

Graham Ward's Poststructuralist Christian Nominalism

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Abstract In his *Cities of God*, Graham Ward advocates for what he calls an 'analogical worldview'. On the one hand, he suggests that this analogical worldview has its roots in pre-modern theology and philosophy, especially in Augustine and Aquinas. On the other hand, Graham Ward draws heavily on contemporary critical theory to express this view. The thesis defended in this paper is that by reading the concept of analogy from Augustine and Aquinas in terms of contemporary critical theory, especially that of Jacques Derrida, Ward develops an analogical worldview that has strikingly nominalist ramifications. These ramifications imply that, in the end, there is no longer an adequacy between the perceiving mind and the reality perceived. The argument is developed in three steps. In the first step, Ward's reading of contemporary critical theory, especially with respect to Derrida, is introduced. In the second step, the theological appropriation of Derrida in the analogical worldview is analyzed. In the third step, the nominalist implications of this application are shown in terms of Ward's critique of privileging heterosexual relationships. In this third section, I will also deal more extensively and precisely with the question of what I mean by labeling his work as 'nominalism' as well as outlining the specific form of nominalism that I am here invoking. In the penultimate section, I will attempt to show that Ward's nominalism can also be found in the works of Milbank and Pickstock, as it has to do with the specific way in which they take up the Platonic tradition. In my concluding remarks, I will come back to the discussion about the ontological status of sexual relations, indicating my own view on this issue.

Keywords Poststructuralism · Jacques Derrida · Graham Ward · Nominalism · Unity · Multiplicity · Plotinus · Radical Orthodoxy

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Introduction

Nominalism and Radical Orthodoxy often seem like night and day, or day and night—depending on how you look at them. It was nominalism, only preceded by Scotus' introduction of ontotheology, that led to the nihilist world that thinkers associating themselves with Radical Orthodoxy see as the main cause of the problems faced by Western society. The world as we now inhabit it, as this story goes, became devoid of the rays of God's presence, because it was devoid of its inner rationality, as it thus became merely dependent on God's arbitrary will rather than God's being. Opposed to this nominalist view, Radical Orthodoxy proposes a strongly participationist ontology in which, to use Milbank and Pickstock's words, knowing is like looking into the mind of God. Nothing could be more realist, or less arbitrary, so it seems.

Given this context, the title of this paper is, of course, intentionally ironical. Accusing Graham Ward of nominalism is an attempt to highlight a problem in his thinking that renders his theology far more arbitrary and nominalist than he intends it to be. At the end of the paper, I will even suggest that the problem I see in Ward's theology is not only typical of his thinking, but also that of the other two founders of the Radical Orthodoxy movement: John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock.

My argument will proceed as follows. In the first section, I will deal with the way in which Graham Ward takes insights from the poststructuralist critique of a metaphysics of presence into his theology and combines them with what he calls an analogical worldview. In the next section, I will show how a similar line of argument can be reconstructed on the basis of his Christology, especially the idea of displacement. Subsequently, I show the nominalist implications of this line of argument in a section on Ward's view of sexual difference. In this section, I will also deal more extensively and precisely with what I mean in accusing Ward of nominalism as well as what exactly constitutes the specific form of nominalism that I detect at work here. In the penultimate section, I will attempt to show that Ward's nominalism can also be found in Milbank and Pickstock, and has to do with the specific way in which they take up the Platonic tradition. In the last section, which forms my concluding remarks, I will also come back to the question of same-sex relationships, indicating my own view.

Baptizing poststructuralism

Quite central to Ward's thinking is a process he calls 'reading the signs of the times'. In practice, this means that throughout his writings, Ward draws much inspiration from cultural studies, linguistics and poststructuralist philosophy in order to develop innovative theological insights. This is already clear in his Barth book of 1995, in which he weaves Barth and Derrida together, and it returns in all of his later books. Ultimately, this interest in culture is Christologically motivated. We find a beautiful motivation for it in *Christ and Culture*, where Ward says:

If all things exist in Christ, then the cultural is not something entirely separate from him; the cultural is that through which God's redemptive grace operates. Christ we could say, is the origin and consummation of

culture, in the same way as he is both the prototype and the fulfillment of all that is properly human.¹

'Reading the signs of the times' in effect means, for Ward, using the concepts and theories of contemporary culture to think through and, even more so, *defend* the truth of Christianity. In this regard, Ward sees the use of contemporary cultural studies and poststructuralist philosophy as risky, but parallel to the use of contemporary thought in the Church fathers:

