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Interview with Conor Cunningham

Interviewer: Zhu Yiming

Eksistenz: An Imitation or an Elimination of God?

——Interview with Conor Cunningham

Conor Cunningham, the associate professor in Theology and Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham. His expertise includes: philosophical theology, systematic theology, the relationship between science and theology, phenomenology and metaphysics. Conor's first monograph was *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (Routledge: London and New York, 2002). It has Spanish and Chinese translations, and the Chinese translation was published by East China Normal University Press in 2022 (translator: Li Yun). His other works include: *Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2010), which has been translated into Spanish, Russian, and Korean. At the moment, Prof. Cunningham is writing three-volumes under the title of (Under contract with Wipf & Stock): *Soul and the Marriage of Discourse: A Summa for Science after Naturalness*. Volume One: Body (Science), Volume Two: Soul (Philosophy), and Volume Three: Spirit (Theology).

“For the given-ness of the creature,
which resists destruction yet is itself an ecstatic opening,
possesses a qualitative infinity as an imitable example of the divine essence.

Furthermore, it proceeds within the circle of the divine procession.”¹

Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*

¹ Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. Routledge: London and New York, 2002. p. 263.

1. Introduction

In this epoch, Nihilism is our paramount context. Most readers may look with favour upon such a view that nihilism is the essence of modernity. However, isn't there any nihilism in the ancient world? In the majority, the nihilism has a pedigree going back to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819). Instead, Conor's genealogy starts from Plotinus (205-270). He believes, that since Plotinus' works, for philosophy, the nothing as something has become everything. It argues that, on the one hand, in philosophies of nothing, it cannot speak without causing that about which it is speaking to disappear; on the other hand, theological discourse will enable us to say, to do, and to see². In a word, nihilism has been understood as plenitude - generating the excessive intelligibility from the negative in philosophies of nothing, but, for his theology, to admit the excessive directly in the activities themselves of to say, to do, and to see. The activities themselves are just imitations of God. In this sense, Conor re-examines the legitimacy of nihilism, and give us a unique way to overcome nihilism. Maybe it's the very moment that we take the gift from nihilism, whatever we taking care of ourselves in philosophical or theological practice.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

Professor Conor Cunningham, welcome to our interview. Thank you for accepting our invitation to talk about "Eksistenz" in an interview for the Journal *Eksistenz*. Now let's start off with the topic of "path". As we all known, you established a great reputation with that original and profound book *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*. I am really interested in your path that led to specializing in Nihilism. How did you turn to studying Nihilism? For you personally, why is Nihilism so important?

Conor Cunningham:

Thank you very much for inviting me.

I alighted upon the study of nihilism from several directions. As a teenager, as is typical, I was replete with existential questions. On my bedroom wall I

2 c.f. Ibid. p.169.

had two photos: one of Samuel Beckett, the playwright, and the only other one was a newspaper cutting about the Hillsborough disaster, a fatal crowd crush at a football match at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, on 15 April 1989. It occurred during an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, and there were a total of 97 fatalities. I often stared at the newspaper cutting; in which several people could be seen pressing against an unforgiving and fatal fence, indeed, one man's cheeks were squeezing through it, as dough would a mold. The question that kept coming to me was: *Is this significant or not?* And that was another way of asking - *Is life meaningless or not?* If it were meaningless then the newspaper image was really nothing at all. To compound matters, at school I learnt about the holocaust (the Shoah), and this horrific phenomenon attached itself, permanently (like a tattoo, derived from the Tahitian word '*tatau*', meaning to mark) to my mind's imagination, acting as an immovable and constant frame of reference. For if life was meaningless, in a sense, the holocaust did not really happen, because the horror it manifested requires meaning. I'll explain this later.

At school my peers never questioned me about such seemingly eccentric images on my bedroom walls – not asking where were the popstar and football posters? Mostly because I was good at sport, thankfully and they wanted me on their teams! Fast forward a few years, and during my first degree, I was reading Law, and in my 2nd year, I put my hand up in a Criminal Law class, which was almost a breach of protocol back then, unlike now (to ask questions in lectures was frowned upon). The Lecture had been about various laws against murder, manslaughter, and so on. With my hand raised, the professor asked me to speak. I asked, *why not murder?* The class laughed out loud, but the professor did not. After they quietened down, I addressed the question again to someone near me who had been laughing with a self-certain gusto. They managed only viciously circular regressive platitude: *life is precious*. I said, *tell that to the murderer*. And if it were so obvious then why did we have laws against it, have prisons, and so on. The professor said that after I had finished my Law degree that I should go and study philosophy, which I did.

So, for me, nihilism was and is a way to outflank bourgeois nonsense, mere chattering, as Soren Kierkegaard might put it; a chattering that undoubtedly emanates from comfortably full and safe stomachs. The precipice or indeed vertigo that nihilism presents can form part of a metaphysical grammar affording us the possibility to speak once again: the responsibility to speak and the responsibility that speaking bears, not to mention the infinity that lies within every utterance. I will come back to this.

2. What is Nihilism?

In this part, we hope to clarify the basic horizon of Conor Cunningham's research, like the limits of what Conor wants to do or of what his research is interested or involved in. These will help us only to pay all attention to what happens in his own problem domain.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

The first question is "What is Nihilism?" In *Genealogy of Nihilism*, you define "Nihilism" as "Nothing as Something", which, to some extent, is shared by both philosophy and theology. And for you, the difference of theology is turning to the transcendence, not the transcendental. As you say in the book, "In this way, being is not beyond thought; it is the beyond of thought." (p.260) I believe that this is like a fork in the road, isn't it? Philosophy heads for something beyond thought, but theology should turn to the abundant ways themselves of beyond. In this way, in philosophies of nothing, we hear of an elimination of God, in other words, a God without Being; yet for theology, *Eksistenz* itself, is an imitation of God, isn't it?

Conor Cunningham:

In terms of the notion of 'beyond', I hasten to point out that Plato's notion of 'beyond being' should not be understood as postmoderns do: A license for decadent self-determination, which entails a mastery over nature, all of which is dressed up in shallow terms of delay, indecision, ambiguity, non-totalizing hesitation,

‘humility’, overcoming metaphysics, mysticism, the apophatic - improperly understood - it should be said: *différance*, *differend*, erasure, event, and so on, these are the terms that populate some of the hymns of late Capitalism, in the guise of Parisian Left Bank inspired philosophies. All of whom, I would argue, are but conceptual prisoners of Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegel,³ which is tiresome, and does Hegel a great intellectual disservice, even though I have a chapter criticizing him in the nihilism book.

Plato was very much the first theologian – he coined the term theology, after all, which was later developed by another Platonist, his pupil, Aristotle, who termed it *First Philosophy*. Being is *aporetic*, because it is both from nothing, *ex nihilo*, and it is unfinished, which is to say, generative. But this is not to lead into a dark abyss, for such excess or sheer fecundity, is the fruit of bedazzlement, or what Plato called ‘Wonder’ – *thaumazein* - (θαῦμα).

To put it in drastically short terms, all knowledge, perception and cognition in having intercourse with that which is known, encountered or perceived, and thereby attaining the immanent (say, intelligible phenomena), already implicates transcendence, and does so by necessity, but one that is generous, or kenotic, accommodating our ignoring, or even violating, its very gift. Such intimation is there before us, because each phenomenon, each action, every cognition, does, as it self, in its very operation and in the fruit it bears, entails and presents a positive excess, an overflow, not to an otherworldly place, but the sheer there-ness of its presentation. Transcendence and immanence are precisely and necessarily not in competition, it is not a zero-sum game, to put it very generally. Instead, they are woven together.

In the *Philebus*, Plato designates the limit (*peras*) and the unlimited (*apeiron*) as the first two kinds of being, yet steps decisively beyond this Pythagorean opposition with the introduction of a third genus, namely, mixture (*mikton*), which is a distinctive mode of being, namely, ‘genesis’, or coming into being (*Phil.* 26d8). Im-

3 See Conor Cunningham, ‘Nothing is, so Something Must Be’, in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds.. Slavoj Žižek, et al. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 72-101

portantly, such genesis does not identify still another form of ideal being but rather the ‘real’ being of what comes to be, which is to say, being emerges as becoming. The *mikton* (the mix of blend) is interpolated between the ‘One’ and the ‘Many,’ or here between *peras* and *apeiron*. (Interestingly, it was this text that inspired Cantor in developing set theory) Plato’s example of just such a becoming is more than instructive. Spoken ‘sound which passes through the lips whether of an individual or of all men is one and yet infinite.’ (*Phil.* 17b). Our ability to discriminate unambiguously between myriads of spoken sounds is conditioned on the availability of an ideal system, that is, the phonemic system of the language. Physical utterances by individual speakers result in wide phonetic variations that only knowledge of a language’s phonological system can organise into distinct phonemes. Hence Plato’s formulation, ‘the knowledge of the number and nature of sounds is what makes a man a grammarian.’ (*Phil.* 17b). A *mikton* marks delineations in the realm of becoming relying on certain ideal structures that mix with sensory perceptions: the *mixt* of Being and Becoming. Accordingly, each *mikton* affords an area of knowledge: meteorology with the seasons, medicine with health/disease, and so on.

