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The Metaphysics of the Sublime: Old Wine, New Wineskin?

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Abstract:

John Milbank's and Phillip Blond's narratives of modernity's descent to nihilism identify the "metaphysics of the sublime" as a feature of modernity, assimilated from Kant's critical project, that is particularly problematic for the robust post-modern Christian theology proposed in Radical Orthodoxy. This essay argues that the sublime is not the concept most fundamental to their account of Kant's role in modernity. Far more important is the "phenomenon/noumenon" distinction, which Milbank and Blond read as a "two-world" distinction—an understanding that, despite a long history in Kant interpretation, is not Kant's. It is less important, however, that constructive dialogue between Radical Orthodoxy and Catholic theology correct this misreading of Kant. More important will be efforts to understand the metaphor of the "immense depth of things," which Radical Orthodoxy offers in contrast to the "metaphysics of the sublime," particularly in relation to the concepts of participation and the analogy of attribution that emerge from Radical Orthodoxy's reading of Aquinas.

Students and teachers alike will readily confirm that Kant is not an "easy read." Even the eminent American Kant scholar, Lewis White Beck, memorably remarked, "It is regrettable that Kant was not more careful; though had he been so, the race of Kant commentators would be unemployed" (Beck 1960, 221). Yet treatments of Kant by proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, such as John Milbank and Phillip

Blond, prove often enough to be an even harder “read” than Kant’s own texts. In my own case, this difficulty may arise from the fact that years of wrestling with Kant’s texts from a philosophical stance has made it difficult for me to stretch my interpretive muscles into this newly articulated theological grip for gaining purchase on the significance of his work for these “post-modern” times. Yet the difficulty in reading Milbank et al. on Kant may also stem from a hazard endemic to any effort to show the bearing that the work of a thinker from a previous generation has upon the thought and practice of our own. Conceptual vertigo is one likely outcome from trying to read Kant, as Radical Orthodoxy seeks to do, from a multiple “optic”: as a sign of (and to) *both* his time and ours—let alone as also a sign to and for times *between* his and ours. Finally, another part of the difficulty may stem from the fact that Milbank and Blond both attend to Kantian texts—most notably the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*—that are unfamiliar inasmuch as they have, for far too long a time, undeservedly held little interest as a field of gainful employment among the race of Kant scholars.

This essay does not propose to address all of the difficulties involved in reading “Radical Orthodoxy on Kant”; neither does it plan to provide an extended gloss on some of the unjustly neglected Kantian texts that are central to such a reading of Kant. Its main task is to begin to decipher the role that Milbank and Blond ascribe to Kant in the “alternative story” they tell about the intellectual trajectory of modernity. In their telling, Kant is “the *fulfillment*, not the overcoming, of late scholasticism” (Milbank 2000, 38). Being such fulfillment, however, garners little praise. Milbank remarks that “Kant *perfects* metaphysical dogmatism because his limiting of the import of the phenomenal is attained only by a safeguarding of the noumenal against the phenomenal, which after all is the real pietistic, anti-Catholic and anti ‘mystical’ aim of the critical philosophy” (Milbank 2000, 39).

Placing Kant among the *adversarii* of Christian orthodoxy is hardly new. He usually gets placed there in virtue of his dismantlement of the putatively “traditional” arguments for the existence of God and for the immortality of the soul, or for his seeming reduction of religion to following the moral dictates of conscience,

and/or for an allegedly Pelagian account of moral conversion which is coupled to a theory of atonement that, at best, assigns only a symbolically representative function to the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹ As the story of modernity unfolds in the hands of Milbank and Blond, however, the feature they intriguingly highlight for Kant's role in its *denouement* is none of the above; it is, instead, his articulation of the notion of the sublime.² As described by Milbank, the sublime constitutes "a realm of ineffable majesty beyond the bounds of the possibility of theoretical knowledge, a domain which cannot be imaginatively represented, and yet whose overwhelming presence can be acknowledged by our frustrated imaginative powers" (Milbank 1990, 204).