I would like to think that the essays collected here share something of the imaginative energies that characterized those early Christian apologetics. Like them, I seek to define a Christology through a defense of the Christian faith. That defense necessarily means an engagement that is at times polemical, for it is always concerned with responding to conditions that pertain to our contemporary culture. Like them I seek not just an engagement with but also a transformation of culture. Like them I take the specific Christian resources of the Scriptures but employ the tools of other discourses to interpret them—seeking to understand doctrine not in terms of some sealed-off Christian discourse [...] but in terms of negotiating an understanding of the Christian faith in the world in which we live. That runs risks, but theological thinking must always run risks for two reasons. First, it must run risks because it has no proper discourse of its own, as Aquinas knew. Secondly, it must run risks because understandings and perceptions of the Word frequently atrophy; they cease to surprise and they cease to scandalize.²

A key element in Ward's use of contemporary thought is the critique of a metaphysics of presence: we have no access to the things as such. There are only interpretations, as Ward states in his methodological reflection at the beginning of *Cities of God*:

They [i.e., social theorists, MW] accept that there is no immediate knowledge of brute data or the given. All our knowledge is mediated by the cultural and linguistic codes within which we are situated. That positions entails that all our knowledge is partial or from a particular perspective. There is no God's eye view of things, no access to a reality 'out there' beyond or behind our systems of communication which enable us to conceive of a reality to start with.³

This leads Ward to the adoption of a so-called standpoint epistemology. No one simply speaks the truth. Claims of truth are always embedded in a social-symbolic order and pursued in someone's interest. In fact, Ward's interest is not to deny the specific standpoint that Christianity takes, but to defend that standpoint as better for the well-being of all than the present governing 'atomistic', 'nihilistic' and 'self-destructive' secular worldview.

¹ Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 22.

² Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 18–19.

³ Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London: Routledge, 2000), 17.

In order to do this, Ward ‘baptizes’ poststructuralist deconstruction in a very specific way, a way that lets itself be most easily explained in terms of Derrida’s concept of the sign. As I have indicated above, the starting point of deconstruction is that the real, or the given, is unavailable, and is certainly always beyond what we know. The presence of a sign means that the thing signified is absent. What we have is only a trace:

All discourse, therefore, performs for Derrida the allegory of *différance*. Allegory names that continual negotiation with what is other and outside the text. In this negotiation language deconstructs its own saying in the same way that allegorical discourse is always inhabited by another sense, another meaning. Saying one thing in terms of another is frequently how allegory is defined. Saying is always deconstructive because it operates in terms of semantic slippage and deferral, in terms of not saying. In this respect, all acts of communication betray a similarity to negative theology: they all in saying something *avoid* saying something. Both allegory and negative theology, then, are self-consciously deconstructive; they are discourses in which the mimetic economy is conscious of itself. As discourses they perform the kenosis or emptying of meaning that *différance* names.⁴

The bridge towards the theological application is built in terms of a concise account of Ward’s argument from his Barth book. Ward summarizes the argument from this book in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*:

If the triune God was other than the world that God created and yet also implicated in operating within that world, then Derrida’s descriptions of a quasi-transcendental economy of signification might illuminate the nature of theological discourse itself. For theological discourse always and only functions within a generative revelation, given in Christ. But it can never function within a generative revelation as such. It can only employ those resources for signification handed down to theologians by the tradition and the particular historical and cultural discourses that contextualize any work.⁵

Almost at the end of the same contribution, the link between deconstruction and an analogical worldview is summarized again:

What Derrida draws us toward here is thinking about language in terms of creation and participation. He does not use the metaphor of incarnation, but the economy of discourse transgresses construals of inside and outside, immanent and transcendent, in a way analogous to the Christian understanding of the incarnate Word and the God who is not simply for us, but also with us and working through us. Conceived in this way, kenosis becomes the allegory of

⁴ Graham Ward, ‘Deconstructive Theology’, in: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 80; for the same passage, see Graham Ward, ‘In the Daylight forever? Language and Silence’, in: Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, editors, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 173.

⁵ Ward, ‘Deconstructive Theology’, 83.

deconstruction while deconstruction becomes the allegory of all signifying economies. Kenosis is the condition for the possibility of deconstruction; the condition for the possibility of naming. Kenosis installs aporia, the ambiguity or metaphoricity that prevents language from strictly being denotational. Kenosis prevents language from being the transparent medium for identities and identification.⁶

From this, we can outline a schematic presentation of the parallel between the Derridian structure of signification, on the one hand, and Ward's Christian transformation of it, on the other. On Derrida's side, we find the following: on top is the 'real', available to the knower only indirectly, and thus quasi-transcendent. Below this are the symbolic representations of this quasi-transcendent reality, bringing the real to expression in ever-changing contexts and forms. Embedded within this web of significations is the knower, possibly themselves conscious of the structure of *différance* in which they are embedded. On the theological side of the schema, we find something like this: The real is now the 'Father' or more generally 'God', installing a profound sense of negative theology within the Christian doctrine of God, or, at the least, illustrating an incomprehensibility at the center of Godself. The symbolic representations that never completely 'map' the real are articulated in the Son, and it is indeed a Christology, as I will show further on, that serves the purpose here of putting the endless deferral of signification into positive use. Finally, the subjects who positively recognize this process of signification, and their roles therein, come to represent the Church as the Holy Spirit on earth.

