Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People


In the recent film The Man who Knew Infinity, based on a biography of the same name by Robert Kanigel, the Cambridge mathematician G.H. Hardy tries to cut the rough diamond Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887-1920) into a gem that meets the exacting Western standards of scientific taste. The subsequent drama between the Indian natural talent and the English member of the educated class exemplifies a clash of cultures. Western mathematicians only appreciate insights that can be formally proven. Ramanujan, by contrast, relies on his startling religious intuition, and rejects the request to carry this burden. Only after his conversation partners succeed in detecting a mathematical flaw in the labyrinthine pile of his theorems, does he accept that they might have a point. According to the historical witnesses, Ramanujan’s methods were terse, bewildering and unconventional, scarcely comprehensible to academics who were unaccustomed to his mind-blowing intellectual gymnastics. Yet, Hardy had already conjectured, after his first examinations of Ramanujan’s notebooks, his theorems ‘must be true, because, if they were not true, no one would have the imagination to invent them’. According to the American mathematician Bruce Carl Berendt, nearly all of his theorems have meanwhile been proven ‘correct’.

This historical example sheds light on my experience of reading John Milbank’s books. Milbank has accepted that his objectors might occasionally have a point. Yet, despite numerous and frequently caviling attempts to ‘refute’ his theories, his research has
turned out to be astonishingly consistent with the most recent Francophone research on the
genealogy of our modern age, represented by such figures as Alain de Libera and Olivier
Boulnois. It seems Milbank’s theories are closer to the truth than his critics were ready
admit.

In his recent publication Milbank has presented a kind of synthesis of his writings
that revisits his 1991 criticism of ‘secular reason’. This book is likely to become ‘the
cardinal text for interpreting him and arguing with him’ – as Oliver O’Donovan puts it in
his cover blurb. It is partitioned in two parts: the first unpacks his genealogy of modern
representationalism (*The Representation of Being*), and the second deepens it based on a
genealogy of the (undeniable) crisis of Western democracies (*The Representation of the
People*).

Milbank’s bewildering writing style has to do with his Ramanujanesque synoptic
intuition: His thinking builds simultaneously on the phenomenological commitment to
provide a rich account of our life-world experience, and a genealogical method that
recovers the forgotten aspirations of the past as resources for a radical reconceptualisation
of the washed-out patterns of thinking of our present time. For this reason, his book is
almost unreadable for philosophers who are not deeply rooted in the history of Western
thinking; and it will probably prove equally indigestible for historians of philosophy who
are not firmly grounded in the philosophical discussions of our present time.

To get an idea of the overall outline of Milbank’s book, we might focus on the four
pillars of modern philosophy, discussed in the first part – *univocity, representation,*
*possibilism, concurrence* – and the four ontological layers that characterize his political
genealogy of the ‘human animal’ in the second part: namely our unique features as
According to Milbank, our declining liberal age was the upshot of an increasing externalisation of the ‘animal’ part of our nature. If we focus, to begin with, on the fate of the ‘rational animal’, this becomes evident as soon as we recall the subject-object dualism that undergirds the ‘epistemology’ of post-Cartesian philosophy. Since the other pillars are derivative to this focal pillar, I will read the first part of Milbank’s book somewhat against the grain, and put the pillar of representation first.

When it comes to representation, Milbank opposes the modern concept of ‘epistemology’ to an Aristotelian and Platonic ontology of ‘knowledge by identity’, and supports this opposition with a creative appropriation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. If we put Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology into an Aristotelian framework, we might say that our cognitive capacities as rational animals are designed to actualize hitherto unknown potentials of our environment. A falcon or a dog actualise a different world than we humans do. Yet our cognitive capacities are in continuity with their sensual life: Like animals we are responsive to our environment. Even our mental capacity to actualize abstract forms (in the sense of Aristotle’s *species intelligibilis*) is fundamentally responsive. I do not experience an ‘internal representation’ in my head of the cherry tree out there. My ability to recognize it as a flowering, rose-coloured instantiation of the species of cherry trees is afforded by the tree itself. As Milbank puts it: ‘the thing known is the fulfilment of the thing as merely existing’ (59).