The sublime carries a great deal of weight in this telling of the story of modernity. When Milbank looks back to locate Kant in relation to his predecessors, he sees the sublime functioning to mark the (vast) distance that separates Kant's treatment of transcendence from those accounts that can be considered characteristic of Patristic and "early to high" Scholastic thought about "consummate transcendence" (Milbank 2000, 38):

If one fails to realize this [i.e., the Kantian denial of any real kinship between the visible and the invisible worlds], then the danger is that one will confuse the Kantian sublimity of pure infinite possibility with the traditional theological notion of a divine darkness that is not the abyss of contentless will, but rather the darkness to us of an utterly dazzling light suffusing its manifold infinite of *formed* content with the full intensity of a single illumination. (Milbank 2000, 40)

In looking forward to the full articulation of the modern that succeeds upon Kant, the sublime then becomes the token of a world and culture from which God is, in principle, absent:

And it is in this form [as immanent to rationality(?)] that one could suggest that the Kantian theory of the sublime completes the secular dismissal of God from the realm of experience. Conceived in this way, the sublime then provides a uniquely successful synthesis of both the nominalist fear of God and the Scotist emphasis on a prior and determinate sphere of knowledge (an emphasis that actually ends with the dismissal of God from cognition). The peculiar though understandable result of this is that God becomes both unknowable and yet deeply feared. (Blond 1998, 15)

In accord with the story's close interweaving of the theological with the theoretical underpinnings of cultural and political practice, the sublime, as token of the a-theistic and the nihilistic, has an important function in the area of public discourse. It serves as the fundamental conceptual legitimation for the marginalization of theology and religion in modernity—in Milbank's terms, for "the policing of the sublime"—by social science and the secular polity:

Sociology's "policing of the sublime" exactly coincides with the actual operations of secular society which excludes religion from its modes of "discipline and control," while protecting it as a 'private' value, and sometimes invoking it at the public level to overcome the antinomy of a purely instrumental and goalless rationality, which is yet made to bear the burden of ultimate political purpose. (Milbank 1990, 106)

Finally, the sublime has a role to play not only in fencing the theological off from public practice but also in shaping the practices of the liberal polity that is arguably the paradigmatic public form of modernity:

In the metaphysics of the sublime the absolutely equal and formally fixed relationship in which we, as liberal subjects, stand to the unknown absolute, serves to confirm the world (the enlightened bourgeois world) as it is. (Milbank 1997, 12)

Milbank and Blond are not the first to hear in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* resonances with profound power to affect the tonality of the whole of Kant's critical theory; nor are they even the first to identify the theological, social, and political chords that he sounds within the complexity of this text.³ As I noted earlier, what initially strikes one as new in their account is the selection of the Kantian sublime as the concept that most fully presents the central features of Kant's critical project that are most problematic with respect to the kind of robust Christian theology for a post-modern era that Radical Orthodoxy seeks to articulate. Yet, as I have tried to puzzle out the particulars of their reading of the Kantian sublime I have found myself wondering whether there is anything remarkably new here, be it with respect to their analysis of the notion of the sublime or in the lineaments of the story/argument that makes Kant "the fulfillment, not the overcoming, of late scholasticism."

In order to bring into better focus the question of whether this is a new criticism of Kant, let me return to a claim of Milbank's that I cited earlier: "Kant *perfects* metaphysical dogmatism *because his limiting of the import of the phenomenal is attained only by a safeguarding of the noumenal against the phenomenal*, which after all is the real pietistic, anti-Catholic and anti 'mystical' aim of the critical philosophy" (added emphasis mine). I will have to leave to another time the exploration of what Milbank may have in mind by his three-fold characterization of the "real" aim of the critical philosophy as "pietistic, anti-Catholic, and anti 'mystical.'" I consider the key point to examine, instead, to lie in the expression "a safeguarding of the noumenal against the phenomenal"—a phrase which itself resonates with other "dualizing," if not dualistic, characterizations Milbank and Blond each make of Kant's critical philosophy. Continuing in the same vein, Milbank notes "What is refused here is not the groundless extrapolation from the phenomenal, but rather (without grounds) any notion of attributive analogy or participation, that is to say any real kinship between the visible and invisible worlds (as has been well argued by Phillip Blond)" (Milbank 2000, 39).⁴ In another context, he writes:

What the radical pietists realised was that to be human means, primarily, that we must reckon with the immense depth behind things. There are only two possible attitudes towards this depth: for the first, *like Kant, we distinguish what is clear from what is hidden; but then the depth is an abyss, and what appears, as only apparent, will equally induce vertigo*. This is why criticism, the attitude of pure reason itself, is also the stance of nihilism. . . . The second possibility is that we trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ. (Milbank 1999, 32, emphasis mine)