The baptism of post-structuralism, however, does not happen by way of a simple identification of the post-structuralist argument and the Christian analogical worldview. Although, in some of his writings, the transition between Derrida's economy of *différance* and an analogical worldview is rather smooth, in other publications, Ward is much more critical of Derrida.⁷ A good example of the latter is Ward's essay on analogy in Goodchild's collection of essays on the continental philosophy of religion. In the introduction to this paper, Ward announces the purpose of the essay as follows:

I want to demonstrate how a new space for analogical thinking has been opened up by certain poststructuralist discourses; how this is a space in which we can think again of an analogical world and a cosmological project; but how, left to poststructural critical thinking alone, this worldview can all too easily endorse a culture of sadomasochism, by enjoying and enjoining its own endless victimage. Only a theological account (not, note, foundation), as the necessary supplement to this analogical discourse, makes possible an ethics and a politics.⁸

⁶ Ward, 'Deconstructive Theology', 87; for the same passage, see Ward, 'In the Daylight forever? Language and Silence', 177.

⁷ This is particularly the case in Ward, *Christ and Culture*, chapter 9; Graham Ward, 'Speaking Otherwise: Postmodern Analogy', in: Philip Goodchild, editor, *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: Approaches from Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 187–211; Graham Ward, 'Questioning God', in: John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon, editors, *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 274–290.

⁸ Ward, 'Speaking Otherwise: Postmodern Analogy', 187.

In the last essay taken up in *Christ and Culture*, Ward explains what he means by the ‘somasochism’ mentioned here. The endless deferral, the suffering and the void all appear for their own sake, without any purpose beyond themselves:

With various modulations each of these [postmodern] discourses operates a sacrificial logic in which love is not-having [...]. The suffering, the sacrifice, the kenosis is both necessary and unavoidable for it is intrinsic to the economy itself. But unlike Hegel’s dialectic, the negative moment is not appropriated and welded firmly into both the providential chain of time and the constitution of the subject. The negative moment remains unappropriated, unsublated, impossible to redeem because forever endlessly repeated. Furthermore, because bound to a construal of time as a series of discrete units, each negative moment is utterly singular and utterly arbitrary insofar as the moment is infinitely reiterated to the point that difference between moments becomes a matter of indifference [...].⁹

As is already evident from the introduction to the essay on analogy, the ultimate danger that Ward sees in this culture of somasochism is an ethical and political one. In the end, Ward suggests, the fundamental indeterminacy in Derrida’s economy of *différance* renders resistance “arbitrary and compromised. And if we can agree that there are still things worth resisting and therefore things worth affirming, then this slaking is politically and ethically dangerous.”¹⁰

What the consequences of Ward’s positive theological rethinking of Derrida’s method of deconstruction are exactly remains to be seen. Although Ward sharply criticizes Derrida at times, it is not entirely clear what the systematic upshot of his theological supplement to Derrida’s endless deferral of signification actually is. It reinstalls God as a transcendent rather than a mere epistemological structure of deferral, although at the same time, as we have seen, Ward is keen to avoid an ontological dualism. Therefore, one might say that Derrida’s quasi-transcendent is not so much supplemented with a more radical transcendent, but rather that the very economy of *différance* itself, as the unfolding of signification, is reinterpreted theologically in terms of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. *Différance* functions here like a metaphor for the Trinitarian procession, in which the Son proceeds from the Father through the Spirit, so that the sign is not just a trace of that which remains unknowable forever, but can be received as the gift of divine love and grace. Nevertheless, and this explains why the transition between Derrida and the analogical worldview is often so smooth, this gift of love itself has almost the same structure as *différance*, so that it may be asked what it means for the status of *différance* to be embedded in a Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Ward seems to run into an aporia at this point, although one might say that the aporia is already in Derrida. On the one hand, Ward seeks to maintain Derrida’s notion of the wholly other in terms of the transcendence of God (especially as God the Father). He needs this in fact to be able to uphold his postmodern emphasis on the situatedness of all human knowledge. He needs this also in order to avoid a fundamentalist reading of Christianity. Our access to God is always partial, always

⁹ Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 253.