Echoing this, in Plato’s *Sophist*, the Stranger warns that ‘if one separates each thing off from everything, that completely and utterly obliterates any discourse, since it is the interweaving of forms that gives us the possibility of talking to each other in the first place’ (*Soph.*, 259e4-6). Understanding the world, Plato thought, required an ‘art of weaving’ (*huphantikē*) that resisted competitive models of knowledge. For Plato, the arts are divided into those that combine or separate, spin or card. But the art of weaving is different: It does both, combining union and difference (*Statesman*, 283B).

Aristotle’s idea of subalternation can also be interpreted as a form of *mixt*, or *weaving*, thereby echoing Plato. There, an operational discourse is replete with other modes of knowledge (e.g., optics employs geometry), what Plato calls an ‘interweaving’; modes that enable it to function, but of which it need not speak. Such ingredients are indispensable, to echo the *Quine-Putnam indispensability argument* for a Platonic interpretation of mathematics: science cannot do without mathematics, and therefore must ontologically commit to it. Theology will

argue that for mathematics transcendence is indispensable. Discourses are separable, yet it is not a matter of mere juxtaposition; there is marriage or union, in Henri de Lubac's sense: *L'union différencie*.

The intertwining of *peras* and *apeiron* to be found in reason invokes also the further marriage of beauty (*kalos*) and truth (*alētheia*). Plato calls beauty 'radiant to behold (ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν)' compared to the other forms and the 'most manifest (εκφανέστατον)' of them (*Phdr.* 250b5–6, d7), repeatedly linking beauty to knowledge and truth (e.g., *Rep.* 508e4–509a7). The beautiful is always co-present with that which is good, never separated: it is beyond being, but not substantially so, hence Plato uses *methexis* (participation) rather than mimesis – there is nothing to copy. The good is more vulnerable to impure imitation, the beautiful less so. 'It is beauty alone that has this quality' (*Phdr.* 250d). The beautiful both creates and surmounts the separation (*chorismos*) of form and appearance, being and becoming, and effective theory (a theory that works, but without the pretence or vanity of ever being complete, indeed, precisely the opposite- this is how most science works today, incidentally, for example the famous *Standard Model* of physics is an effective theory) signals just this relation to knowledge: beauty is the very possibility of effective theory. 'One might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.' (Wittgenstein)⁴

Aquinas tells us that 'every substance which comes after the first simple substance participates in *esse*. But every participant is composed [*componitur*] of that which participates and that in which it participates, and the participant is in potency to that in which it participates.'⁵ Moreover, *esse* is 'superior to life and to all other perfections.'⁶ It is 'among all principles the most perfect.'⁷ Here, it

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty (Über Gewissheit)*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans., by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969-1975), 248

5 *In VIII Phys.*, 21, 1153. 'Everything that has some quality by participation is reduced, as to its principle and cause, to that which has that quality by essence' *Compendium Theologiae* 1.68.

6 *ST I-II*, 2, 5, ad 2.

7 *De pot.*, 7, 2, ad 9 (see also *ST I*, 4, 1, ad 3).

is the idea of participation through perfection that provides a conceptual clue to a mixed relation: ‘Esse is the ‘actuality of all acts and thus the perfection of all perfections.’⁸ This understanding of *esse* pushes us to be cognisant of a mode of occurrence without change (*mutatio*, in terms of the divine). Analogously, we will see that God is most close yet most distant. ‘God is in all things, and innermost.’⁹ Yet at the same time Aquinas speaks of ‘the infinite distance of the creature to God’.¹⁰ Aquinas is here echoing St. Augustine, for whom God was not only higher to the soul than the highest heaven (*superior summo meo*) but nearer to the soul than it is to itself (*interior intimo meo*). This is the *complicatio-explicatio*, enfolding and unfolding, of *esse* in which we by way of a mixed relation analogically participate.

It is wise to clarify here what is meant by *esse*. *Esse* is the infinitive of the verb ‘to be,’ which we should translate as existence rather than as ‘being., as being is employed also to translate *ens*, or öv and Latin *ens*, the present participle of the verb ‘to be,’ used as a substantive to mean a thing that is, or a being. *Esse*, or here existence is not a thing or a being, but the act in by which something thing is a being (*ens*). Accordingly, Aquinas distinguishes between the existential and the copulative usages of the term *esse*. For instance, *esse* ‘signifies the act of existing [*actus essendi*]’¹¹ *Esse* signifies, therefore, the ‘that it is’ or that by which it is (quo est) rather than the ‘what it is’ (*quod est*). As Aquinas says, ‘*Esse* itself does not signify the subject of existing [*essendi*], just as ‘to run’ does not signify the subject of running [*currendi*]. Next, just as we cannot say that to run itself [*ipsum currere*] runs, so we cannot say that *esse* itself is [*ipsum esse sit*]; but as ‘that which is’ signifies the subject of existing, so ‘that which runs’ signifies the subject of running; and thus just as we can say of that which runs, or of a runner, that it runs, insofar as it is subjected to running [*cursui*] and participates in it, so we can

8 *De pot*, q.7, a.2, ad.9: ‘*esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et propter hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum.*’, *ST I*, 8, 1, resp.

9 *ST I*, 8, 1, resp.

10 *De ver*. 2, 11, ad 4.

11 *ST I*, 3, 4, ad 2.

say that a being [*ens*], or that which is, is, insofar as it participates in the act of existing [*actum essendi*].’ Just as ‘to run’ (*currere*) is not a runner, a thing that runs (*currens*), so ‘to be’ (*esse*, that is, existence) is not a being, a thing that is (*ens*).

In contrast, modernity, postmodernity, Late Capitalism, and all the other progeny of nihilism, treat the gift of being (*esse*), first, univocally (*a univocity of being*) and then equivocally (*an equivocality of being*) – affording only nominal aggregations. In the wake of this catastrophic mistreatment of being – *esse*, all acts of cognition, all phenomena are mere givens, dead things, to be mastered, manipulated, exploited, abused, and most likely destroyed, and this has major implications. As philosopher Robert Spaemann tells us, ‘Nature becomes exteriority without selfhood (*Selbstsein*). Moreover, to know something as existing by nature means to objectify and thus alienate it, “to know what we can do with it when we have it.”¹² To know no longer means (in accordance with the classical axiom *intelligere in actu et intellectum in actu sunt idem*: understanding in act is identical to the thing understood in act) to become one with that which is known. In the Hebrew Bible, the same word is used for the cognitive act and sexual intercourse—“Adam knew his wife” (Gen 4:1). But this becomes completely untenable where the ideal of cognition is self-contained enlightenment. Every time we think, just as when we are, we enter into a relationship. As Aristotle says, “For the mind somehow is potentially what it thinks (*ta noēta*)”¹³—there is not domination, but intercourse. Again, “Knowledge that is activated is thus the same as the thing.”¹⁴ Once more, “Thus in general, the mind that is active is the objects.” ‘This is the soul and the world together, and for this reason, the soul “is somehow all things.”¹⁵ *Capax omnia*.

This intercourse between thought and thing, and though offered by someone, a thing or at least an animal is the dance of all that we do, see, and believe: we know, like Adam, that which we think. This relationship gives birth to all thought

12 Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference Between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something’*, trans. Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 49. Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology*, 9–10.

13 *De anima*, III, 4, 429b30–31.

14 *De anima*, III 7, 431b21

15 *De anima*, III 8, 431b21.

and in this way to all things also. For just as there is no matter without form (see below), and all forms, including souls, come into being only with matter, thoughts and things arrive together; yet any such arrival is always *in via* (on the way) that is, it never ends. In this way the thought of the simplest thing is analogous to the beatific vision, for there we will *know all of God's essence*, because God is simple (despite misguided thoughts to the contrary, all of which, I would argue, are self-undermining), but *we will never comprehend God's essence*. Here Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epectasis* becomes the basis of all thought, of all things, for just as we must traverse eternity to know God, we must also traverse time to know the slightest thing—that's why Thomas Aquinas says that *we don't even know the essence of a fly*.¹⁶ Therefore, we can indeed, think of all knowledge as a form of marriage—we do become one with that which we seek to know, and this why Aquinas calls all thought *verbum cordis*.

