates into one social body which always implies a single, if elusive social subject – a corporate personality, as Christianity identifies humanity and the cosmos to be the corporate personality of Christ.

The wider and all-encompassing truth, which is inherently connected with spatial differentiation, is therefore something collective and performed – perhaps, as Shelling and von Baader considered, a theurgic action, which, like nature, seeks to attract down by 'magic' an ultimately spiritual and divine influence to infuse all the realities of earth.

For this reason, von Baader connected his ontology of creativity and love with the phenomenon of the 'corporation', or mediating institution, which he took to be the most singular mark of the Christian legacy, as the combining of immanently connected beings only by way of their shared rooting in transcendent wisdom[23]. It was his meditation on the corporation, in the wake of Burke, de Maistre and Adam Müller, which enabled him both to build up the ideology of the anti-Napoleonic 'Holy Alliance' under Prince Metternich, and to shape much of the foundations of what later became 'Catholic Social Teaching'[24].

Von Baader's original 'third way' was a constitutional mediation between absolutism and pure democracy, which refuses the abortive polarisation between the political centre and the isolated individual, upon which both depend. Like Burke and de Maistre, von Baader considered human beings as creatures that love within corporate formations, whether of family, trade or cult. The authentic polity is not the sovereign 'state' over against this (also much refused by Schelling, in contrast to Hegel)[25] but is rather an organic body of bodies, or an interlocking and itself constitutionally mediating association of associations which can be fluidly regional, national or international on a confederating principle.

This 'mediating politics' is actually a politics of creativity and love that is in continuity with von Baader's metaphysics, so that one can say the latter is a kind of cosmic 'sociology', while the former is a kind of performed 'philosophy'. The key

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22 - Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* XII, 10, 21.

23 - F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis* IV, cit., pp. 8-9.

24 - Cf. R.H. Bowen, *German Theories of the Corporative State*, Russell and Russell, New York 1971, pp. 46-53.

25 - Cf. S. Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder,* cit., pp. 39-42.

term here is 'the middle' which von Baader regarded as paradoxically the beginning, just because at the outset lies love, which even in the case of self-love, involves an othering and a supplementation.

Von Baader considers that Schelling and Hegel have equally missed the point of their own dialectic. The former is much nearer to the mark, and yet fails to see that we cannot in *any* sense think of nature, the real or 'the dark' as an absolute beginning, or foundation, even if for Schelling it immediately and obscurely gives rise to its polar opposite[26]. Because of his continuing rationalist attachment to the principle of non-contradiction, the youngest Idealist does not fully embrace the alchemical unity of opposites as sustained in Boehme.

When one does embrace it, then one realises that darkness was always already a contraction into itself that implies equally and immediately an emanation out of itself into the light of phenomenality. That implies the priority of love as something from the outset never withheld, though indeed assuming also reservation of an 'owned' power as self-integrity. For a love offering nothing of one's self is an impotent love, and so not love at all[27]. If creativity is love, then, inversely, any act of love is an exercise of creativity, because it attends to the specificity of the other who is loved, and because it offers something specific, a shaped and concrete and not an empty gesture, opening up for the other a new path and conveying to her something of oneself.

If one embraces the full analogical paradox that the withheld is also the granted, then the third potency becomes a secure synthesis, rather than a precarious balancing of the two poles, which is always liable to slip back into their conflicting oscillation or rotation. Because there is a clearer refusal of any sort of initial truth as immediacy in Hegel, von Baader sometimes cleaves to his thinking more than to Schelling's. This is primarily because he thinks that Hegel more securely sees truth as mediation and therefore, truth as love, rather than as a darkly potentiating and darkly 'willing' power of blind reality itself.

Yet Hegel only half sees this. For Von Baader he makes the mistake of supposing that each of the three dialectical stages after the first stage suppresses, by surpassing through logical negation, what went before. If there is such an abolition of poles and only the final pole is the real middle, then the true middle has been excised, and the final truth is not love but the sheer clarity of reason – as synthesis or as impossibility of synthesis and the ultimate truth of emptiness and contingency. Ultimately, von Baader is much closer to Schelling than to Hegel, because the former preserves the oscillations of all three dialectical poles and understands the

26 - F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis* V., cit., p. 20; VI. cit., 5,17.

27 - D.H. Lawrence, Apocalypse, Penguin, London 1995, pp. 64-9.

progression as a positive, creative and wilful potentiation, or as grammatical, propositional expression, and not as a logical sequence, which is inevitably dominated by negation - since all logic in sterile excess of grammar is always the alternation of yes and no[28].

What von Baader is *actually* accusing Schelling of is a residual over-allowance of negativity, and so a residual Hegelianism. By tending to regard the first, reserving potency as truly ontologically prior, Schelling is rendering the initial cosmic move out of 'absolute' self-enclosure a matter after all primarily of negation. With von Baader this initial negation is instead equally an initial and affirming emanation, although this identity is not a fully Hegelian identity of nothing with something, since it is an identity of opposites within the field of 'somethings'.

One could argue that every licit identity of opposites is always an identity of relative opposites that can be shown to be identical in a greater context, even if this context is sometimes the infinite. Schelling objects to the Hegelian nothing as something, which drives his sheerly logical dialectic, because it appears to Schelling as a violation of the principle of non-contradiction, though one ironically undertaken out of a lust for a pure identity that would swallow even the ineliminable logical contrast of something with nothing[29]. When Schelling identifies God as equally not being as well as being, he means by contrast that he is not restricted in scope or power, unlike any other mode of existence.