¹⁰ Ward, ‘Speaking Otherwise: Postmodern Analogy’, 187, see also 209.

situated and, as such, subject to an indeterminacy and (endless) deferral.¹¹ On the other hand, Ward wants to affirm the adequacy and mediation of God the Father in the Son and through the Spirit, and therefore he needs to maintain that *différance* indeed is more than just the endless indeterminacy of signification. In the following quote from an essay in Turner and Davies' *Silence and the Word*, this aporia is evident:

Derrida does not understand presence as grace. He does not understand the mediatorial operation of the Word and the Spirit within creation, a creation which is not finished, and a Word which is not yet complete. The presence of God in grace is not the violence of the moment—but the unfolding of the divine maintenance and sustenance of the world. Taking the incarnation seriously is not being translated out of the world into immediate contact with God; it is recognizing the movement of God in what has been gifted for us in the world. Incarnation cannot admit the inadequacy of mediation and representation. To accept the antinomy of language and silence theologically would implicate us in Gnosticism.¹²

It seems Ward moves back and forth between affirming true difference, that is a notion of difference that is not elevated by being embedded in some higher notion that encompasses the difference, and affirming such an elevation, thereby losing a strong version of difference and ending up in a logic of sameness.

Displacement in Christology

So far, we have elucidated Ward's analogical worldview from his discussion of Derrida, and therefore, we have seen its rather theoretical aspects. We will now gradually move towards a concrete application of poststructuralist theory in terms of a discussion of Ward's Christology. In Ward's Christology, we see a parallel construction of a world of differences participating in a transcendent¹³ Real, at least initially, in the central article entitled 'Bodies: The Displacement of Jesus Christ', reprinted a few times,¹⁴ and featuring also quite prominently in his Christology book *Christ and Culture*.¹⁵ The leading idea here is that in all aspects of Christ's life and work, we see a 'displacement' of the ordinary human aspects of Jesus. In the incarnation, certainly, Jesus became an ordinary human being, though, at the same time, his humanity was displaced, for example, in the sense that he did not share in the ignorance of ordinary children.¹⁶

¹¹ The problem is that as soon as one tries to turn this endless 'nihilistic' deferral into something positive by rejecting the use of 'endless', one is forced to say where it ends, and one will immediately run into a metaphysics of presence.

¹² Ward, 'In the Daylight forever? Language and Silence', 180.

¹³ Transcendent is meant here only in an epistemological sense. Ward is very keen to deny an ontological dualism, where the real is beyond the material. The real appears as the mutually different but related, and as participating in the things of the world. Indeed, the real is this plethora of analogical entities in the world.

¹⁴ Graham Ward, 'Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ', in: John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London: Routledge, 1999), 163–181; Ward, *Cities of God*, 97–116.

¹⁵ Ward, *Christ and Culture*, especially the second part, entitled 'Engendering Christ'.

¹⁶ Ward, 'The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ', 164–165/Ward, *Cities of God*, 98–99.

The soteriological significance of Jesus Christ's displacement lies in fact in the reverse of this displacement. Contrary to Christology proper, Ward differentiates between ordinary human beings and the special displaced human being that is Jesus Christ. The soteriological significance of this is that in the Eucharist in particular, the displaced body of Jesus Christ becomes 'extended' to include other bodies, and, in this way, constitutes the Church. Thus, from Christology to anthropology, all 'natural' and 'ordinary' views of human beings become 'displaced' as Christ shows their true nature through the displacement of his own body:

It is not simply that the physical body of Jesus is displaced in the Christian story; our bodies, too, participate in that displacement in and through the crucifixion. At the Eucharist we receive and we are acted upon: now, having been brought into relation and facing the acknowledgement of the breaking of that relation we recognize displacement of the body as part of Christian living.¹⁷

The Church then becomes a community of displacement, a community in which it is recognized that differences are not absolute and natural, but symbolic, and to be respected in mutual love: that is, the Church defined as an erotic community.¹⁸ Desire requires difference, and difference produces desire. We see the distinction between a 'nihilistic' account of difference and a theological transformation of it occur again at this point. The differences within the Church as an erotic community counter the 'atomic' differences that characterize our postmodern society in that they are embedded in the analogical worldview. Rather than the differences being disconnected and fragmentary without a unifying origin, the celebration of communion in difference within the Church is rooted in the Trinitarian unity in difference that God is. All differences thereby retain their analogical nature through this embedding in a Trinitarian framework.¹⁹

The nominalist ramifications: sexual difference

Already mentioned in his Christology paper, and again and more explicitly mentioned in a later chapter in *Cities of God*, Ward applies his analogical worldview to sexual difference and a critique of the traditional Christian way of privileging heterosexual relationships. Ward's primary target here is Barth's theology of sexual difference.²⁰ One might say that today Ward's critique finds a primary target in pope Benedict XVI's *Deus caritas est*.²¹ As we have seen from the preceding Christological discussion, the displacement of the body of Christ implies that Jesus was not the 'ordinary' male human being that he seemed to be. Similarly, the symbolic nature of sexual difference implies that the difference can be culturally construed, as it is continually symbolically construed, rather than being merely

¹⁷ Ward, 'The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ', 171/Ward, *Cities of God*, 106.