Regarding such intercourse, as G. K. Chesterton says, 'The mind is not purely creative. ... But the mind is active, and its activity consists in the following, so far as the will chooses to follow, the light outside that does really shine upon real landscapes. That is what gives the indefinably virile and even adventurous quality to this view of life ... [R]eality and the recognition of reality; and their meeting is a sort of marriage. Indeed it is very truly marriage, because it is fruitful; the only philosophy now in the world that really is fruitful.'¹⁷ Maurice Blondel once said that *history is metaphysics in act*, and this is most certainly true: the horizontal (history) and the vertical (metaphysical) are conjoined and never more so that in the Incarnation, which acts as a meta-key by which to interpret Creation. To riff on Kant, *metaphysics without history is dumb, whilst history without metaphysics is blind*. Without this union all is not *just from dust and to dust it shall return, but remains dust throughout*.

Regarding nihilism, and as a quick aside, historically it is worthy of note that Jean-Baptiste Louis Crevier seems to have been the first to use the term nihilist in 1761. He employed the term to describe the 'disciples' of Peter Lombard. He

16 So "the essential ground of things are unknown to us" (*De anima* 1.1.1n.15); thus "we do not even know the essence of a fly" (*In Symb Apost prol.*).

17 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 148.

pointed out that in *Libri Sententiarum*, Lombard argues that Christ ‘in as much as he is a man, Jesus Christ is not something, or, in other words, is nothing. This proposition is scandalous, and yet some of his disciples supported it and formed the heresy of the nihilists.’ In the sense in which it is generally used today, the term ‘nihilism’ was introduced by F. H. Jacobi in an open letter to Fichte (1799), in which he described the philosophy that followed in the wake of Kant as *Nihilismus*. The term did not enter common usage, however, and it was not until the writings of Nietzsche that nihilism came to prominence. Nietzsche diagnosed Europe as having fallen into nihilism for the simple but dramatic reason that, he said, God is now dead, and we have killed him by way of our incredulity, apathy, and *ressentiment*. Confronting such nihilism, which he saw as degenerate, it is generally agreed that Nietzsche endeavoured to overcome (*überwinden*) it, by constructing an entirely new way of looking at existence, employing concepts such as the ‘Overman’ (*Übermensch*) and the ‘eternal return’. In later sections we shall discuss those philosophers who were influenced and inspired by the claim that God is dead. One wider consequence of the advent of nihilism was a severe disenchantment of the world (described by Max Weber) and the rise of an all-encompassing materialism (nihilism’s great progeny), which sought to consummate the death of God (proposed in various forms within Marxism). In my book on nihilism, which has chapters on many towering philosophical figures (from Plotinus to Badiou), yet there is no chapter on Nietzsche, and for very specific reasons. The most important being that Nietzsche’s self-declared nihilism was more about *diagnosis*, than true self-characterization. Nihilism is much more insidious, and often *comes as an angel of light*, as it were, with all the posture of clever innocence, and an apparent bountiful supply for all our needs and desires.

As you mention, in the book I argue that Nihilism is an *invariant logic* which treats the *nothing as something*, which is a highly clever effort to retain that which is lost: people, ethics, trees, all phenomena, yet doing so without positing their irreducible reality. In short, if nihilism carried or presented a lack, then there was a logical space for its replacement: if it were a bare nothing, then a something could usurp its place. But if nihilism were the *nothing as something*,

there're was no place or space for its replacement, for it gave all that its apparent opposite would give. It is in this way that nihilism is plenitude, an ersatz one, no doubt, but plenitude nonetheless. Nihilism even gives us commentaries on scripture – think of some of the Continental tradition's contemporary leading lights, if that they be: Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben, to name but three, all offering commentaries on St Paul. Doing so, it should be noted, for two reasons: *First*, to present a positive nihilism and *second*, because the Parisian Left Bankers have run out of steam, and therefore must look elsewhere to gain, appropriate, or steal traction; a fully parasitic move, of course.¹⁸

Thus Nihilism can be seen in philosophy, in both its Continental and analytic variants, and in certain presentations of science, though there is some hope for science, if radically re-construed as a true art, something I'm trying to do at the moment in the aforementioned trilogy. For example, we often hear of the reduction of the person, or indeed their soul, to mind, and then the mind to brain, and the brain to a patchwork of neurons, synapses and so on. Such reductions tend to rest on *the fiction of a base element*: from Democritus' atoms, to Thales' water, to DNA, or, today, microphysics – elementary particles, which sometimes come in the guise of strings or quantum foam. The positing of a base facilitates (logically, culturally, and literally) the reduction of all that is to the base, the unique *terminus*. Consequently, quite literally, nothing gets off the ground, for it is always sucked back in, being but an epiphenomenon, a shadow cast by the real solidity of the *fundamentalia*: the fundamental base. The operation of a fundamentalist base look like this, which is highly transferrable across many disciplines, 1) *The Hierarchy thesis*: The universe is stratified into levels. 2) *The Fundamentality thesis*: There is a bottom level, which is fundamental. 3) *The Primacy thesis*: Entities on the fundamental level are primarily real and the rest are at best derivative, if they are real at all.

18 For a critique of some trendy figures of Continental philosophy- Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Gianni Vattimo - in relation to nihilism see -'Nihilism and Theology: Who Stands at the Door?' in *Oxford Handbook to Theology and Modern European Thought*, eds. G Ward, and G. Pattison (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 138-152. For a critique of Badiou's student, Quentin Meillassoux, see 'Divine Inexistence in the work of Quentin Meillassoux' in *Theology, Politics and Culture* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2012), pp. 138-152.

The great polymath genius, Henri Poincaré captures this nihilistic or scientific fundamentalism well: ‘Our body is formed of cells, and the cells of atoms; are these cells and these atoms then all the reality of the human body? The way these cells are arranged, whence results the unity of the individual, is it not also a reality and much more interesting? A naturalist who never had studied the elephant except in a microscope, would he think he knew the animal adequately? It is the same in mathematics. When the logician shall have broken up each demonstration into a multitude of elementary operations, all correct, he still will not possess the whole reality; this I know not what which makes the unity of the demonstration will completely escape him. In the edifices built up by our masters, of what use to admire the work of the mason if we cannot comprehend the plan of the architect? Now pure logic cannot give us this appreciation of the total effect; this we must ask of intuition.’¹⁹

Intuition may not be sufficient here, but it is necessary.

Regarding Poincaré’s point about the limits of the microscope, and the attitude that seems to attach itself to the use of such apparatus, Kierkegaard articulates a similar concern, doing so in more prosaic terms: ‘The researcher right away begins dissipating his brain on details: now someone is going to Australia, now to the moon, now into a subterranean cavern, now the Devil knows where in the arse after an intestinal worm; now we must have a telescope, now a microscope: who in the name of Satan can stand it!.’²⁰ Well, possibly the Devil can, to answer Kierkegaard’s rhetorical question.

It is important to realize, that the arrival of such nihilism is a progeny of Descartes’ cataclysmic and tortured severing of the world into two parts: mind and matter – *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Interestingly he himself being influenced by Francisco Suarez, a Jesuit, who was the first to abandon the commentary tradition (such as when a living figure, say, Aquinas, offers commentary on Aristotle’s *Meta-*

19 H Poincaré, *Science et méthode* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1908), p.436, italics mine.

20 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans., G Anderson (London: Peter Owen Ltd, 1960), p.97; italics mine.

physics or *Physics*) and instead hubristically launches the modernist (non) tradition of auto-nomy – it is from here that the modern novel is born, and the Catholic church's use of the term novel as almost synonymous with heresy is telling: heresy itself as a term stemming from the Greek word for choice (*haíresis* -αἵρεσις): I choose, says the modern, which is of course risible, as they will be even more open to near-total conditioning, as the 20th century proved to our great horror.

Interestingly, R.G. Collingwood argued that in the history of European thought there have been *three periods of cosmological thinking* when the idea of nature generated radically new approaches within science.²¹ First, the Greek understanding of nature, its physics (φύσις) was one of growth; nature was approached as if it were alive. This *Weltanschauung* was superseded by the *second* approach, what Collingwood called Renaissance cosmology, one that was corpuscularian and decompositional, which is epitomised by the separability principle of classical physics with its attendant microphysical fundamentalism – all wholes are reducible to their parts. Its formation, as mentioned, was partly generated by the Cartesian dualism of *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). It is worth noting that this Cartesian divide began the modern accommodation of materialism as a feasible philosophical position. We should, therefore, take on board the philosopher Hans Jonas's crucial insight: 'the *res cogitans* was made perhaps more for the sake of the *res extensa* than for its own'.²² In other words, mind was made for the sake of matter, rather than the other way around. Any such dualistic pattern of thinking or of parsing the world, invites, because it accommodates, the cutting free of the *res cogitans*, which is rendered otiose, and if not redundant, it is absorbed by its opposite. An eventuality mirrored by the hyper-spiritualisation of the soul: Here, body as *mere* matter, and soul as *pure* spirit reflect each other. Robert Spaemann makes an identical point, arguing that materialist monism is dualist *malgré lui*.²³[5] Echo-

21 See R. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945).

22 Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 54, n. 7.