Following these two German Romantic thinkers, we can see that there is a paradoxical priority of the middle involved in the genesis of beauty, truth and reason. What comes first is linkage, as creativity and positive desire, which is drawn forwards into the future. Out of the first birth of identity comes the further procession of aspiration, such that reaching from good to good is also a renewed offering of what is held back, the gift of self that one alone has to give. To sustain its integrity of uniqueness as specifically characterised gift, this reserve of selfhood must paradoxically be fully handed over, and in a mode already *different* from that of the given self, in the course of a new departure of the self that is also an attention to the specificity of the emerging other and to the specificity of all other independently given and emergent others.

Goodness is therefore both temporally futural or teleological in its horizon, in terms of its self-othering, and spatial, like truth, in terms of its attention to everyone and everything. It is doubly tensional as emerging yet withheld, and bestowing and

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28 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Ages of the World* (tr. Wirth 2000), cit., pp. 3-10; Id., *Ages of the World* (tr.. Norman 1997), cit., pp. 126-131.

29 - F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy,* tr. A. Bowie, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 134-63.

receiving without end. The incorporated community is a matter of the theurgic enticement of truth through ritual, and an ecstatic reaching out towards the eschatological finishing of time in an ultimate future which would be the full cosmic realisation or attainment of the Good when God will be 'all in all' (*1Cor* 15:28).

If we try to imagine how the transcendentals might survive the abolition of default, or absence of any negative contrast, then the surviving positive contrasts which have variously to do with transition from nature to spirit, or the real to the ideal, imply a perpetual creative transition which is nothing other than the dynamic of love.

The construal of the transcendentals in terms of their negative contrast, is therefore but the 'Old Testament' of philosophy, equivalent to the grasp of evil only under the reactive and external forbidding of the law, which, as St Paul said, tends to incite evil, if it does not even actually invent it. The wrath of God against evil is in some sense not just in league with evil, but stands at the very origin of evil.

Once the 'New Testament of philosophy', has arrived in time, finally abolishing the illusion of an 'ontology of violence', then the medieval 'convertibility' of the transcendentals appears in a new light. Beauty, truth and goodness, along with thinghood (*quid*) somethingness (*aliquid)* and the always theologically implied transcendentality of intellect, are converging moments in a punctuated flow, just because they are all moments in a process of specifically *personal* and *impersonating* love. Since creativity as love and love as creativity are the 'hyper-transcendentals', there is nothing entirely impersonal anywhere in reality. It is personal love that registers value in a process of endless increase inherent to valuation as the invaluable, and never an objective contrasting of the valuable with the supposedly valueless, whose delimitation from the valueless can be established and measured by legal rule – which for Schelling and von Baader is the rule of the State. Any shallow and one-sidedly spiritualising *mere* personalism is thereby disallowed. The insight of Schelling and von Baader is exactly that *the subjective most of all requires the predicationally objective,* and the personal is accordingly compounded as much of the real as of the ideal – as much compounded of nature as of spirit.

If only persons can offer each other love and are linked by love, then that is because love, unlike pure reason, is not 'all at once' and fully transparent in the mode of the Enlightenment, but has its dark, 'Romantic' emergent side, without which its illumination would be impossible.

Love is inherently linked to surprise and wonder, such that philo-sophia exceeds any notion that philosophy would have access to wisdom by way of reason alone. What we love, we come to love as other, as something is drawn out of us through erotic aspiring, or we encounter something apparently alien to ourselves through erotic shock. If we could entirely fathom what emerges from us, or the things and persons we encounter, then love would be at an end: it would be surmounted, as

Hegel thinks art is surmounted, by philosophy, and for the same reason: because of a total and totally appropriated lucidity.

Since all knowledge is initiated by love and persists as love, then genuine knowledge remains an unknowing, and a never ended attempt to explore conjecturally the inherently, and positively, beneficially unknown. Were there no real other to knowledge, there would be no knowledge and no truth. And were that to mean simply that reality is outside truth, then hypostasised scepticism as nihilism would ensue. Instead, if the obscure and known is nonetheless known, and there is after all truth, then there is an identity, an 'indifference' of real nature with spiritual knowing that is clear/obscure, or is precisely the identity of love in liberty[30].

At the level of the interpersonal, subject-object identity in love is compounded subject-to-subject identity in love, as the collective body of the 'corporation'. According to von Baader, if love rules, mediation rules. There should not be sovereign domination from the centre, coordinating individuals through the operations of the market or bureaucracy, but a mediation that goes 'magically' from the centre of one to the centre of the other, as with all causality which is indissolubly material, efficient, formal and final all at once.

Just as our 'predications' protect us from the naked exposure of our empty selves, so the collective compounding of this predication further mediates and protects us, merging our partiality and mistakes in a shared human responsibility; contextualising and relativising our errors; our limited perspective and doom of ceaseless, unrehearsed improvisation. This is how von Baader understood our need for the Church, its sacraments and its confessional[31].

If we are able to receive supernatural grace as already present in any creative action or loving encounter, then this is compounded to our benefit through the membership of a corporate body, its combined ritual creativity and channelling of many encounters within itself, and between itself and other corporate bodies.

3. Theosophy: Positive Contrasts within God

In the case of the most humanly inclusive corporate body, the Body of Christ, this is a channelling of divine grace, of the Absolute. We cannot simply *know* that all of reality is love; only by *loving* all of reality and every part of it can we *suppose* that we know that all of reality is love. It could rather be the case that all of reality is endless *agon* and that an ontology of violence is 'true'. That would mean that

30 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Presentation of the System of My Philosophy,* cit., pp. 171-84; Id., *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom,* cit., pp. 68-70; Id., *The Ages of the World,* pp. 87-93.