Remarks such as these, especially when read in coordination with Blond's charges against Kant's "cognitively self-sufficient finitude" (Blond 1998, 15), his observations about "Kant's sundering of thought from reality" (Blond 1998, 16) and the "Kantian opposition between the conceptual and empirical" (Blond 1998, 38)⁵ indicate to me that the sublime may not be the concept most fundamental to the tale they have told and to Kant's role in that tale. What seems to bear far more weight is the construal given to Kant's much vexed distinction between the "phenomenal" and the "noumenal." It should hardly be surprising that the distinction that Kant himself considered to be fundamental to

his whole critical enterprise and that proved to be a point of fierce contention in the reception of the critical philosophy should again be contested in Milbank's and Blond's effort to read Kant as a (cautionary) sign for our times. Nor should it be surprising that their construal takes this distinction to mark a divide between two "worlds"—a divide for which the critical project is then taken to provide a bridge—for this is a construal that has a venerable history in Kant interpretation. It is, moreover, a construal that has had a significant impact on subsequent Western thought and culture—including many of the deleterious ones that Milbank and Blond justifiably bemoan.

There is a fundamental problem with such a "two-worlds" construal of this distinction, however: There are good reasons to think that it is not Kant's own construal. However else Kant understood the phenomenon-noumenon distinction—and, considering the amount of conceptual work he asks it to do in his critical philosophy, he understood it in many ways, not all of them fully coherent with one another—he did *not* understand it as fundamentally marking a distinction between two "worlds." The same, I believe, can be said for other related distinctions he uses to characterize the properly human engagement with the cosmos, such as that between sensibility and understanding, or between the theoretical and the practical uses of reason. These are not—and cannot be—a "two world" distinctions because Kant takes the most fundamental "deliverance" of our human engagement with the "world" to be inescapably unitary—as we ourselves are, even though we also find ourselves engaging that world in ways that present themselves to our reflective considerations as deeply different. There is no bridge that we need to build between two "worlds" because there is a single "world." That we need to deal with it, however, in different ways—i.e., in Kant's terms, theoretically and practically in the use of our reason—indicates something that bears principally upon our make up as human, rather than upon the world that we humans engage. Whatever duality there may be, it is one that we encounter *within* the unity of our humanness as embodied finite reason.

This brief essay is not the appropriate place to spell out the various considerations from Kant's texts and from his historical context that indicate why this long interpretive tradition is mistaken. I am more concerned with trying to figure out how and why construing Kant

as a “two-world” theorist serves the purposes of the story that Milbank and Blond tell. A quite tempting immediate answer might be that construing Kant this way allows him to be cast in quite unambiguous terms as a “bad guy”—a bright bad guy, and even, if one is especially charitable, an unwitting bad guy, but a bad guy nonetheless. That, however, seems to me to be far too easy an answer, in part because it is likely to lead us to argue (interminably) about whether or not Kant really is a bad guy. That argument, however, is one that I believe would distract us from engaging in a constructive manner the more fundamental theological concerns of “Radical Orthodoxy,” since those concerns do not seem to turn crucially upon either the historical or the philosophical accuracy of this movement’s reading of Kant.

I think a more helpful way to go about understanding the role in which Milbank and Blond have cast Kant is to return to what they want to affirm over against a “two-worlds” Kant. Let me return to a couple of passages cited earlier in this essay:

What is refused here is not the groundless extrapolation from the phenomenal, but rather (without grounds) *any notion of attributive analogy or participation, that is to say any real kinship between the visible and invisible worlds* (as has been well argued by Phillip Blond). (Milbank 2000, 39, emphasis mine)

What the radical pietists realised was that to be human means, primarily, that *we must reckon with the immense depth behind things*. There are only two possible attitudes towards this depth: for the first, like Kant, we distinguish what is clear from what is hidden; but then the depth is an abyss, and what appears, as only apparent, will equally induce vertigo. This is why criticism, the attitude of pure reason itself, is also the stance of nihilism. . . . The second possibility is that *we trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ*. (Milbank 1999, 32, emphasis mine)

These passages contain three important phrases that, in view of their evident rhetorical function as counters to a putatively “Kantian” philosophical syntax of “the sublime,” stand in need of further “parsing” that would identify their function principally in terms of the theological/philosophical syntax that Radical Orthodoxy is endeavoring to articulate. Such parsing, I suspect, could provide an appropriate place from which a conversation—one less polemical than so far seems to be the case—might begin between Radical Orthodoxy and the forms of Catholic theology of which Radical Orthodoxy has been so sharply

critical. Since it is not clear to me to what extent the main proponents of Radical Orthodoxy are ready to shift the conversation to a less polemical mode, it is at some peril that I, or anyone not a proponent, single out what appear “from outside” as crucial markers of its positive program. I thus do not propose to do any extensive parsing of these phrases here. I shall, instead, only indicate why I think these are phrases whose parsing might clear a small patch of common ground on which to parley rather than polemicize—and hope that some might come to parley.