23 Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference Between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 49.

ing this, John Haldane says, ‘Ironically, one might even say that it was Descartes’s dualism that made *scientism* possible by yielding everything publicly observable to reductionist explanation, thereby leaving the residue (mind) liable to elimination on grounds of empirical-cum-explanatory redundancy’.²⁴ Or as David Braine argues, ‘for materialism to get going at all in its main contemporary form it is an absolute condition that one should have established a dualistic pattern of analysis of what goes on in human life’.²⁵ Incidentally, scientism – that science is the only begetter of truth, which is of course an extra-scientific statement, is Friedrich Hayek’s term.

A casualty of a move such as this can be witnessed in the advocacy in (analytic) philosophy of a purely extensionalist world, wherein all intentionality, all properties, and so on, are vanquished; less to contend with, given such philosophy’s limiting remit, method, and metaphysics, namely ontological naturalism. We witness another victim of this mode of thinking, a surprising one, we would surmise, not faeries, souls, persons, normativity even, but material objects: They become *merely gerrymandered aggregates of matter*, whatever matter might be, except as a placeholder. Such aggregation is like the reverse of the child’s address: From home, to street...to the universe. Instead, books to chapters, to pages, syllables...to letters. But surely even more, for any lone unit, say, a letter (or a particle), is itself composed, so the letter ‘A’ would itself begin the process anew. The sense of our concepts lapses into nominalism, it would seem: A point brought home by both Plato and Aristotle.²⁶

24 John Haldane, ‘Common Sense, Metaphysics, and the Existence of God,’ *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2003), p.383.

25 David Braine, *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1993), p. 23.

26 See Plato’s *Theaetetus* 203a–205e. If the syllable SO is just the letters S and O, then knowledge of S and O should be sufficient for knowledge of SO, and vice versa, but it is not [203d]. If SO is a new form arising from the combination of S and O, it ceases to have S and O as parts, and so can’t be composed of them [204a, 205b]. Socrates summarizes these points at 205d–e. For the so-called Syllable Regress see In *Metaphysics* VII.17.1673–1674. ‘The syllable, then, is something- not only its elements (the vowel and the consonant) but also something else; and the flesh is not only fire and earth or the hot and the cold, but also something else. Since then that something must be either an

We should ask, maybe, how atomism, reductionism or, for that matter, post-modernism is able to *utter* data at all, that is, to traverse a sentence, given its own terms. All components of said utterance would surely fall into disarray, if indeed they can fall. As Lynne Ruder Baker argues, given the prevailing nihilistic materialist logics, we cannot even speak of a car crash anymore, for all we are left are meaningless configurations or aggregations of matter, which we might term carwise. The ultimate crash is that there cannot be a crash at all. Likewise, we cannot say, Baker argues, that the Twin Towers fell, for nihilism, and its lackey, materialism renders such an occurrence or event impossible,²⁷ even more so than angels and miracles; after all, flavoured quarks, muons, and holes acting as particles, are all permitted, *all of which pop in and out of existence*, yet a cancerous tumour is beyond the purse of materialism's ontology, therefore nihilism prevails.

Like some latter-day doubting Thomas, we are incredulous—we need to see the wounds (and we can't even see them), we need to see the soul, to see the person—but where are the wounds for any such test, for wounds are surely impossible, cancer is impossible, likewise murder, rape, and genocide. Take cancer, which I just mentioned, well, one needs a rich enough ontology—in this case an ontology of oncology, if you will—to allow for such imperfections, such phenomena. Speaking purely through the lens afforded by nihilistic materialism, with maybe an auxiliary logic such as Darwinian survival, here, on the first count there is no real organism, as we know; and on the second, the “radical democracy” of Darwinism offers cancer as much suffrage as the bearer of this condition—pick your team and perhaps cheer: chemo vs. cancer. And it would be anthropocentric, colonial, or totalizing of us to oppose cancer; after all, cancer is merely trying to stop cells committing suicide (*apoptosis*), least that's how one

element or a compound of elements, if it is and element the same argument will again apply; for flesh will consist of this fire and earth and something still further, so that the process will go on to infinity.’ In *Metaphysics* VII, 17 (1041b 11-22).

27 Lynne Rudder Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.7.

could moralize it, and why not, given nihilism. Serial killers are a poker tell in this regard.

It is sociological true to say that a great many Western humans say there is no soul, but all, or nearly all, act as if there is, especially with regard to their snatched prodigal portion (to echo Gerard Manley Hopkins), Of course serial killers may be thought to be an exception, but even they presume a soul; why else would you bother killing someone, when you might as well just watch the weather—it is, after all, more random or aleatory. This is just the mistake in the book and later movie ‘No Country for Old Men.’ A phrase, we speculate, borrowed by Cormac McCarthy from W. B. Yeats’ poem - *Sailing to Byzantium*. At least in the movie of the novel, the psychopath (Anton Chigurh) flips a coin in a gas station to decide whether to kill the owner or not. This is taken to be dramatic, radical even. But it is not; rather it is adolescent, the supposed revolutionary logic of which amounts to the equivalent of a domestic chore. It is wholly parasitic on what is taken, or contrived, to be its opposite, namely, meaningfulness, which it quite patently is not. Indeed, the killer’s lack of emotion is not exceptional, but par for the course, when compared to the profoundly indifferent systemic inequalities across the globe. Also the psychopath certainly gets some traction from their antics, again, in an adolescent manner.

Indeed, it is just such inescapable meaning that frightened St Augustine, when it came to his reminiscence of stealing pears when he was a child. Recently, listening on BBC radio to some apparently learned academic commenting on this event in Augustine’s life, and bursting into a gaudy laugh at the very notion of it amounting to anything serious, really was rather embarrassing. I didn’t know where to look. It is obvious that Augustine was perfectly serious. The stealing of pears was not the transgression of some cultural more, that is, it was not about something thing or other, for instance, theft. Rather it was all about nothing and that was his point. To unpack, it was all about nothing becoming something – that is, nothing, here representative of evil, becoming substantialised. It was here that the abyss of real evil, in an almost Manichean, gnostic sense raised its head: The Light as opposed to the now real and equal Dark, which is which the

question becomes. The pears represented nothing, the theft was without reason, it lacked sufficient reason, yet still it was; *still there arose the desire to commit the act*. Here Augustine hovered over the abyss, one that was full and plump: a positive nihilism, it would seem.

The Czech thinker, Vilém Flusser makes just the same point regarding both the Devil and ivory towers, deepening it with a telling vision of the world: ‘The murder of God and the Devil, which we perpetrated in our pride, has revealed itself as the suicide of our Will. In place of the golden throne, from which our creative Will was going to govern the illusory world, an ivory tower rises, chiselled and decorated with grotesque figures, from which the spectre of the decapitated mind spies, nebulously and vaguely, the nebulous and vague spectre of the decapitated world. The progress of the evolution of the mind has resulted in a macabre dance. It started from the lustful desire to delight in reality. The mind did not achieve the delight in reality and annihilated itself in the attempt.’²⁸ In more particular terms, this dance is the *danse macabre* of 0’s and 1’s.

It is not, in short, the Heavens that are under threat, but rather the Earth. For this is the very flat lining of reality, as only a Flat Earth ontology prevails. A consequence of which is that, as G. K. Chesterton put it, ‘*There is no such thing as a thing.*’²⁹ One Nobel-winning biologist, François Jacob, articulates this situation in stark terms: ‘*Biology no longer studies life.*’³⁰ A sentiment echoed by Harvard philosopher of science, Michael Ghiselin: ‘*If we ask the question when did human life begin? The answer is never.*’³¹ It is little wonder, then, that Michel Henry tells us “there is no person in science.”³² And Henry appears to be correct, for as Thomas Metzinger informs us, “no such things as selves exist in the world:

28 Vilém Flusser, *The History of the Devil*, trans., by R Maltez Novales (Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2014), pp.201-202.

29 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Fontana, 1961), 59.

30 François Jacob, *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*, trans. Betty Spillman (New York: Pantheon, 1973), 299.

31 Michael Ghiselin, *Metaphysics and the Origin of Species*, p.1.

32 Michel Henry, *I am The Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 262.

Nobody ever was or had a self.”³³ In light of such logic, Gregory of Nyssa’s prescient words spring to mind, if mind there be, given reductive materialism, and its overarching meta-position, namely, nihilism: ‘*By their arguments they would prove that our life is nothing but death.*’³⁴ Or as Spaemann, points out, *the human has become an anthropomorphism to themselves.*³⁵

The wholly destructive, unnatural, Cartesian dualism is echoed or replicated again and again, for instance, reduction/emergence, or micro/macro. The Cartesian cut (between mind and matter, generating two immiscible substances; only one now remaining, due to cultural demand or for utilitarian, functional need) consolidates *corpuscularian atomism* – today’s microphysical fundamentalism – and remains mandatory and even constitutive for the exact sciences. Arguably, this fundamental bifurcation was itself facilitated by the previous substantialisation of matter (possessing its own form) – ‘matter’ being *now a stand-alone term* (thus seeming to render materialism coherent), *no longer a relative term* as it was for Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas (who was a lone voice fighting against such a move, during his time), to name but three, and is arguably the case today for physics.