31 - F. von Baader*, Fermenta Cognitionis,* VI. pp. 19-27.

there is no ultimate truth, but merely endless rupture between an abyss that can only appear as real material illusion, and this illusion itself. For this outlook the abyss gives 'weirdly' dark rise to the illusion of spirit that it stands apart from abyssal material scum in its impossible and doomed to be frustrated quest for a substantive foundation of the real[32]. This is the nihilistic upshot of Hegel on one plausible reading of him which tends to misread Schelling as only an approximation to Hegelianism, and that regards the 'indivisible remainder' of material nature as a sign of the void, rather than of religious mystery[33].

We can question the apparently absolute violation of the Law of non-contradiction involved here, and yet we cannot finally refute this nihilism, in view of our alternative and also not completely rationally transparent embrace, in love, of the paradoxical coincidence of the relative positive opposites of reserve and expansion: the very conundrum of love as gift. Our reading of reality as love through love depends upon the theurgic notion that nature and society entice down an ultimate creative love as the source of everything, both nature and spirit, and their impenetrable, occult union.

To revert to our starting point, and indicate the partial inadequacy of what has so far been said, a philosophy that does not simply wish to hypostasise rupture as an impossible alienation from nothing, must include an account of why there is rupture at all.

Just as any nihilistic philosophy is really parodied theology, so also any serious philosophy that seeks non-trivial ultimate explanation can only be a theology, or an account of the Absolute, plus the derivation of the non-absolute from the Absolute, and then of the apparently incurable alienation of the non-absolute from its grounding source. This is the core of the Schellingian claim and why his philosophy merges in his final phase with what is a complex Christian theology[34].

If we were to link the mystery of human and natural non-coincidence with the general appearance of conflict, and the prevailing cosmic opposition between interdependent poles, then perhaps we might have a clue to the nature of fallen

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32 - The allusion to the American genre of materialist preternatural horror, after E.A. Poe and H.P. Lovecraft seems appropriate.

33 - S. Žižek, *The Indisvisible Remainder*, cit., pp. 35-9. Žižek overestimates the religious scepticism of the earlier to middle Schelling and equivalenly *underestimates* the degree to which an esoterically Behmenist version of Christianity survives into Schelling's final and more conventionally orthodox phase. In particular it is not clear that there is any later rejection of the 'necessity' of the Creation from the Creator, although Schelling never suggest that the void or *ungrund* is literally 'before' God in such a way as to threaten his supremacy over merely finite matter.

34 - Cf. F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation (1841-42) and Related Texts,* tr. K. Ottmann, Spring Publications, Thompson 2020.

cleavage, that appears tragically to have *ontological* purchase. This cleavage is so extreme that it can only be challenged in a 'gnostic' and also orthodox manoeuvre, by insisting upon the contingency of the seemingly universal, and hyper-contextualising it as the outcome of a hidden cosmic metanarrative of a break with God and his original paradisal Creation.

Does this 'gnostic' narrative trumping of the universal simply elevate us to a level of an alternative universality of pure inert peaceableness and harmony? Were that the case, then we would be left with positive transcendentals standing without contrast, such that beauty, truth and goodness would sink into henological unconsciousness, or an eternity of Leibnizian computation for which conscious awareness and selection seems a luxurious superfluity.

Instead, our account of 'positive contrasts' saves the perspicuity of the transcendentals even within an eternal reign of peace and righteousness, just because the universal is now as much a narrative plot as it is a background scenario, rendering *logos* once more fully *mythos.*

As Schelling put it, the Bible does not speak of a God without beginning, but of a God who is at once the Beginning and the End: not, of course a processive or a moving God, since Schelling insists that God is, in one regard, a simple *actus purus,* but a God who is an unimaginable eternal beginning and an eternal ending and an eternal always present bridging passage between the two[35].

By imagining how contrast might survive the oscillation of positive with negative, allowing intra-positive contrast, we have concluded that truth and all the rest of it are *not* coincidence and self-coincidence, but rather, as François Jullien puts it, *de-coincidence.* Jullien also concludes that God himself is de-coincidence[36].

The medieval 'convertibility' of the transcendentals, which was never their pure, flat identity, is now raised to a higher power through a Rosmini-like inclusion of the subjective categoriser within the very field of the categories, in a move that, applied to the transcendental hyper-categories, implies their personalisation as the becoming of the subject, and of the ultimate, absolute subject, through its polar unity with its objective opposite[37]. This is not 'self- coincidence', but rather de-coincidence of identity as always relational and therefore always a matter of love.

Without the obscurity of origin, knowledge would be simply obviousness and calculation, and in no sense spontaneous and creative, even for God – but the best

35 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Ages of the World* (Wirth), cit., pp. 23-30.

36 - F. Jullien, *Dé-coincidence: D'ou viennent l'art et l'exister*, Livre de Poche, Paris 2020; Id., *Dieu est dé-coincidence,* Labor et Fides, Paris 2024.

37 - Cf. J. Milbank, *Trinitarian ontology and the division of being: a Rosminian reflection*, in «Sophia. Ricerche su i fondamenti e la correlazione dei saperi», III. No 2, 2021, pp. 189-231.

medieval tradition insists that God's knowledge is itself emergent art[38]. Without the obscurity of the emergent product, it would be a static upshot, not giving rise to further creative interpretation which draws once more upon the natural (in God the Paternal) source that is totally exhausted in ideal (in God Filial) expression, and yet paradoxically not exhausted after all, since the beginning is not sublated, à la Hegel.

Without the obscurity of the other, we would no longer require her presence in order to encounter her and again, this must hold true, even for God. Although the persons of the Trinity are constituted by substantive relation, the relations are only necessary, and are endlessly resumed in a perichoretic relay, because each personal pole is *also* and immediately the 'surplus' of the inexhaustible divine essence, not comprehensible even by God himself, as recognised by Gregory of Nyssa and Eriugena.