However, in the wake of Augustine and Aquinas, Milbank goes a significant step beyond this Aristotelian ontology of knowledge: Our knowledge of things is ‘qualified by a
kind of counter-teleology which is intentionality’ (59). This means, our response to our physical environment is always governed by subjective inclinations and the desire for the true, the beautiful and the good. Our ‘knowledge by identity’ is inextricably linked with modes of creative enactment that put our perceptions and cognitions ‘in perspective’.

This creative feature of our mental life might be exemplified by Picasso’s painting Guernica. Picasso’s iconic depiction of violent destruction, that captures the crying out of suffering animals and people, changed our perception of war and genocide. Yet this change not only affected our subjective intuitions, it also enabled us to discover essential features of the real world that we inhabit. Artistic creations are more than ‘mere fictions’: they can change our understanding of the real world, and sensitise us for its true purpose.

This revelatory feature of artistic fictions leads us straight to the core of Milbank’s criticism of the political representationalism of modernity in the second part. Modern societies tend to reduce artistic fictions, technological inventions, or social conventions to autonomously created parallel worlds. The latter might be used for their own sake, such as in modern art and entertainment, or in computer-generated ‘virtual realities’ in which we can ‘immerse’. Yet, they can also be used as representationalist means for extrinsic scientific or political ends. For example, we use ‘made up’ mathematical parallel worlds as scientific ‘means’ in order to represent (supposedly) ‘bare facts’; or we use them as political and economic tools in order control a ‘society reduced to measurable quanta’ (4).

According to Milbank this representationalist constructivism is fatal, since the instrumental use of artifices almost inevitably inverts such that the artifices start to determine what they are supposed to depict. It is no accident that the post-political societies of our present time tend to replace engagement with the social reality of the people with
engagement with fictional media spectacles; or that they replace engagement with social problems with engagement with algorithms that reduce everything to a matter of ‘functional, administrative necessity’ (176). In our universities, for example, we make great efforts to introduce quantifiable ‘quality assessment procedures’ that improve nothing but the artificially constructed representation of ‘quality’ without bothering about the underlying social reality of the students and academics.

According to Milbank this use and misuse of ‘made up’ realities conceals that artifices are no neutral means. Fictions, conventions and artistic creations shape the realities that they represent. And this has normative implications: If their use is not governed by the prudential desire for the true, the beautiful and the good, it will inevitably turn into a plague that undermines our desire for a good life. Just as the *species intelligibilis* is ‘identical’ with the materialised form that it represents, because it participates in the life that it actualizes in our mind, so artistic or technological creations are ‘identical’ with the animal world that they represent, because they are an expression of the benevolent or malevolent inclinations and desires that govern this world.

In accordance with this observation, Milbank characterises our human constitution as ‘transbiological’. Artifices are an essential feature of our animal nature, because they have the creative potential to actualize hitherto unknown potentialities of perception, cognition and action through inventions that add something to the ‘biological facts’. Consequently, fictions, artifices, and conventions should not be imposed on an animality that is mistakenly considered as ‘pure nature’, or replace our intuitive understanding of the world. Rather, they should augment the scope of our intuitions in a way that is in continuity with our animal desires, and our shared vision of a good life.
For this reason, Milbank attacks the modern inclination to use the ‘laws’ and ‘conventions’ which govern our social, economic and political interactions, as a ‘biopolitical’ means of surveillance and control (in the sense of Michael Foucault). Rather, the use of laws should be based on the principle of ‘equity’, which resists formalisation, and appeals to our faculty of judgement. Wise leadership and government can never be reduced to the ‘fair’ application of anonymised rules. Rather, it should be informed by the ‘supernatural’ virtues of ‘pre-legal trust’ (faith), ‘patience’ (hope) and a ‘polity of friendship’ (love), and teleologically oriented to the organic actualisation of the common good.