Indeed, we now know that spacetime itself is emergent (something already insisted upon by Plato and Aristotle), thus it is by no means a reductive base. Materialism, consequently, is further exposed as incoherent babble, mere ideology, or wishful thinking, for those who specialize in cultural self-harm. From Plato and Aristotle to Hegel, it is quite obvious that materialism has *always been unable to point to, or pick out, its one key ingredient, namely, matter*, for it simply does not exist, at least not on its own, ever. Rather, there is always *something* material, thereby requiring *form*: matter only ever is when it is in-formed, for matter, metaphysically, is a co-principle along with form (form/actuality- ἐνέργεια – and

33 Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 1.

34 Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima* 1. For a critique of such nihilism, see Cunningham, ‘Is there Life before Death?’ in *Death in Life*, ed. John Behr (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp. 120-151

35 Robert Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology*, xxiv

matter/potentiality- δύναμις), and not something you can touch, hold, lick or kick – here, the philosopher George Berkeley was absolutely correct.

Regarding the emergence of spacetime, rather tellingly, the problem that faces Cartesian dualism – how to join that which is immiscible – mind and matter, what we might call the ‘hard problem’, to give a nod to David Chalmers, reappears, for we now have spacetime as the non-fundamental – comparable to mind, over and against the fundamental, which underlies it, and yet remains forever, it would seem, unknown, like some ghastly, diabolical, Kantian noumenal realm.

Question 2

Zhu Yiming:

Maybe it’s better for your efforts in that book *Genealogy of Nihilism* to be regarded as closer to continental philosophy. However, I would like to remind our readers that, you discuss Nihilism both in analytic and continental philosophy. Especially, in analytic philosophy, your works are also attractive yet profound. And I see, in *Wittgenstein after Theology* (1999), you mentioned that “Wittgenstein’s view dogmatically postulates the transcendent as the unutterable and inexpressible. Such a transcendent cannot really make a difference to finite reality... Thus Wittgenstein is the ally only of a dualistic theology and religion, by the same token as his philosophy in the end suppresses the various grammatical specificities of language.”³⁶[9] It usually seems more difficult to start an effective dialogue on Nihilism between the discussing way of analytic philosophy and the continental one, but, here, you make it possible, by distinguishing the transcendent and transcending itself. How do you think about it?

Conor Cunningham:

In one sense regarding both analytic and Continental traditions of philosophy, it is a case of plague on both houses, to nod to Shakespeare, for they, in the end, very often come sporting the same outfit but simply with a different tie,

36 Conor Cunningham. ‘Wittgenstein after Theology’. in: *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward eds. Routledge: London and New York, 1999. p.86.

or in the case of the Continentals, the Parisian Left-Bankers, being apparently cool or trendy, no tie at all, but rather an open shirt, and with the analytics a bowtie, inevitably. But of course, to some degree I'm being facetious; as there is very good work to be found in both tributaries, especially in the last 30 years (though I think it made a nascent effort back in the late 1950's with Strawson's book - *Individuals*, and then made a notable appearance in 1990 with Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings*), as metaphysics proper has made something of a renaissance. Maybe we should not be too surprised, after all, as the great Thom-ist, Étienne Gilson pointed out that *metaphysics always buries its undertakers*, thankfully. We see this across the board – in ontology, philosophy of chemistry, indeed of science generally, but also in questions surrounding beauty, ethics, and so on. A much needed espresso, if not always the recommended double, has been imbibed and people have woken up to the big questions, once again.³⁷

So, to answer your question, I think the distinction between *transcendence* and the *transcendental* is always hovering, the former properly making sense of the latter, whilst the latter left to itself, is apt to take a cheap shortcut, which is somewhat self-satisfied, as it gives a false appearance of depth or sophistication, when, generally, it's just being clever, like doing the Rubik's cube. Comparable to someone who can do all manner of tricks with a soccer ball, keeping it up in the air for an amazing amount of time, but isn't' actually any good at the game of soccer – a circus act, if you will.

Question 3

Zhu Yiming:

We cannot keep silent on Nietzsche while talking about Nihilism. However, you hardly ever talk about Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Nihilism*. Why? And we know, in his *Weak Theology*, John D. Caputo describes the possibility of a God even Nietzsche could love. In my opinion, it means that as absolutely compulsive

37 See Conor Cunningham, 'Homo ex machina: The Nightmare Dreams', *Theology of Freedom: Festschrift for Alexei Bodrov*, ed. Языкова Ирина (Moscow: St. Andrew's Institute Press, 2022), pp. 93-132.

identity this God is already dead, yet as infinite creations and continuously repeatable revolutions this God is being alive. You will be totally opposed to this view, won't you? To be more specific, according to your *Genealogy of Nihilism*, is Caputo's belonging to the philosophical logic of nihilism, not theological one, isn't it? But when you are borrowing the unique expression "inexhaustible richness" from Merleau-Ponty (c.f. p. 259), it seems that there is still a possibility of a God even Nietzsche could love. So, the last question is that could your theological logic of nihilism tolerate Nietzsche's challenge?

Conor Cunningham:

Without meaning to be rude, but given their privileged positions within academia, I think there's a cultural mandate to say that I find the work of Caputo and his ilk to be highly decadent and desperately vulgar. Nietzsche would have offered such efforts only defenestration. It is just spoilt adolescent chatter, by my lights. Indeed, such writing is the equivalent of what Kierkegaard called 'Christendom', a mere civil religion, here the religion of the Western academic game.³⁸

Regarding Nietzsche not appearing in my nihilism book, I answer that question above. Like Kierkegaard, from whom he took nearly everything, there is of course a God for Nietzsche to love, and it is the God of creedal orthodoxy, the God who is Love, who is so utterly intelligible, because God is intelligibility, the most knowable, yet consequently is forever unfathomable, even in eternity; hence we are back with Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epectasis*, mentioned earlier. To repeat: In eternity we will *know* God, because God is simple, but we will need to traverse eternity to *comprehend* God's essence. It is to this that Merleau-Ponty, the lapsed Catholic, speaks, when mentioning *inexhaustible richness*, one to be found in creation, being so because it is an analogical reflection or echo of its Creator.

Incidentally, if you want to read something truly radical, and not Late – white-Capitalist dross, go read Plato, Aristotle, Proclus, Maximus the Confessor, or Cyril of Alexandria, Hamman, or in the last century, Maurice Blondel (e.g., his

38 Again, for a critique of the notion of a weak god, see Cunningham, "Nihilism and Theology: Who Stands at the Door?"

L'Action) or Charles Péguy (for example, his last work, which I had translated a couple of years ago, with an excellent foreword by John Milbank: *Notes on Bergson and Descartes*). Resist the lobotomy of fashion, at all costs, for it only prepares the way for self-colonization by legion of ideologies.

3. Nihilism: The Consummate Philosophy?

When we were talking about the possibility of tolerating Nietzsche in Conor's theory, in fact, we were already talking about the limit of philosophy. In other words, Nihilism is the consummation of philosophical thoughts, but it should be noted firstly, not the theological ones. Now, in Part 3, we will focus on how "Nihilism" almost becomes a synonym for "Philosophy."

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

Now it's time to go back to some vital arguments in *Genealogy of Nihilism*. So, for you, is nihilism the consummation of philosophy? And why? Is nihilism indicating the limit of philosophy - a special way to say the relation between identity and difference? On these grounds, could we be of the opinion that there is no difference between postmodern philosophies and modern philosophies?

Conor Cunningham:

To recall Blondel once again, 'Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man [sic] have a destiny?' This is the question with which he opens his *magnum opus*, *L'Action*. After positing '*Il y a quelque chose*' (there is something), he argues that philosophy, any philosophy that does not reach the one thing necessary - *unique nécessaire* (transcendence)- is no longer philosophy, but rather, *ideology*. Nihilism is the consummate philosophy because in its positive form it grasps this conundrum, hence it attempts to generate its own faux, counterfeit god or 'transcendence', and here we are back with the contrived terminology, such as *différance* or a Badiouian event. Postmodernism was useful, for a spell, because it did point out that the positivist emperor was somewhat chilly, being naked as it was. But it transmogrified in to its own, self-serving, endless game

of navel gazing, as it was caught up in its own clever efforts to avoid pushback from existence, over which it sought to remain in control, doing so from wood panelled offices, with obsequious students at their feet, listening avidly and then tasting that day's sophistry, in which ever flavor it was offered up. In short, post-modernism, if approached as something welcome, was meant to be a moment (comparable to Protestantism, which was intended to be a 'protest') and substantialized, as when the anti-colonialists colonize the weak of mind with stories of a weak god. But as a cultural litmus test, as it were, if such professors have someone round to the house, say, a plumber, an electrician, or someone who lays brick for a living, and they ask what they do, and they start to tell them about a 'weak god', with almost certainty eye brows will be raised, being driven by contempt, and following Elvis, respect will have truly left the building. Working class people – the *proletariat* - have no time for such indulgent games.³⁹

Back to your question, yes, nihilism, as hinted at already, brings philosophy to a limit, a precipice, and here we are back to the newspaper clipping on my bedroom wall of the Hillsborough disaster, or my question in the Law lecture regarding murder, if murder be possible, given the aforementioned flatlining of reality, wherein univocal being has lapsed into a wholly equivocal being – the kingdom ruled by nominal aggregation: a pure nature, *natura pura*, which is now cleansed, purified of everything.