Because of the inexhaustibility of the essential monarchic origin and the manifest repetition of this inexhaustibility in the image of the Father that is the Son, there is also the third moment of the Spirit's scrutiny of both the fiery depths and the luminous heights, which alone ensures triadicity and so God as mediation, and therefore God as love. In this scheme the Behmenist abyssal *centrum naturae,* becomes at once the Son-*Logos* as the mediating passage from nature through ideality towards Spirit, and the Spirit itself as the equally mediating subjective and fully personal unity of the realised ideal – a fully personal quality which the Holy Spirit retroactively grants to the other two divine persons[39]. God is omniscient, but if the only knowing is loving, and loving involves non-abolished obscurity, then divine omniscience is only (or most sublimely) the omniscience of love, of the irreducible medium.

Since the ultimacy of love is actually de-coincidence, this casts our failure to coincide with ourselves, the apparent inaccessibility of an unassailable truth, politics or aesthetics, in a completely different light. It seems that we have confused, in an 'Old Covenant' fashion, the inevitably wrathful refusal of evil as violence with the quest for a too literal Unity, despite the constant intimations of the actual Old Testament that point in a different, mediating direction.

From the perspective of the 'new philosophical covenant', that truth itself is indeed covenantal, we do not coincide with ourselves, nor nature fully with itself, just because we fail to see that de-coincidence can be more fully and truly found within the sphere of the ontologically positive. It is therefore in the search to possess ourselves, that we find we cannot possess ourselves. Instead, if we wish

38 - Cf. É.H. Weber, *Dialogues et Dissensions entre Saint Bonaventure et Saint Thomas D'Aquin à Paris (1252-1273)*, Vrin, Paris 1974.

39 - J. Boehme, *The Way to Christ,* tr. P. Erb, Paulist Press, New York 1978, p. 28, p. 43, pp. 115-20, p. 129, p. 134, p. 217; F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis* VI, cit., pp. 16-19.

to find ourselves, we must lose ourselves, just as if we seek illumination we must enter once again into the fertile darkness and be 'born again'.

The immense insight of Jacob Boehme was that we can only fully think God as personal, in the way that the Scriptures and Christian doctrine and tradition demand, if we see him as in some strange sense self-generated and self-drawn towards his own end from an inscrutable commencement.

Thereby only a personalist ontology of love, implying a Trinitarian absolute, is able to save beauty, truth and goodness from being only recognisable by contrast with their absence or their opposites. It was in the face of just this sort of problematic that Plato in the *Republic* insisted that, without guidance by an ineffable and unopposed transcendent goodness, the force of human justice could always be regarded as the triumph of the strongest.

But it has turned out that goodness, alongside beauty and truth, can only be construed as eternal and unopposed in the personalist terms of the Bible. And yet there would seem to be problems concerning how to combine such dynamic personalism with the necessary doctrine of divine aseity, to which the authors that I have invoked fully ascribed. But they all took the seemingly dangerous speculative risk of thinking of the relationship between aseity and relational dynamism *itself* in dynamic terms, despite their confession of the ultimate ineffable unity of divine aseity with divine generation and divine procession.

In this, they were anticipated by Meister Eckhart, who spoke of the ultimate and inscrutable divine unity as an *abgrund,* rather as Boehme later spoke of it as an *ungrund*. Their shared insistence is that the absolute, that ineffable abyss which both authors do not hesitate to speak of as 'before God', even though it belongs to God, as it *is* God, must be itself grounded in nothing, and as replete cannot relate to anything outside itself, and cannot be the ground of anything outside itself. Von Baader percipiently identifies this with Eriugena's fourth natural category which is 'the neither creating nor created', in contrast to 'Uncreated and Creating', 'Created and Creating' and 'Only Created', which are respectively the immanent Trinity, to the creative outgoing and creative self-formation of the Creation, and to Creation in its modes of passive completetion. The fourth category of the eternally abiding, Von Baader realises, is also Creation's eschatalogical return to God[40]. He also notes that the divine 'abyss' of deriving from nothing and giving rise to nothing is that to which *all creatures are to return* for Eriugena.

Von Baader and all the rest are faithful to Eckhart's paradox that, while God is all of reality, all of reality is not God. In later, post-Spinozist terms as developed by Schelling, von Baader and then Soloviev, God is 'One and All', and yet 'the All' is a

40 - F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis* V., cit., p. 9.

surplus over God[41]. It then follows that reality as 'more than God', or as 'the Absolute', is a strict implication of a rigorous monotheism. Because God is love, love is even in excess of God because love is de-coincidence. Impossibly it turns out that even the One which is all and everything exceeds itself as love.

Everything beyond the infinite All is finite limitation, but if God is love he can, via the Incarnation, include and yet not include even this other to himself, if he is to be complete in love. Such finitude has its own irreplaceable perfect imperfection and beauty of frailty, besides a possibility of knowledge as 'comprehension' which the infinite itself lacks. Therefore, what the Son knows through infinite-finite love in the Incarnation is 'added' to the knowledge of the Father, even though he was never without it, since the Incarnation is eternal and its eventuating on earth was also its manifestation.

The God who does not exceed himself is thereby the God who entirely exceeds himself, in an ultimate mystery of the personal, which a knowledge without love can never fathom and is only known otherwise, in ecstasy. But the problem remains as to just how God 'leaves' his aseity, which is at one with the problem of why there exist separate and finite things at all – a problem with which Schelling was concerned as what he regarded as the primary problem of philosophy.