¹⁸ Ward, *Cities of God*, 152–156, 171–181.

¹⁹ Ward, *Cities of God*, 172; Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 264.

²⁰ Also see his more readable—in my view—analysis and critique of Barth in *Christ and Culture*, 1–15.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (Rome, 2005), URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html, e.g., 2, 11.

'natural'.²² In this sense, homosexual relationships fulfill the same role as the displacement of the body of Christ:

Same-sex relationships displace (in the way I have used that term of the body of Christ in Chapter 4) heterosexist symbolics, revealing a love which exceeds biological reproduction. Of course love between men and women can do that also; their love does not need to be restricted to reproduction. But there is nothing surprising about the attraction of opposites that manifest their opposition in appearances. [...] The mystery of attraction, the deconstruction of 'male' and 'female' as self-grounding, biological positions, the opening of 'male' and 'female' to recognize a certain mystery and malleability of the body—this becomes more evident in same-sex relations, that disrupt the *Magic Flute* rationality which deems that every man wants a woman and every woman wants a man.²³

Building on the displacement of the body in terms of Christology and same-sex relationships alike, Ward criticizes the idea of the heterosexual relationship as the natural, original and primary sexual relationship. This idea, Ward argues, leads automatically to the idea that homosexual relationships are secondary, abnormal or at best 'equal' to heterosexual relationships. Thus, although equality is accepted at best, the discourse is still dominated by the primary heterosexual relationship. A parallel can be drawn to gender relationships, in which the search for 'equality' is still dominated by male interests insofar as these set the standard for the equality that is to be reached:

The politics of the heterosexual family are predicated upon an unreflective biosociality which renders unnatural (if not even criminal) homosexuality and, what is possibly worse, reifies two models of sexual orientation within which all human being is situated. I will argue that kinship is a symbolic, not a natural, arrangement, and that there are as many genders as there are performances of being sexed. Marriage, as the Church conceives and practices it today, sacramentalizes an exclusive relationship between two positions, one biologically male and the other female. I argue for the need for redemption from such an erotics and outline the economy such a redemption might take.²⁴

How do the consequences of the analogical worldview in Ward's view of sexual relationships highlight the nominalist tendencies in his thinking? And what does 'nominalist' mean in this context? The type of nominalism that Radical Orthodoxy rejects is a nominalism in which the world is seen as totally disconnected from the being of God. The world becomes devoid of God and God becomes an object like all others. In this sense, Ward's analogical worldview is certainly not nominalist, as everything that is, exists in the Trinitarian God. In fact, the world is the Trinitarian

²² Ward, *Cities of God*, 199.

²³ Ward, *Cities of God*, 200.

²⁴ Ward, *Cities of God*, 183.

unfolding of God, God's symbolic self-expression. Thus, in a basic ontological sense, Ward's theology is certainly anti-nominalist.

There is more to nominalism, however, than just an ontological disconnection from God.²⁵ Nominalism has everything to do with the problem of universals. Opposite to nominalism stands a form of realism which espouses that there is a rational order in the world. Realists believe that human beings were created with the ability to understand this order, because the structure of the mind corresponds to the structure of the world. To quote Augustine's basic statement of this realism:

But we ought rather to believe, that the intellectual mind is so formed in its nature as to see those things, which by the disposition of the Creator are subjoined to things intelligible in a natural order, by a sort of incorporeal light of an unique kind; as the eye of the flesh sees things adjacent to itself in this bodily light, of which light it is made to be receptive, and adapted to it.²⁶

Thus, trees are trees not only because we call them trees, but because God created both the trees and our minds, enabling us to see them as they are. Or to put it more strongly and in more Platonic terms, as Milbank and Pickstock suggest in *Truth in Aquinas*—although I would deny that Augustine holds this opinion—trees are trees not because we have merely been created to know them as such, but because both the tree and ourselves exist in the mind of God, and know one another as such.²⁷

Nominalism thus now means that God's *potentia absoluta* is of such power that it renders these realist presuppositions useless. Therefore, we cannot rely on our categorizations as being intrinsic to reality, for creation is the result of God's arbitrary will, and hence unpredictable. This renders all our categorizations, designations of differences and distinctions as so many uncertain products of our minds rather than as intrinsic aspects of the universe we know.