This leads us to the second pillar of modern philosophy: *possibilism*. Our modern mind-set emerged out of the counterintuitive assumption that the real world that we inhabit is an instantiation of a theoretically made up ‘possible world’. This is consistent with the representationalist, scientific conviction that we can elaborate mathematical ‘models’ of possible worlds, and then determine by empirical tests which ‘model’ comes closest to reality. Yet, examples like Picasso’s Guernica, the fall of the Berlin wall, or the Storming of the Bastille demonstrate that this cannot be right. Real events can change our perceptions, cognitions and actions in ways that cannot be anticipated by abstract permutations of possibilities or computer-simulations, because they transform our understanding of what is essential and what accidental. Hence, we have to recover Aquinas’s prioritisation of the actual against the possible: Our actual world is not an instantiation of a possible world, but inversely, every hitherto unknown possibility is a ‘gift’ that is afforded to us by the ontologically saturated actual world that we inhabit.
The significance of the pillar of *univocity* (which comes first in Milbank’s book) is rooted in a particular feature of the above representationalist possibilism: the dogmatic assumption that the law of contradiction can never be suspended. Whatever ‘model’ modern scientists chose in order to represent the world, it typically has to meet the minimal requirement to be univocally ‘either A or non-A’ – in accordance with the Scotist tradition of the late Middle Ages, and in contrast to more thoughtful late medieval innovators like Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa. Consequently ‘there can be no “middle” in meaning between identity and difference – and therefore also … [no] irreducible meaning for poetic metaphor and any grounding of meaning in a depth which is not fully fathomable’ (51).

Milbank’s ‘analogical’ alternative to this dogmatic position might be illustrated by the following two sentences: ‘My wife loves me’ and ‘My dog loves me’. It would be insulting to say ‘My wife loves me like my dog’. So, they are not ‘univocal’. Yet, our use of perfection term (like ‘love’) with regard to animals is not equivocal either (like the word ‘bank’ in ‘river bank’ and ‘savings bank’). We would rather consider ‘animal love’ as the analogical actualisation of a phenomenon that manifests itself more perfectly on the higher level of human animals – and most properly in manifestations of the divine fullness of being.

According to this interpretation of perfection terms, the emergence of ‘human animals’ in our universe actualised possibilities that no lower creature would have been able to anticipate: their actuality preceded the possibilities that they afforded. Consequently, perfection terms like ‘being’ and ‘goodness’ (or ‘love’) cannot be reduced to a univocally recognisable core of meaning that differs only in quantitative terms. God is not a person like me, ‘only infinitely more perfect than the latter’ – for the same reason
why my wife is not an animal like my dog, ‘only infinitely more perfect than the latter’. The emergence of higher modes of being always has the character of a transformative event that reveals radically new possibilities. And this means, perfection terms have an irreducible poetic core: they account for similarities between unique creatures that are unaccountable in non-paradoxical, univocal terms – as Cusa and Eckhart argued in their post-Scotist attempts to recover the ontological realism of Aquinas (100-105).

If we want to understand this ontology of transformative events more clearly, we have to turn to the last pillar of modern philosophy: the concept of causation as **concurrency**. According to Milbank, the emergence of radically new possibilities cannot be derived from the synergistic interaction between ‘concurring’ causes – like the synergy between physical forces, or between form and matter in Kant’s account of the interaction between a priori and a posteriori principles that assured the modern dualism between subject and object.

The significance of this point can be illustrated by the phenomenology of human relationships. Milbank agrees with Emmanuel Levinas that there is an asymmetric ‘priority of the divine or human other in us’ (238). In phenomenological terms this means that the ‘influence’ of the ‘other’ has the character of a ‘flowing in’: she has already intruded my subjective world before I have been able to determine what I am doing. I can never resist relating to the presence of another person, because her ‘influence’ precedes my intentional acts. Yet, this happens, not despite but precisely because the presence of the other actualises in me the potential to act as a rationally accountable social animal. In contrast to concurrent causes, ‘inflowing’ causes do not undermine but confirm my ability to act as a free subject.
Milbank goes beyond Levinas’s phenomenology of alterity in that he considers this possibility as a feature of our relationship to every created entity. Since every mode of knowledge is a kind of ‘knowledge by identity’ (and not ‘by representation’), every subjective response to our environment has the potential to actualise in us unanticipated possibilities. Moreover, unlike Levinas, this ‘influence’ ‘goes beyond any ontic contrast between giving and receiving’ (238) – it transcends the distinction between activity and passivity in every respect. If I discover at a certain turning point of my life the difference between my love for my dog and my love for a human person, then this event actualizes unprecedented potentialities on both sides of the subject-object-relation: it changes not only myself as a ‘subject’ that relates to an ‘object’, but also the object of my perception. Hence, the whole relationship has the character of a gift that is derived from the in-flowing of a transcendent cause.