It is not a problem that he ever claimed to have solved, and really he *never* claimed that our knowledge of the Absolute is at one with the Absolute, even if an inchoate sense of the presence of God is for him (as for von Baader), the foundation of all other certainties, rendering the idea of a 'proof of God', as if God were present within a wider field of surveyable reality, entirely absurd[42]. He nonetheless speculatively suggested that the very contentment of aseity itself in the divine darkness gave rise to a bliss that mutated into an initially unconscious searching desire of God for a self beyond himself that would be a still fuller self[43]. When this search becomes more conscious, it is fulfilled not in a logical self-percipience, but in an 'artistic' recovering at the consciously expressive level of unconscious inspiration that retains a promising obscurity. What Schelling calls the ultimate 'un-prethinkable' is not violated, even by God himself.

This theosophic notion is nonetheless vitiated by an excessive rationalism that colludes with an overly-voluntaristic presentation of mystery, just because Schelling does not fully embrace von Baader's paradox, whereby the ultimate self-containment is already and immediately an ecstatic going forth. Such an observation

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41 - *Ibid.*, III., p. 10.

42 - F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy,* cit., pp. 87-93.

43 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* cit., pp. 26-32; Id., *Ages of the World* (Norman), cit., p. 137; Id., *The Ages of the World* (Wirth), cit., pp. 23-30; pp. 75-104.

applies at once to the emergence of the entire Trinity from the *ungrund,* and to the emergence of the Son and the Spirit from the Father – to invoke a distinction which I will try to elaborate.

Precisely because of his rationalist clinging to the ultimacy of the LNC, even with respect to the infinite, Schelling at times sustains what is ambiguously problematic in Boehme – the imagery in his texts of a real original divine fury which, although already eternally overcome by divine light, still possesses some pertinence of its own, as if indeed God were finally a synthesis of anger and mercy[44]. Present here is perhaps both a Lutheran concern to root all in the edict of God, besides, in Boehme's case, a certain Seventeenth Century rationalist seeking after a theodicy that would 'explain' evil as a positive element within a possibly univocal view of being, that does not allow for any ultimate mystery of evil as incomprehensible lack of sufficient being and attempted refusal of reality itself[45].

By contrast, von Baader's embrace of a full paradox of emanation as also withdrawal allows, in principle, that there was never any furious fire in God to be overcome by light. Instead, God was, from all eternity, akin to the burning bush of *Exodus*: fully alight but not self-consumed by potential empty narcissism or tantalising desire that consumes the desirer.

A similar situation arises with respect to the nature of the Holy Spirit. For Schelling, the original divine abyss, or *ungrund,* involves in its purely active but slumbering potential, the coincidence of Being as such with Existence that alone manifests Being, which in itself would be nothing. In this sense, God as the difference of Being from beings is also *beyond* the ontological difference, since he is eminently all actual existence, rather as, for Aquinas, God as *esse ipsum* is also infinite essence, which is the essence of all essences. As containing the ideas of everything, he is the perfection of everything and so actually *is* everything, as existing, more than finite things are in themselves[46].

By containing both these realities, which are equivalent to the poles of containing and expanding, God as *ungrund* is for Schelling 'indifferent' as to both. Only because of the total *passivity and inertness* of the abyss is it spared an unmediable and agonistic polar tension. Yet it would seem that, for Schelling, somewhat like Issac Luria, who regarded the Creation as a purging of potential evil from the realm of the *Sephiroth*, the operation of the immanent Trinity, by distinguishing the Father as Being from the Son as existence at once isolates and

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44 - J. Boehme, *The Signature of All Things,* tr. C. Bax, James Clarke, London 1969, pp. 13-22.

45 - This is Cyril O'Regan's astute thesis in his book C. O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme's Haunted Narrative*, SUNY, New York 2002.

46 - Cf. J. Milbank - C. Pickstock, *Truth in* Aquinas, Routledge, London 2001, pp. 19-59.

overcomes the potential anger and evil that lurks in the moment of self-withdrawal[47]. Here once more, he would appear to allow a real potential anger in the Father, however 'victorious' over this God is eternally said to be.

The moment of the Spirit is supposed to represent a new synthesis in excess of 'indifference' that amounts to a real fusion of the real and the ideal, but Schelling also, in the third version of *Ages of the World,* envisages that, since the Spirit's synthesis is but a balancing or judged mediation between polar opposites, whose difference is in some way not mediated, it follows that this mediation is inherently unstable and God would appear to be locked within a permanently sterile and futile tripartite rotation[48]. In this third version, it is apparently the Spirit's re-invocation of the indifference of the *ungrund* that after all stabilises things in favour of love. But is that not a reversion to a passive and sterile truce? In the second version of *Ages* it was more promisingly the other way round: here it is the *active* decision of the Holy Spirit in its bias towards emerging light from the darkness that elevates the spiritual synthesis above passive indifference[49]. If there is no perfect and paradoxical fusion, and the darkness of the Father slips away from this synthesis to re-initiate potential wrath, how can the synthesis be stable and real love securely

47 - F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., p. 42: 'For all evil strives back into chaos, that is, back into that state in which the initial *centrum* had not as yet been subordinated to the light and is a welling up in the *centrum* of a yearning still without understanding.'; Id., *The Ages of the World* (Wirth), cit., p. 86: 'Not only does the negating force not posit A [the positive, expansive force], it must determinately negate A (and consequently also negate the higher unity, which is spirit). It must exclude A and utterly displace A ut of the present. Within the negating force there is that wrathful force that the jealous Jewish God expressed towards other gods. The negating force must remain in this exclusion till its time is fulfilled. It must maintain itself with full power precisely so that life may be elevated to the highest glory'. This passage illustrates how, to the extent that Schelling does not fully overcome the idea of an origin of evil in God, he remains surprisingly captive to Hegelian primary negation and fatality. On Luria, see G.G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, New York 1961, pp. 244-286.