In this latter fashion, the sense of rendering all differences symbolic rather than intrinsic, I would like to suggest that Ward's theology has strikingly nominalist aspects. Although everything participates in God and is therefore part of God's very way of being, this participation is of such a character that it renders all differences symbolic. In fact, in Ward's analogical worldview, there is no analogical ordering of the world that reflects the being of God, as there is only one big analogy: namely that everything, however different it is, is symbolically rooted in God. The only implication this has for the knower is that she or he is related to everything else, however different it is. However, it gives her or him no clue whatsoever what those things that are different, are in themselves.

²⁵ It is striking to see that analytically oriented encyclopedias do not even mention the meaning of nominalism as an 'ontological disconnection from God', as for example: Michael J. Loux, 'Nominalism', in: Edward Craig, editor, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London etc.: Routledge, 1998), 6081–6086, and Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, 'Nominalism in Metaphysics', in: Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2001–2009).

²⁶ Augustine, *trin.*, 12.24.

²⁷ John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London: Routledge, 2001), 9–12.

Graham Ward's nominalism and Radical Orthodoxy

Of course, Graham Ward's positive use of poststructuralist theory as a basis for developing his analogical worldview, especially his use of Derrida, is not entirely uncontroversial, as he himself admits in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*.²⁸ As is well known, Catherine Pickstock for example, sharply criticizes Derrida in her *After Writing*, portraying Derrida as the champion of a nihilist philosophy. Still, I believe that the nominalist strand that I have pointed to in Ward's thinking is not to be attributed to his use of Derrida and other poststructuralist authors. Instead, it is intrinsic to Radical Orthodoxy as a whole, if indeed something like a Radical Orthodoxy movement even exists, as Ward tends to deny.²⁹ I believe a Radical Orthodoxy project does exist, although differences between various proponents ought of course not to be overlooked. I think the core of it is a specific kind of rigorously participationist metaphysics, a kind that I will now deal with in more detail.

In order to show that the alleged nominalism is broader in Radical Orthodoxy than just Graham Ward, I will briefly deal with Milbank and Pickstock's *Truth in Aquinas*. As is generally known, intrinsic to Radical Orthodoxy is a certain reading of the Platonic tradition. Milbank and Pickstock have labeled it an Iamblichian-Proclean version of Platonism, one baptized by Christianity into a Trinitarian theology.³⁰ This preference for the later versions of Neo-Platonism is not without reason, because, as Milbank and Pickstock are well aware—although especially in *After Writing*, Pickstock seems not always sufficiently sensitive to the consequences—the philosophy of Plotinus and perhaps even Plato himself will have consequences that run counter to some of the core interests of their thinking.

These core interests include a specific way of thinking about the relationship between unity and multiplicity. In Plotinian Platonism in particular, unity and multiplicity are thought of as dialectical counterparts that have their anchor point in a primary category of unity that is beyond thought. In Plotinus' thinking, absolute ontological unity is fundamental and hierarchically prior to any kind of multiplicity. If we leap to our present context, we see this hierarchical view of unity and multiplicity being implemented in the Roman Catholic Church. We then immediately understand why a preference for Plotinian Platonism would run counter to Radical Orthodoxy's practical ecclesial and societal interests.³¹ Milbank's Christian socialism, for example, is unthinkable on the basis of a Plotinian metaphysics. Plotinian Platonism implies a hierarchy between unity and multiplicity, and grounds multiplicity in unity, thus making an egalitarian society impossible, to give just one example.

²⁸ Ward, 'Deconstructive Theology', 83f.

²⁹ In personal conversations in Leuven, Ward stressed several times that he sees Radical Orthodoxy as no more than a publication platform, and at a recent conference in Rome, 2008, he publicly emphasized that he sees Radical Orthodoxy as nothing but a shared sensibility.

³⁰ Milbank and Pickstock, 13; John Milbank, 'Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon' URL: http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/Milbank_SophiologyTheurgy.pdf —visited on February 2, 2009, 48–51.

³¹ Cf. e.g., Ward, *Cities of God*, 152.

Hence, Milbank and Pickstock favor Iamblichian-Proclean Platonism.³² What that means is not always crystal-clear, but what is clear is that they intend to do away with the hierarchy between unity and multiplicity. The multiplicity that we find in the world makes manifest the one coming to expression in the many, without the one being more than, or ontologically separated from, the many—as we have seen, Ward speaks of rejecting a metaphysical dualism. The one exists in the many, and the many exist in the one. There is no one without the many, and from a Christian perspective, this mutual *perichoresis* of the one and the many is grounded in God as Trinity.