It comes as no surprise that this principle applies also to the influence of ‘supernatural’ causes, as Aquinas still knew in the thirteenth century – in contrast to Luther, and the seventeenth-century de auxiliis controversy of Catholic theology (86, and 226f.). According to Milbank, our secular world view emerged out of the assumption that every form of causation can be reduced to a kind of concurrence between real or formally distinct forces. The concept of concurrence undergirded controversies about the competing forces of human freedom and divine grace after the Reformation; it returned in considerations about political and economic forces in thinkers like Hobbes and Smith; it governed Kant’s considerations about the relationship between ‘empirical impressions’ and ‘spontaneous subjective acts’, etc. Yet, according to Milbank, this counterintuitive reductive concept was invented by misguided late medieval clerics and theologians, and not by sober minded philosophers. Hence, it is time to return to a more realistic way of
thinking, if we want to recover a theologically qualified understanding of the creation that we inhabit.

In the second part, Milbank unpacks this revised ontology by guiding his reader through almost all ramifications of the Western history of science, art, technology, politics and religion. The historical landscape that emerges during this forced march reminded me of the above quotation: ‘no one would have the imagination to invent it’. However, as a reviewer, I can only confine myself to delineating the key concept that governs Milbank’s attempts to retrieve an alternative to the ‘secular order’ of our present time: his concept of ‘original supplementation’.

While this concept is indebted to Jacques Derrida, it provides Milbank with the key to a properly Thomist, ‘integral’ account of our nature as ‘transbiological’ animals. As in the case of technological devices, integral supplements actualise ‘essential possibilities’ in that to which they are seemingly only ‘accidentally’ superadded – this is the paradox of supplementation. Milbank uses this concept not only in order to retrieve Aquinas’s understanding of social innovations and fictions as ‘figura veritatis’ (192), but also the ontological, gnoseological and theological principles of his philosophy. The concept of ‘original supplementation’ characterizes Aquinas’s ‘real distinction’, where ‘being’ is superadded to an essential possibility although the latter could not ‘exist’ without this supplementation; it undergirds his account of the ‘rational animal’, where the light of the ‘agent intellect’ is superadded to the soul as the form of the body although the latter would not be human without this addition, etc. Yet most importantly, an original supplementation governs Aquinas’s account of our supernatural destination, symbolized by ‘Christ the King’: The revelation of Christ as ‘priest and king’ added a supernatural reality to the
‘natural body’ of our social and political world, although the latter could never be ‘truly human’ without this super-addition.

Milbank’s suggestion that we recover a concept of ‘mixed government’ that includes democratic, aristocratic and monarchic elements builds on a creative appropriation of the last thesis. And it goes without saying that this far-reaching suggestion needs further discussion – particularly in terms of his deconstruction of the modern mainstream distinction between ‘left wing’ and ‘right wing’ politics. In contrast to the Frankfurt School philosophers of the German post-war tradition, Milbank doubts that this distinction is still expedient. Yet, he does not simply abolish the ‘emancipatory legacy’ that inspired the ‘redemptive criticism’ of the enlightenment tradition in the wake of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas. Milbank’s ‘third way’ only questions the naive assumption that this distinction is self-evident. Unlike Habermas (‘Was links ist weiß doch jeder’), he insists that ‘both “truth to oneself” and the “truth to the witness of others” is a matter of constant discernment’ (264). Yet, he does not dispense with the ‘leftwards slant’ of a policy that aims at the ‘democratisation of virtue as love … and the expressive release and fulfilment of the entirety of human powers’ (269) His just published monograph The Politics of Virtue (together with Adrian Pabst) takes a further step on this path by going beyond a post-liberal rehash of a neo-Aristotelian ‘communitarianism’. In accordance with Habermas and the ‘counter-teleology’ of Augustine and Aquinas, Milbank’s ‘third way’ relies on our ‘emancipatory potential’ to transform our social, political and cultural life.

Johannes Hoff