The first is the imperative that “we must reckon with the immense depth behind things.” This imperative seems very closely aligned to what John Paul II has characterized as the “*sapiential dimension* [of philosophy] as a search for the ultimate and overarching meaning of life” (John Paul II 1998, §81)—a search that he sees as basic to the dynamics of human life. I think that a fruitful parsing of Milbank’s “depth” metaphor—which I also take to be more than “mere” metaphor—might begin by locating it with reference to the dynamics of the quest for meaning articulated by John Paul II. Such a linkage would allow a far more differentiated analysis of the “secular” and of the thinkers and the practices that have been charged with bringing about and sustaining the secular. Like the proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, John Paul II’s diagnosis of modernity traces its trajectory towards nihilism, but also frames it in a larger trajectory of grace that, more generously than the one traced in Radical Orthodoxy’s narrative, enables the dynamics of that quest to function *even within* nihilism’s most vehement denials of meaning. A similar generosity of grace can be found in Charles Taylor’s reading of modernity in *Sources of the Self*, a work in which exhibits to readers prepared to look for it a deep seated Catholic theological sensibility that is more sure-handed and less self-consciously proclaimed than that often found in the writings of Radical Orthodoxy.

The second is “the refusal of any notion of attributive analogy or participation, that is to say any real kinship between the visible and the invisible worlds.” My suspicion here is that this concatenation of phrases captures a key epistemic and metaphysical worry that drives radical orthodoxy in that they are all evocative of a fundamental “connection” to God—or, more precisely, a fundamental manner of

intelligibly articulating such a connection—that is lost, severed, or denied by and in the secular. This severance constitutes one defining feature of “the stance of nihilism” into which all “secular” thinking is consigned. In theological terms, the focus of this worry is upon the possibility of rendering robustly intelligible the full scope of the doctrine of Creation to and for a techno-empirical culture that has made a conceptually and symbolically impoverished understanding of causality the most potent instrument of its dominance. A similar worry seems operative in the work of George Steiner, and in response to such a worry, David Burrell, Kathryn Tanner, and Robert Sokolowski have all offered evocative proposals for construing this doctrine in “non-contrastive” terms that properly limn “its unique philosophic-linguistic situation” (Burrell 1993, 8) that then allow us to “finesse the ‘zero-sum’ presumptions [that modern culture has] of any divine-human encounter” (Burrell 1993, 2). Exploration along the axes of these proposals may clear an area with the potential to serve as common ground.

The third phrase is “that we trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ”—which I take to capture an important Christological and soteriological thrust within the positive theological/philosophical program of Radical Orthodoxy. Parsing here might usefully attend once again to the metaphor of “depth,” but, in this case, a more fundamental focus would be upon the form and function of the “trust” that stands over against, first, the “refusal” that is portrayed as the characteristic attitude of the secular’s encounter with “appearance” and the “visible world” and, second, the “vertigo” that is taken as the characteristic outcome of that encounter. Charles Taylor’s work, particularly the final three chapters of *Sources of the Self*, may prove instructive here, even though it may not be directly helpful for clearing common ground inasmuch as its analysis is indexed to a different reading of Kant. Taylor reads modernity’s engagement with the “depth” of appearances from an optic in which the “beautiful,” the other lens of Kant’s “Analytic of the Power of Aesthetic Judgment,” figures far more prominently than does the “sublime.” His reading discerns in this engagement a set of attitudes and outcomes that is far more richly variegated than seems to be displayed in the narrative of

modernity as it is told in the sample of the literature of Radical Orthodoxy that has been the focus of this essay.⁶

Notes

¹ For a counter to the standard reading of Kant as Pelagian, see Mariña 1997.

² Clayton Crockett (2001) also argues for the importance of the sublime as a marker of modernity, but claims that Milbank “recoils from the theological implications of this insight” which, on Crockett’s reading of Kant, affirms imagination as a radically decentering function of human subjectivity.

³ A notable recent political reading of the third *Critique* is Arendt 1982. See also Beiner 1993.

⁴ The mention of Phillip Blond is referenced to his “Introduction: Theology Before Philosophy” in *Post Secular Philosophy* (Blond 1998).

⁵ Previously Blond had noted that “for Kant sensibility seems never to have any role other than to deliver over an acquiescence of the empirical domain to the human mind” (Blond 1998, 13; cf. footnote 25 on p. 60).

⁶ I wish to thank Matthew Powell for a careful reading of the penultimate version of this essay.

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