What does this have to do with the question of nominalism? Everything, as I will now show. When one looks at the hierarchically ordered descriptions of the universe, one sees that it depends on increasing levels of simplicity, or at least this is the case in Plotinus. For example, the fact that a tree is a tree, and is substantially different from animals, which are in turn substantially different from human beings, which again are substantially different from God. What makes things what they are in the world, is their degree of unity/simplicity. One tree is different from another tree because the idea of a tree is brought to expression in matter as a variety of trees. That I am able to see all these different trees as trees is because they participate in a higher level of unity, the idea of a tree. In Aristotelian terms, the *genus* and *species* of an object enables me to see the *differentia specifica* of that object from another. This makes it the specific object that I see rather than another.

But what happens if I blur the distinction between unity and multiplicity in the way in which Milbank and Pickstock propose? Doing so implies that every specific thing that I see has the very same relationship to the One that all the others have. The ordering principle that makes an object what it is rather than something else is effectively destroyed, so that the only thing I can say about the being of beings is that they all participate in the Real, the Absolute or whatever we call it. However, when it comes to the question of how I order the plethora of multiplicity in the world I'm faced with, I am left entirely on my own, because there is no ontological ordering implied in the structure of the universe. Every bit of the universe is at the same ontological level. This seems to lead to the problem that I had previously pointed out in Ward's understanding.

Concluding remarks—the question of same-sex relationships

The purpose of this essay has been to point out an internal problem in Ward's analogical worldview and, more broadly, in Milbank and Pickstock's preference for an Iamblichian-Proclean view of the relationship between unity and multiplicity. Through a rigorous participationist account of the relationship between God and the

³² Catherine Pickstock, 'Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City', in: Graham Ward, editor, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 161; Eli Diamond, 'Catherine Pickstock, Plato and the Unity of Divinity and Humanity: Liturgical or Philosophical?', in: Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, editors, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1–16; Wayne J. Hankey, 'Philosophical Religion and the Neoplatonic Turn to the Subject', in: Hankey and Hedley, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, 17–30.

world, the secular character of the world, as typical of modernity, is overcome. However, in drawing heavily on poststructuralism, another typical characteristic of modernity—that of a potential lack of fit between the categories created in the mind of the knower and the structure of the world in itself—is affirmed and reinforced rather than overcome.

Due to the nature of this essay, my own view of the subject has had to remain in the background.³³ With one exception, the concluding remarks are not the place to break that rule. In the course of my argument, I have taken up Graham Ward's rejection of the privileged heterosexual relationship to point out the problem of nominalism. Thus, the question of same-sex relationships and their connection to heterosexual relationships as such remained merely instrumental to the purpose of pointing out the problem of nominalism.

I think, however, that this question in itself is a very worthwhile one, too worthwhile to be functionalized simply in order to demonstrate an instance of a particular form of nominalism. Ward points out that one's view of the status of sex relationships is deeply rooted in one's theology and thus calls for an authentic response. The strength of Ward's analogical worldview is that it provides a very rigorous answer to the question of the status of sexual relationships and relationships more broadly. If there are no 'natural' relationships whatsoever, neither in a secular sense nor in a theological sense, then indeed every view of sexual relationships is merely our symbolic representation of that relationship, and those representations cannot be passed onto the laws of nature. They are and remain our fundamental responsibility.

As I said, Ward provides a very rigorous answer here. For me, however, the question is whether the rigorous answer that Ward gives does justice in the end to the complexity of social reality. This has to do with the sort of answer that Ward gives, and the way we look at the question that it is an answer to. Ultimately, his answer is an ontological one given to an ethical question. For Ward, in fact, the question is not so much what ethical principles guide us in dealing with sexual or gender relationships. Rather, Ward develops his view of relationships in ontological terms, asking what these relationships are on their most fundamental level. Still, what he is doing is not just a matter of intellectual curiosity. The question at stake is how we can deal with these relationships in such a way as to do justice to their ontological status. For Ward, our responsibility to one another is rooted in the way things are. Thus, he derives his ethics of gender and sexual relationships from his ontology. If the world is in God in the analogical way that Ward postulates, then it is our responsibility to be truthful to that ontological character of everything that is and, therefore, nothing is 'more equal' than anything else.