Question 2

Zhu Yiming:

Would you believe there is a pure nothing? Why cannot there be a nothing? To be more specific, according to your ideas, there is always a world promised firstly. Why cannot there not be a world, or why cannot the world be nothing? Why cannot we talk about nothing without the correlation between “there is” and “nothing”?

Conor Cunningham:

It is most important to realise that act – actuality – is always prior, hence God

39 Again, see Cunningham, “Nihilism and Theology: Who Stands at the Door?”

being *actus purus*. If that is the case, then all such talk of a pure nothing, negation, etc., always arrives in the middle, and is thereby intrinsically dependent and therefore parasitic, feeding of a prior gift. Tricksy –to echo Tolkien’s Gollum– language games work or convince by way of misdirection, distracting from that upon which they rely. When a knife moves across a throat, slitting it, the bourgeois sentiments expressed in such sophistry regarding the pure nothing are phenomenologically evident. But not only in that register, even logically and linguistically if we attempt to articulate that which we witness, for again, we will be back to the *one thing necessary*, if we are to believe that a knife has been employed to slit a person’s throat.

Question 3

Zhu Yiming:

One thing, it’s still necessary to show clearly the difference between the limits of philosophy and the ending of philosophy. Some philosophers make it a central concern of their philosophy to reflect on the ending of philosophy. For example, Heidegger was quite keen on speaking about thinking (*Denken*) and poetry (*Dichtung*), yet Nietzsche was full of praise for music and dance. However, if you ask me, these cannot escape from such a logic, “if thought requires its own thought, then it can either be another thought or something other than thought. The former would initiate an infinite regress, for the supplementary thought would require its own thought, and so on, while the latter would ground thought in that which is not thought. But this means that all thinking would rest upon its own absence: thoughtlessness.”⁴⁰ So, when are we acutely aware of such an *aporia* involved in finitude, what else is there for philosophy to do?

Conor Cunningham:

Theology, otherwise known as First Philosophy, for such *aporia*, that is, the aporetic is built into its structure, as already suggested. Of course some will balk at the idea of theology, but when Late capitalists point out, when some

40 Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. Routledge: London and New York, 2002. Preface: xii.

past famous figure is mentioned, and who believed in God, they will say well, everyone believed in God back then, so we need not concern ourselves with that cultural/historical idiosyncrasy. Apart from the stunning chronological arrogance or chauvinism, with its Whiggish airs and graces, the flip side is just as valid, if not more than. Namely, *all the sheep may have gone to church back in the Middle Ages, say, but now not all the sheep don't; go to church*, and instead watch daytime TV, or play Xbox, those whom Nietzsche called – *the much too many, or the herd*.

Philosophy is *finished* only when it tries to be autarchical, fully autonomous, rather than subalternate, again to use Aristotle's term. To repeat, subalternation simply means the implicit reliance of one discipline or discourse on another, such as an optician relaying on geometry, but never having to discuss geometry explicitly; or science's dependence on mathematics, as another example. If it is reflexively subalternate, then such *aporia* bring into focus *limits*, but if philosophy is self-deluded enough to posture as autonomous, promoting some sort of isolationism, then it will indeed *end*, doing so in disaster. Both the Continental and analytic traditions have teetered on the edges of such demise – one getting lost in the haze of its own obfuscation, and the other becoming an ever-more refined form of Sudoku (*how many predicates can dance on the head of a pin*), but as mentioned, they have pulled back from it. Of course the temptation for near total self-indulgence is ever-present. The same goes for theologians, too, which goes without saying, for it stands in a relation of variegated, bi-directional dependence: towards God or transcendence and, concomitantly, towards sister disciplines.

4. An Alternative Way of Understanding Heidegger

In his history of Nihilism, Heidegger explored its range and depth. Meanwhile, nihilism is a complex phenomenon around which a few of the most important questions of Heidegger's philosophy orbit. In other words, Heidegger builds a bridge between the past and the future. In his books, Conor provides a different way in which Heidegger can be understood. Phenomenologically speaking, he

also offers a possibility to surpass phenomenology.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

We see that, as you once said, “The showing, which every phenomenon is, is a showing that withdraws as it shows, because Being is the arrival of a show, one which involves withdrawal. This means that every phenomenon presents itself in a manner which exceeds understanding, and this is the excess of phenomena as such: this excess manifests itself as withdrawal.”⁴¹ Do you think that phenomenology tries to achieve ontological stability, remaining in a movement between manifestation and withdrawal? And how can phenomenology also sink into univocity? Let’s take a broader vision, when regarding this special ontological stability as a base, which would lead to naturalism cosmology: In your view, could we get rid of nihilism?

Conor Cunningham:

First, I think phenomenology is very important, as it is an especially fruitful approach in many ways, but as is always the case, left too long on its own and a somewhat pharisaical proceduralism sets in, as it becomes ossified, and begins to present itself as a panacea. Its importance lies in bringing, or drawing, us back again and again, non-identically, to the cusp, the very font of reception. Yet such reception - and here’s the problematic moment - issues mandates for us to go forth and manifest such reception in a plethora of guises, modes and registers, from which there is no doubt a feedback loop to phenomenology, but not on its own, in isolation.

Phenomenology does explicitly admit it is subalternate, in terms of givenness (*Gegebenheit*), but this, at times, is too one directional. Phenomenology usefully weaves the apophatic and cataphatic together, which is absolutely necessary, but times, I feel, buried deep in its psyche, so to speak, it hides the very logic it rejects; the logic of its opponents, for it takes itself for granted, and has

41 Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. Routledge: London and New York, 2002. p. 136.

an *unquestioning, unreconstructed notion of objectivity*, on the one Husserlian side, yet on the other, can go too far down the purely poetic side, which can easily lapse into indulgent word play that makes possible a space for collaboration, accommodating all sorts of ideologies, including Nazism, as we saw with Heidegger, or later, postmodern piffle and pontification with an accompanying fiddle whilst Rome burns.

Question 2

Zhu Yiming:

Now back to Heidegger himself. Generally, we could describe Heidegger's thoughts as a "Negative Theology". In your book, you suggest that it should also be seen as a "*meontotheology*", but you have a clear vision for this and say: "that which is, cannot simply give way to another, for it is there in the first place as a result of eternal intention." (p. 263). I believe here you provide a way forward on which we might be able to surpass Heidegger. Could you provide more explanations? Since that book was published, have you ever changed these ideas?

Conor Cunningham:

My ideas have not changed, but they have developed and what has altered is their extent or reach, as I now more fully realise their application and relevance in a plethora of other disciplines, for example the natural sciences, neurology, and so on. I characterized Heidegger as an advocate of *meontoheology* because, simply, he prioritized *das Nicht*, which is to substantialize a process, namely, the *epoché*, or bracketing. He, like Protestantism, rendered a verb a noun, and that was the move that afforded the hospitality his work offered to Nazism. Simultaneously, he endeavoured to capture the *one thing necessary*, rendering it fully immanent, and thereby something to be mastered and possessed. His work was broadly, a secular counterfeit theology, something which would come into liberal fashion in the 1970s, with all manner of shallow plays, and writings (*Honest to God* springs to mind, and of course the work of Don Cupitt. Cupitt was in truth an unreconstructed Feuerbachian who, in terms of imagination and influence – went on a day trip from England to Cherbourg in France, and on his way back to

the port to catch the ferry, popped into a second-hand book shop and purchased a copy of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*.

The point about eternal intention that you mention, is that Creation, and all creatures, all phenomena bear the shadow of divine intention, and thereby intrinsic worth. Creation is an icon, and accordingly receives a gift twice over: *First* in being at all, and second in recapitulation, creation is 'summed up' (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι / *anakephalaaiosasthai*), as with time and history, it is taken up and non-identically repeated by God, in terms of eternity. As St Gregory of Nyssa says, 'there is produced, by virtue of a superior wisdom, a mixture (*suanakrasis*) of the comprehensible with perceptible creation, so that nothing in creation is rejected.'⁴²

5. Between Philosophy and Theology

*Conor Cunningham has roots in the movement of radical orthodoxy. Radical orthodoxy is a Christian theological and philosophical school. When this movement was founded by John Milbank, it showed a great emphasis on the question of "Nothing" and "Nihilism". In his book Genealogy of Nihilism, Conor goes further and talks about the possibility of the "possibility of nihilism" (Milbank). He writes, "Indeed, nihilism is the absence of all choice. But this absence comes in the form of a particular 'plenitude'. For nihilism to be 'possible', it must not be a choice, but must be, in a sense, every choice, in that every choice must be available to it."*⁴³ *That is to say, nihilism promises something of positive value. But the positive one is only ever given real considerations and thought in theological discourse. So, in this part, we will pay more attention to the theological perspective.*

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica* 6.2; emphasis mine (C. Cunningham).