48 - F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (Wirth), cit., pp. 19-27, especially p. 25.

49 - Id., *Ages of the World* (Norman), cit., pp. 135-137, p. 138: the ultimate, real spiritual will 'is the very will that wills eternity – that wills that the will that wills nothing become active and perceptible to itself as such'. I agree with Žižek that there is an important difference between the second and third versions of *Ages,* but disagree as to the nature of this difference. For him the second version sustains a sceptical and 'materialist' rotation, whereas the third points towards the orthodox harmony of Schelling's final phase, where all is rooted in spiritual transcendence: *The Abyss of Freedom,* 34-5. For me the rotation is unresolved in either version, even though the *consistently* orthodox Christian thrust of Schelling's thought *requires* a resolution that his persisting, sub-Romantic rationalism cannot accommodate. This may be both why he could not finish the work and why all his subsequent work is never brought into a satisfactorily organised shape.

triumph – given that love is rooted in the productive darkness, as well as being resplendent in the open light[50]?

It is the doctrine of the Trinity that fully expresses the absolute consummation of the ontological difference in God, and we can note here that Aquinas at one point 'appropriates' divine self-standing subsistence to the Father, divine essence (all existences) to the Son and divine being (uniting divine unity and divine essential existence) to the Spirit[51]. Although the scheme is obviously different from Schelling's, it also exhibits a drastic linking of the metaphysical register with that of sacred doctrine, and it also seems to dynamize, in a Trinitarian fashion, the contrasts of the ontological difference.

It might be asked just why one needs the speculative apparatus of the *ungrund* at all, and whether this is not really heterodox? To which one can reply that, for the mainline orthodox tradition the *unity* of God is *not any more to do with the divine essence* than it is with the divine relations and the divine persons. That would not seem to license thinking of the unity, in the manner of Eckhart, Boehme and 'the magus of the south' F.C. Oetinger, as being 'prior' to the Trinitarian God, but there is another way of looking at all this[52].

One must certainly allow that there may be at times a lurking ontotheological rationalism in thinking, with Boehme, that God requires an ungrounded ground, if it is taken that anything that exists requires a ground, akin to supposing God to be self-caused since everything that exists has a cause in a basically efficient sense of cause.

On the other hand, if presence and simply 'being there' are every bit as much merely finite categories as coming-to-be and self-projection into the future, then it may make more sense to see God as metahistorical as well as metaphysical, and as being in some way eminently past, present and future, as on Schelling's understanding. This approach is strongly favoured by my arguments already supplied, that to think of God as *personal* requires exactly this outlook upon the eternal. From such a perspective, 'self-caused' and 'self-grounded', or, as for Eriugena, 'self-created', are not confusions of God with the ontic and the need for efficient causality, but rather recognitions of his innate artistry and love as having nothing merely static lying 'before themselves'.

However, this dynamism in God only seems to apply within the Trinity. Why speak, additionally, like the Christian theosophists, of the emergence of the entire

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50 - Thus, the active spiritual will 'does not sublate eternity, as many would like to imagine' (F.W.J. Schelling, *Ages of the World* [Norris], cit., p. 138). That is to say, it does *not* cancel indifference.

51 - T. Aquinas, SCG 4.11 (13).

52 - J.G. Hamann was 'the magus of the north', regarded as being in some sort of complementarity to the mystical Swabian.

Triunity – persons and essence – from an abyssal gulf, even if it be fully understood, with von Baader, that this emergence is eternal?

The answer would seem to be that even the notion of the Father as ground from which something is generated implies that aseity has already been 'left', or, in other words, that if God is manifestly rather than latently to exist, even for himself, he cannot be just self-contained, but must show himself, be *dynamis* besides *ousia,* as for Gregory of Nyssa.[53] The point then is that the same God who seemingly cannot emerge from himself *as Trinity as a whole,* is nonetheless the God who does so emerge, on pain of *inexistence*. For that which is infinitely 'One' and self-contained in absolute potency must thereby already include the 'All' if it is also *actual*, even though this inclusion implies a paradoxical exit or 'exclusion' from ineffable self-enclosure, since the all involves everything that is particular, circumscribed, dependent and inter-related.

This is true even of its 'eminent' and infinite presence in God. Yet if the One is all-inclusive then it includes also every finite and created articulation. The two outgoings, of generation-spiration on the one hand, and Creation on the other, are modally distinguishable for us and yet for the simple God they are not really distinct – as even Aquinas at one point allows, anticipating Eckhart[54].

There is a valid sense then in which *all* the persons of the Trinity come forth and manifest the invisible and ineffable, even though the latter is nothing but this triple manifestation. The concealed *ungrund* is not exactly the divine essence, which is rather to be regarded as the 'impersonating' but essentially feminine and passive power which is *Sophia,* the medium which receives all three persons and 'births' their ever-spiralling transmission to each other.[55] The polar question of what 'binds' Father with Son is repeated at this more esoteric level of what binds the *ungrund* with *Sophia,* the answer being the Behmenist *centrum* about which all reality mystically oscillates. Yet the *centrum* is a 'shifter', like the centre of the divinely infinite sphere which is everywhere, and circumference nowhere: it is at once the abyss, the Father as ground, the Son as mediating middle and the Spirit as concluding middle or final synthesis – all of this being love.

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53 - Cf. J. Milbank, *The Force of Identity*, in Id., *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language,* Culture, Blackwell, Oxford 1997, pp. 194-216.

54 - T. Aquinas, *In Sent* I d. 16 q.1 a.1 resp.