³³ For some hints to my own view, see: Maarten Wisse, 'Was Augustine a Barthian? Radical Orthodoxy's Reading of *De Trinitate*', *Ars Disputandi* 7 (2007), URL: <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000274/index.html>; Maarten Wisse, 'Truth in Augustine, Plotinus, and Radical Orthodoxy: The Trinity in Outer Man', in: Mathijs Lamberigts, Lieven Boeve and Terrence Merrigan, editors, *Orthodoxy, Process and Product*, BETL 227 (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 143–170; Maarten Wisse, "'Pro salute nostra reparanda': Radical Orthodoxy's Christology of Manifestation versus Augustine's Moral Christology", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49 (2007), 349–376.

I see a problem and a missed opportunity in this view in that, given the sort of nominalism that follows from Ward's analogical worldview, his answer is internally problematic. I believe that the oblique way in which he states that everything in the world is rooted in the 'real', leads to a rather minimal relevance for ethics. An ontology of unity in difference seems to provide a merely negative ethical principle, namely one of keeping an eye on differences and respecting these. The unity aspect of course suggests something like a positive notion of a kinship between us all, but these are still very general notions.

But even apart from that internal problem, I see a missed opportunity. What I am going to say now is very sketchy, as this is not the place to develop a full scale theological ethics. But I would at least hazard this initial response. I would not anchor ethics in ontology in the same way Ward does. For me, the basis of our responsibility towards others is not the fact that they are 'other' to us, something like a general eye for difference, but it is rather our inter-personal ability to call one another to do justice that motivates an ethics.³⁴ I would not place much trust in our ability to know exactly what the world is, not even if it is a mere unity in difference. In a certain context, we do justice to the way the world is if we say much more than this, and in others if we say less. There are many views, many perspectives and no one has a God's eye point of view. The same is true, of course, of our ideals of the good. Still, we call one another to do the good and we share in experiences of pain, justice and love. That we can do this, I would prefer to say, is not so much because the world tells us what the good is. Theologically speaking, one should rather say: God is freely present among us as the Good, and as the source of the justice that we do. The reality of sin means that we are far away from doing that which we realize is good, but still, we live from the awareness of what is good, good for others and good for ourselves.

This good, however, is not a given in reality, even less a given 'with' reality. In a way, one might say that, in many cases, doing the good is acting *against* the ways things are. Thus, often, ethics runs counter to ontology. We try to cure illnesses and we irrigate the desert. We try to deal with 'defects' in nature all the time, partly because they lead to severe forms of inequality among inhabitants of the world. Frequently, the way things are leads to severe forms of inequality. Our 'natural' sensitivity to our shared experiences of pain, justice and love makes us struggle with these to overcome them.

What does this mean concretely for the way we deal with sexual relationships? It might mean that we take persistent forms of inequality between heterosexual and homosexual relationships more seriously, not in the sense of taking them as a biological given, but in the sense of taking them as a complex interplay between biological, social and cultural factors. It might be that in certain contexts and respects, same-sex relationships will hardly ever feel as

³⁴ This ability is in turn rooted in a 'natural' ability to know the good, but a more extensive argument would be needed to defend this. In the background of this argument is an idea that runs through Augustine's *De Trinitate*, especially the second half (e.g., books 8 and 9). It is the conviction that although we often do not do the good as we ought, everyone knows it. We know what a righteous human person is, even if we are not perfectly so ourselves.

'ordinary' as heterosexual relationships, and indeed, the discovery of being gay or lesbian is an unpleasant discovery of being 'different' for many in our society. Even if the individuals concerned have no religious problems with being gay or lesbian, this might well continue to be the case. Same-sex couples will never have children in an equally 'ordinary' way as heterosexual couples, and those with a predominantly homosexual preference might well comprise about only 10% of the population. When almost all the boys and girls at school begin to show an interest in the opposite sex, it might well continue to cause feelings of exclusion among those who discover that they do not have this interest. The feeling of difference, and even inequality, will remain in the sense of being less 'common', less 'easy', less 'natural'. An ontology that declares all these issues as being simply 'symbolic' representations of reality, it seems to me, does not take into account the enormous impact that these persistent forms of inequality have on the way we deal with sexual relationships today.

If we create more room for these persistent experiences of inequality, we might be able to develop more targeted strategies for countering processes of socially and culturally embedded inequality and oppression, than if we render them solely as symbolic representations. The more vulnerable certain groups are in society, and as they possibly continue to be, the stronger the call is on those who belong to the 'majority'. All people are equal, but some are less equal than others. This confronts those in a 'majority' position in particular with a call to do justice and to be respectful. It also calls upon them to avoid regarding the minority with disdain, misdirected compassion, protection, or whatever often well intended but still painful ways of disrespect we find in practice. Thus, every one of us, and even more so in cases of inequality, is called upon to do justice, that is, to love others as they love themselves. 'Pain' is universal, but so are 'justice' and 'love'.³⁵

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