⁴³ Conor Cunningham. *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology*. Routledge: London and New York, 2002. p. 170.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

What is “radical orthodoxy”? What does “radical” really mean? Could radical orthodoxy be perfectly suited to consider the implications of “Nihilism”? Actually, I see that, when John Milbank founded this movement, it was accompanied by enormous interest in “Nothing” and “Nihilism.” Is this observation correct? And then, concerning the issue of Nihilism, what is the main difference between general ideas from radical orthodoxy and yours?

Conor Cunningham:

‘Radical’ just means root, to get to the root of things and nihilism helps us get to the root. What’s radical for RO is simply the Creeds – read them, speak them, they are unfathomable, and make punks, rockers, supposed cultural iconoclasts and the postmoderns all look like grannies at a knitting competition, eating cucumber sandwiches made with stale, somewhat grey bread. What is important for now, is the realization that Western culture must break the *omertà* of nihilistic materialist ideology, our very lives depending on it. These are the stakes, as Jacobi puts it in his *Open Letter to Fichte*, which I already mentioned: *God or nothingness*, and not even that. Any ‘wager on the meaning of meaning,’ George Steiner writes, must also be ‘a wager on transcendence.’⁴⁴ It is at such a juncture that conversation begins, all else is gossip. This is our Kierkegaardian leap of faith or F H Jacobi’s *salto mortale*, which, as with Kierkegaard, is a somersault, wherein we leap, not somewhere else (say, from reason here, to faith over there, crossing Gotthold Lessing’s protestant ‘broad ugly ditch’ - *der garstige breite Graben*), but into the air like a ballerina, landing eventually from where we rose, but now, after this moment (*Augenblick*), all is new, all is real—the person is real: *Ecce homo*. Here, Franz Kafka is surely correct ‘There is no path, but there is a goal’, or even more precisely: *Gluben ist sein*, as he puts it. Accordingly, he argues that ‘The Expulsion from Paradise is eternal in its principle aspect: this makes it irrevocable, and our living in this world inevitable, but the eternal nature of the process has the effect that not only could we remain forever in Par-

44 *Real Presences*, p. 213)

adise, but that we are currently there, whether we know it or not.’

RO seeks to recapture the sheer vertigo, fragility yet girth of creation in all its hues: The miracle of the quotidian, the sacrament in ordinary, to echo Hopkins again. RO seeks to wake us from the dogmatic slumbers of bourgeois other-worldly sedation. For our professors and their weak god, the sedative will be tenure, and modes of small-souled fame, what Aristotle called ‘small-souledness’ (*mikropsuchia*: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125a21-32), with its accompanying ‘small thoughts’ (*mikra phronein*). Such tenure becomes their telos, rather than a means for daily bread and opportunities to teach and learn. No wonder both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche used ‘professor’ as a scathing term of contempt.

As for differences between me and RO, they are not very interesting, and they would only ever be irrelevant nuance and emphasis. More important is the generative unity born out of creedal orthodoxy, for there, we have hardly begun.

Question 2

Zhu Yiming:

How does radical orthodoxy view the relation between philosophy and theology? It seems that, in radical orthodoxy, especially some declarations from John Milbank, philosophy is nihilism exactly, isn’t it? Of course, we have talked about it, but here, I want to ask in a theological angle: now that Nihilism is the consummate philosophy, where would be the position for philosophy? Should we just give up philosophy?

Conor Cunningham:

The main worry would be a strict dualism between philosophy and theology, for that would tempt both to become a caricature of their selves, and again to reside in a form of almost hermetic isolationism (parochial and colloquial). But in Blondelian fashion, philosophy will fall into nihilism when it denies theology, whether the cocks have crowed or not, whilst theology can easily lapse into some sort of Barthianism (followers of Karl Barth) when it is too neurotically self-enclosed, or a vacuous liberal morass if it is too insecure and therefore too accommodating or obsequious (neurosis from a different angle). In truth, Barthi-

anism is a form of liberalism, but in thin disguise, whilst liberalism advocates a form of fundamentalism, however implicit, that of secular logic. Both must be avoided, and that's what John Milbank has always tried to achieve, very successfully, it should be said.

Question 3

Zhu Yiming:

What is the radical orthodoxy's view of the body (*Leib*)? As far as you are concerned, how should we understand the relation between body and world? I would like to venture an idea that, even if emphasizing the correlation between body and world, as long as there is still a dualism, the body will finally become a body without body, that is to say, it ultimately falls into a bad monism. What do you think of this idea? What can we learn from the different views of theology about the body?

Conor Cunningham:

I always get a little weary when asked about bodies, as such questions usually issue form some sort of trendy rebellion against what is taken to be its opposite, say, soul or spirit. And nothing could be more ridiculous, inane even. In briefest terms, *no soul, no body: nobody*. Yet, conversely the body is there to help the soul, as Aquinas makes clear. It's a matter of duality, to borrow from physics, and never dualism. Think of the Council of Chalcedon, *Christ is fully divine and fully human in one person (esse)*. To ask about the body, as if it could be standalone term, is to miss the boat. It is wrongheaded. Interestingly Aquinas compares the soul not with some wispy flash of light, but more often than not with prime matter, for both have a *capax omnia*, a capacity for everything, this already eschews the typical questions about matter, body, and so on, especially in light of Creation and Incarnation, not to mention sacraments, bodily resurrection, or more generally eros.

Generally our imaginations are impoverished, having been so heavily programmed and conditioned by prevailing ideologies. Regarding impoverished imaginations, the angels offer a telling metaphysical and theological lesson, re-

garding bodies, and our imaginations generally, in terms of theology's intrinsically paradoxical nature, that often goes unnoticed. When the women discover the empty tomb, the missing body of Christ, they are told: 'Do not be amazed (*ἐκθαμβεῖσθε*). You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here.' (Mark 16:6). Similarly, recall the passage from Acts (1:11), wherein Christ is 'lifted into Heaven'. Two angels then turn up and chastise the onlookers: 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?' The impoverished imagination suffers a distorted wonderment. What would it entail, after all, to look up to 'see' the ascension? How high would Jesus be? Likewise, the command of not to be amazed, and the parochial references, inoculates against the idea of cheap miracle. Echoing this sensibility, when Christ encountered the women at the tomb, the casualness is telling: '*chairete*', 'good morning', *the lack of drama is dramatic*, as it were. There is here, revolution, yet fittingness. This resurrected person is, after all, God incarnate, for whom creation is, yet is the same person that cried at the tomb of Lazarus. Here we have the marriage of ascent (Aristotle) and descent (Plato). Yet there is no flattening, the removal of tension or specificity. The angels speak using geographical terms. It is not the Christ, but Jesus of Nazareth, likewise, in Acts, it is men of Galilee, just as further in the same verse of Mark, the angels tell the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. Most telling is that the resurrected

Jesus appears as a man not as some figure all in white and glowing, as with the transfiguration. The angels at the tomb are dazzling, but not Jesus, even if he no doubt does some peculiar things: On the one hand eating broiled fish, just as he *rose with his scars, validating history*, and on the other, passing through walls. This is our epoché, as it sets our natural understandings adrift, and precludes domestication, doing so because this is the marriage of transcendence and immanence, soul and body, time and eternity. Now, in light of this, questions about body seem somewhat tame.

6. Where Would be the Position for Darwinism?

Apart from Genealogy of Nihilism, one of Conor Cunningham's other very sig-

nificant books (in my opinion) is: Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong. In fact, in this book, Conor also pushes on his research "Nihilism and Theology". However, this book hasn't attracted Chinese readers' serious attention.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

Is there any continuity between your first monograph *Genealogy of Nihilism* and the second one *Darwin's Pious Idea*? Will the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists fall into Nihilism?

Conor Cunningham:

Yes, there is real continuity. In fact, scattered throughout the nihilism book, especially in the preface, and then towards the end, figures such as Dawkins and Dennett begin to make an appearance, as do questions about molecular reductionism. Ultra-Darwinism is a conspicuous example of modern nihilism. For example, the expansion of Darwinian evolution to that of a *universal theory* enacts a project of radical elimination wherein mind, ethics, normativity, beauty and so on are totally lost. In their stead is the aforementioned flatlining of existence, bolstered only by conjurations fashioned from mere aggregation. Similarly in the Darwin book, there are explicit moves to begin taking about the soul, which is taken up in the work I'm doing now, alongside a radical critique of our general understanding of science; a critique which is simultaneously negative and positive. Put differently, I deconstruct and then reconstruct science moving it from being a largely *degenerate research program* (to echo Imré Lakatos) to being a regenerative one that is now in better communion with its sibling disciplines.