55 - J. Boehme, *The Signature of All Things,* cit., pp. 22-31; Id., *Mysterium Pansophicum, or Thorough Report on the Earthly and Heavenly Mysterium,* tr. J. Love - J. Schmidt, in F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 85-98, esp. 88: «the word is its [the threefold spirit's] *centrum* or residence and stands in the middle as a heart. And the spirit of the word – which originally came into being in the first will – inaugurates [*eröffnet*] the miracles of the essential life [...]»; J. Pordage, *Sophia,* tr. A.G. Paddle, Grail-stone, Minneaopolis 2018, pp. 274-87.

Nor is the relation of *ungrund, Sophia* and *Centrum exactly* different from the relations of the Trinity which also repeat them as Paternal Ground, *Logos* and the spiritual bond of Love[56]. The entire former apparatus might well seem redundant, but the point is that the Father is at once and radically that which sacrificially gives way to the Son, and yet is also the *Monarchia*, the entire 'original' divine essence, such that his role slides back into that of the ungrounded, into what is already the entire source of the Trinity, of which outgoing Paternity, Filial arrival and Spiritual fusion are all equally expressions of what leaves itself as what still does not leave itself.

4. The Origin and Nature of Evil

In this essay so far, we have seen how it is possible to imagine the reality of the transcendentals as surviving negation, if we rethink them in terms of de-coincidence as the creativity of love, and consequently in terms of a Trinitarian ontology where all of created reality participates in the Triune personal God and the linked mysteries of *Sophia* and the *ungrund.* The passage of the creation from the Creator can be regarded also in terms of *Sophia,* as now the Proverbial play of the divine essence between the three personal powers outside God in his immanence at the inception of the Creation, such that even here God does not 'pre-plan' his work, but only knows it through its artistic performance, first encountering it in love when, as it were to his surprise, he 'saw that it was good'.

Yet even if we realise that it is a de-coincidence that we do not coincide with, we still lack the keys to the full performance of love and to the final work of art. Therefore, we are returned to the primacy for us of rupture, to the prompt of disaster and a need to incorporate the theological notion of the Fall within *any* seriously coherent philosophy.

Even now, after the advent of Christ, the gospel of love and the healing of the breach between nature and spirit in the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, we still live within the transition from law to gospel, and we still only have access to the promise of love through the initial experience of the divine 'anger' or the rebound of sin, and through the experience of the co-belonging of sin with death. Herein lies the element of truth in Schelling's sense of the independent separability of the moment of wrath and disaster, but it is only true for the fallen world, and even here the accepted suffering of the consequences of sin is always the beginning of the positive arrival of grace. Without a clue to the nature of our ontological lapse, it is not possible to begin to restore the de-coincidence of love. To this degree we must first

56 - Cf. K. Hemmerle, *Franz von Baaders Philosophischer Gedanke der Schöpfung*, Karl Alber, Munich, pp. 102-16.

seek to negate the negation, even if the positivity of grace secretly draws us on. But we have already glimpsed this clue. It lies in the way in which evil appears to be always the corruption and distortion of the polar oppositions constitutive of reality.

At the heart of Boehme's reflections lies the insight that, if unconscious nature and matter derive from God, then there must be a root of the former also in God, especially if spirit is not really imaginable without its continued emergence from nature, the ideal from the real, and the manifest from the concealed. To say that unconsciousness, nature and matter are just deficiencies seems to lapse back into the pagan notion of a dualism of the forming and the chaotic. Nor can we identify nature and matter with limit, since matter is an infinitely open receptacle and nature is as much infinitely forming as it is finitely formed (*natura naturans* besides *natura naturata*) and is, as Schelling insisted, the endless play between the two.

This co-derivation of both nature and spirit from God also implies a linkage between natural imperfection and disease, and willed evil and failure. In either case one can understand evil as privation, and von Baader does not refuse this understanding. Schelling appears to do so in terms of some of his phrasing and conceptuality, yet some of it clearly still implies merely a mutation of the Augustinian view[57].

Both thinkers resist any idea that evil consists in the deficiency or the temptation of finitude and both thinkers point out that evil phenomena and people are perversely strong and destructive. In accounting for the latter the idea they add to tradition is that all evil is spiritual disease and disintegration. If even disease is privation of health, nonetheless the perversely positive effects of disintegration are to do not just with privation but with the setting unnaturally free of one force from its combination with others. Above all, this setting free is to do with the created and fallen *separation of being from existence*; of the drawing within from the expanding without. All evil in fact is *a disintegration of the Trinitarian ontology that composes created reality.* In this way evil is *more precisely* the refusal or distortion of love than it is the privation of the Good.

For both thinkers this twisting of reality concerns a perverse isolation of the grounding or the Paternal power. Either it retreats into passively narcissistic self-isolation, something that is ultimately a suicidal impulse, cut off from all loving relation. Or else the dark origin falsely tries to usurp the illuminating centre, such that the Father is always displacing the Son whom he fails to love, and then the displaced Son tends to rebel against the Father, refusing his own lineage and falsely attempting to begin all over again with pure 'enlightenment'.

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57 - Cf. for all of the following F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*; F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis*, esp Book VI; *On the Assertion that there can be no wicked use of Reason*, tr. J. Love - J. Schmidt, in F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* cit., pp. 99-102.

It follows that von Baader, especially, has a *political* interpretation of evil. All evil, at every corporate and individual bodily level, is essentially either domineering tyranny or anarchic rebellion, or yet again solipsistic withdrawal which is refusal of association. In consequence, evil as refusal of our participation in the Trinity is also a refusal of genuine political order, since the true order of love can only be socially realised and sustained through the formation of corporate bodies, at once natural and ideal, which mediate sins, convey grace and creatively entice the divine.