In so doing, all talk of soul, anthropology, and so on, receive a much better hearing, as I've neutralized what is taken by some to be the Master Discourse, namely, particle physics, turning it instead into a *proto-metaphysics*, on the one hand, and a *proper art*, on the other. Regarding it now deserving the appellation 'art' is something that has been achieved, unbeknownst to itself, no doubt, but achieved nonetheless; doing so in fits and starts over the last 120 years or so.

In short, *science has finally bumped into Plato up ahead (something Catherine Pickstock has argued for, doing so for many years, right back to when I was a student at Cambridge University, and very much against the tides of fashion)*. I intend to bring this to the fore and distil the enormous consequences that arise from it. Many childish things will have to be put away, with which many people have made duplicitous, counterfeit livings.

7. Conclusion

Now the interview with Professor Conor Cunningham is drawing to an end. I would like to thank Conor Cunningham for his inspiring answers. He offers so many profound philosophical and theological insights, which are still difficult to fully comprehend. In this final part, we are asking for some support for our understanding from Prof. Cunningham himself. Also, there are some cultural barriers between the Professor and Chinese readers, and we must realize that dialogues between western and eastern cultures are essential for the future research on Nihilism. This interview aims to promote such dialogue and exchange.

Question 1

Zhu Yiming:

You possess a wide knowledge of different thinkers, ranging from philosophy to theology. Sometimes, our own limited academic background makes it difficult to follow your train of thought. Could you provide some effective methods to get into your book?

Conor Cunningham:

As mentioned, the nihilism book is underwritten by the simple realization that there is, an invariant logic that continually manifests itself in the Western corpus, and this logic entails nihilism. I use the example of the *Gestalt* image of the duck/rabbit, in terms of what is called aspect perception. When we look at the image, we either see a duck (one aspect) or a rabbit (second aspect), but *we can never see both at once*. More importantly, whilst we perceive the duck or

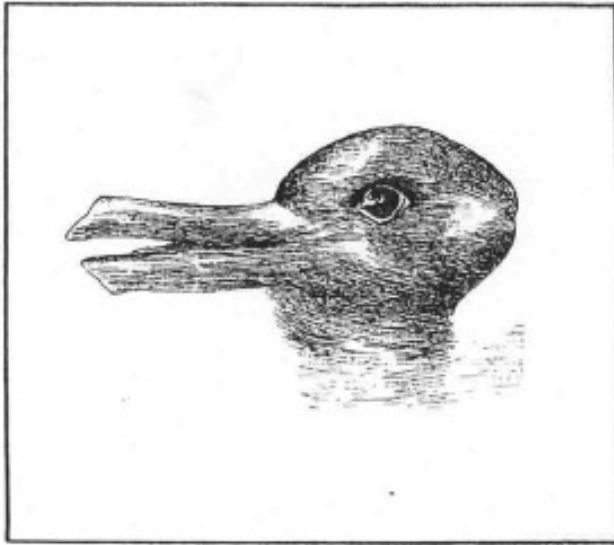


FIG. 20.—Do you see a duck or a rabbit, or either? (From Harper's Weekly, originally in *Fliegende Blätter*.)

the rabbit, the two aspects, *we can never see the 'One' underlying the two*, upon which the aspects appear, even though we are staring right at it, there in front of our eyes, empirically: *the One is forever hidden*.

Philosophically the two aspects - duck or rabbit are taken as representing a dualism, say, mind and matter, whilst the hidden One is the implicit or even insidious monism that prevails. For example, Spinoza has God (duck) or Nature (rabbit): *Deus sive Natura*. Yet, we know that both irreducible aspects reside within one hidden Substance. Similarly, Kant has the phenomenal (duck) and the noumenal (rabbit), and again underlying this dualism is a hidden 'One' upon which they are unwittingly made manifest. For Kant this One is the transcendental 'x', as he calls it in the *Opus Postumum*, his last work. Finally, Hegel has the finite (duck) and the infinite (rabbit), and the One *Geist*.

The above logic then is applied to a host of philosophers, and philosophies, which are found wanting, amounting to expressions of this nihilistic logic that is often just a counterfeit (Trinitarian) theology. The second point is to grasp

the ‘positive’ nature of nihilism, it will, in short, not survive if it is just lack. Instead, it must be able to generate *ersatz* or false versions of what the absence of nihilism might provide: ethics, beauty, truth, meaning, and so on: By providing all these ‘goods’ it is much harder to outflank nihilism. Lastly, nihilism can be read as a *propaedeutic* to theology or of a more transcendent philosophy, such as Blondel’s or in some respects, reservations notwithstanding, Michel Henry’s. Being so because nihilism brings us to the crossroads of decision: *God or nothingness?*

Question 2

Zhu Yiming:

China and the UK still differ greatly in their culture. Do you believe that nihilism is in essence of Western origin? Generally speaking, both Greek and Hebrew traditions constitute the very core of Western culture. But how is it that nihilism might be inevitable? There are also some profound thoughts of Nihilism stemming from traditional Chinese philosophy. How do you think about these debates on “Nothing” and “Nihilism” that were taking place in China? I am referring to Taoism, Buddhism, and so on.

Conor Cunningham:

Nihilism is Western, in broad strokes, for as Kierkegaard, and then Nietzsche borrowing from him, rightly diagnosed that Europe, through presumptuous decadence, had fallen into nihilism. And the god of Europe was the ancestor of today’s weak god: the bourgeois conjuration advocated by Caputo *et al*, as already said. Nihilism and talk of nothingness is foreign to Europe’s Hebraic/Hellenic origins, which always cross-pollinated, endogenously, and there is no sense of speaking as if they were two wholly different entities, that can be unwound and separated. Here it is wise to ignore the ideological erroneous fantasies of Adolf von Harnack, who contrived the notion of the Hellenic corruption of the purely Hebraic, doing so to enable the generation of an artificial mandate that permitted criticism of the church for having taken on foreign beliefs. Such xenophobic fantasies are for the birds, as Shakespeare might say, and are part ingredient of

Nietzsche's very diagnosis. Harnack's god is related to the weak god of Caputo, the grandfather of which is the dead god of Nietzsche.

By contrast, Chinese culture is different, and therein talk of nothingness is more indigenous, and therefore not contrived and self-serving, a symptom of decadence, but rather part and parcel of an organic manner of speaking, ignoring for the moment, whatever other criticisms could be made legitimately of such talk.

Question 3

Zhu Yiming:

Following the directions you've pointed us toward; I've heard that you are writing a three-volume book. So, before we end this interview, could you provide us with some details about it? Also, is there anything special you want to say to Chinese readers, especially those young students who are preparing to study philosophy and theology? What are your expectations for the future research on nihilism?

Conor Cunningham:

Well, I've mentioned the trilogy already, so here's a short abstract for the first volume, for your readers:

"Naturalness, a central dogma of particle physics, is failing. Shockwaves are spreading throughout science, as the prevailing paradigm—from the Higgs boson to the cosmological constant—collapses. Naturalness, it turns out, is not good science, but bad philosophy: fruit of a reductionist programme spectacularly undermined by the latest scientific data. My project explains why naturalness does not work and shows how its failure buries the myth that only particle physics delivers real knowledge. Across three volumes—interweaving physics, philosophy and theology—I develop a new paradigm of science and nature with the potential to inspire imaginative research in a post-naturalness landscape. This paradigm also dissolves many hoary dualisms, which it exposes as wrongheaded and unmotivated, thus clearing the way for the radical reformulation of many seemingly intractable debates—such as that between emergence and reduction. In this way, I seek not only to midwife the discovery of new theoretical vistas for physics, but also to re-open lines of communication among the sciences. To debunk naturalness, to undermine the specious hegemony

of particle physics naturalness supports, is to invite all the sciences to renounce internecine turf wars and to re-discover themselves and one another as co-participants in a single community of inquiry.”

As for research, my advice is: read as widely as possible, and then gradually narrow it down to a few horses, as it were, and then whichever one, fuelled by desire, eventually takes the lead, put your saddle on that one, and engage with it exhaustively. In general, when doing research, be courageous; take risks, inhabiting places of initial discomfort, because creativity comes from that liminal realm. But at all times be rigorous. Treat fashion like desert (sweet), only to be consumed after the savoury. Ensure to engage fully with the genius of the past (tradition), which will, with patience, appear to be much younger or vital than the new.

I wish young researchers well for all their efforts and pursuits, and when things seem tough, recall the words of Samuel Beckett (the other poster on my bedroom wall): *‘I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on’*.

Conor Cunningham

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Zhu Yiming (Interviewer)

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