If all of reality is interpersonal love in various degrees, and this binds together nature and spirit, then it also for von Baader and Schelling links theory and practice in one. The thinking of reality as love is none other than the performance of reality as love. If, through suffering and the rebound of wrath, we begin to realise that what we and nature have lost is de-coinciding love, then the articulation of truth becomes a practical matter of seeking to restore ourselves and the world. Since it is the awareness of disaster that prompts us to philosophy and politics, then truth, like goodness, and the full display of beauty, is something always yet to arrive in the future, but for which we must confidently strive in time in the face of the prospect of deepened disaster, in trustful hope in the unaffected absolute.

Time, for von Baader, was the time of mercy, allowed for us in its ambiguity, because human beings had not demonically opposed God, but had rather sought independence from him in an indifference that is a kind of parody of the absolute, and a *third* mode of evil lying between withdrawal and domination[58].

This third mode of evil is the attempt of humanity to be autonomous, between isolation and community, without God. Von Baader explicitly refused not just Kantian autonomy, but also its accompanying notion of 'radical evil' which is 'rooted' in the supposed natural neutrality of our free will and the near impossibility of deciding when the will to will freedom, or to go out of ourselves as ourselves by our own choice, is not in fact the will against will and liberty, and secretly the will to confine and isolate ourselves[59]. He avers that evil is never an ultimate root, even of the will, and in this respect he is also loyal to the understanding of evil as an inherited habit and a weakness of our real power and spiritual understanding. It is therefore clear that von Baader's Behmenist philosophy (unlike Schelling's) does *not* embrace the Kantian notion of radical evil which renders evil a sheer positivity

58 - F. von Baader, *Elementary Concepts Concerning Time as Introduction to the Philosophy of History and Society*, tr. J. Glenn Friesen, 2004, on the web at [https://jgfriesen.wordpress.com.concerning-the-concept-of-time.pdf].

59 - F. von Baader, *Fermenta Cognitionis* IV, cit., p. 6.

of the will in a way that the Behmenist theory, which merely adds disintegration to privation, actually does not. Most commentators miss this point[60].

As I have indicated, Schelling's version of evil as disease does not make this mistake either, and yet there is once more in Schelling more confusion and ambivalence than there is in von Baader. Schelling does indeed at some points try to align Boehme with Kant. This concerns his apparent adoption of the Kantian view that the exercise of freedom lies outside the causal sequence of time.[61] That would seem to conflict with Schelling's own relativisation of the contrast between subject and object, and allowance of non-mechanical spontaneity and teleology within nature. Von Baader, by contrast, regards time as the time of subjective freedom, since it is the time of mercy. If indeed every spiritual decision and new birth re-connects us to eternity, then that is true of each moment in natural time also. Every subjective or ideal element of nature is therefore at once inside and outside of time. From this it follows that our acting freely, although it is a matter of habits which are already established, is also a question of habits that can be freely formed within time.

Instead, Schelling inherits from Kant an all-too Lutheran fatality, despite his more general espousal of a *Sittlich* virtue ethic, and by no means an ethic of duty.[62] Precisely that element in Kant himself that rightly recognises that we do indeed always act in character rather than out of an empty freedom, is vitiated by his duality of time and liberty, such that a habitual tendency to the good and a habitual tendency to evil are *both* regarded as matters of a seemingly 'pre-temporal' and inscrutably eternal decision. In consequence, a problematic notion of will as equally inclined to good and evil is qualified and yet compounded by the idea that we are mastered by either God or the Devil.

In Schelling's case, this woeful lingering sense of double predestination can be linked to his non-paradoxical account of abyssal indifference. It is a theoretical gain to say that God is eternally the 'contingent' decision for the Good (and therefore that God is most fundamentally a will self-lured in love to the Good) which opens up the possibility that finite creatures, gifted with freedom, may perversely choose the other contingency. All the same, it is unsatisfactory to indicate that *the will as such* is equally poised between good and evil, as between mercy and wrath, since this once more sunders the contracted ground (and *ungrund*) from the eternal outgoing from the ground which is the other aspect of the good, and not just an arbitrary decision.

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60 - For example, R.J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation,* Polity, Cambridge 2002, p. 89.

61 - *Ibid.*, pp. 48-54.

62 - F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath, University of Virginia University Press, Charlottesville 1993, pp. 185-236.

Against this, von Baader equally sees freedom as an expression of formed character, of virtue or of vice, and yet does not put good and evil character on the same ontological level, precisely because he openly rejects Kantian radical evil and the Kantian duality of liberty and time. Instead, the spontaneity of habit remains the work of acquired habit in time, and because there is, according to his privation theory of evil, always a greater bias of subjectivity towards good, there is no human subject closed off to the transforming arrival of grace which can shift and even uproot our habits through the creative onset of inspiration, or the encounter with others and every mediating social body.

This more hopeful outlook, oriented towards *apocatastasis,* is after all in keeping with one crucial motivation of Boehme's modification of privation theory, as pointed out by Alexandre Koyré[63]. This was the idea that if evil is infection or distortion, then, more obviously than in the case of privation, it can be *entirely and eschatologically driven out,* just as the integrated body can be finally and irreversibly healed, rendered absolutely immune.

This leaves the onset of spiritual disease as a mystery of freedom, but in agreement with Origen it does imply that, after the experience of wrath and disintegration, no one, returned, in full and so 'simple' realisation, to the ultimate body and security of the absolute, would or even could ever make the choice for evil ever again. In that sense, the prompting of disaster will have been ultimately heeded at the end of time and beyond the closure of its interval of mercy.

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63 - A. Koyré, *La Philosophie de Jacob Boehme*, J. Vrin, Paris 1979, pp. 503-8.