BETWEEN POLITICS AND METAPHYSICS: REFLECTIONS IN THE WAKE OF GILLIAN ROSE

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Prologue

Can we find a way of talking about metaphysics that doesn’t immediately descend into the quagmires of fantasy, the sort of thing Nietzsche excoriated in the context of religious discourse as talking about unreal objects and causes? But why should we want to find any way at all of talking about metaphysics? In what we are constantly told to regard as a post-realist age (told by whom, though?), the project of speaking with generality about the real or actual has become marginal; we are frightened of generating a discourse that seems to aim at rivalling our talk about talk itself, to aim at the grasp of structures or ‘conditions’ or ‘transcendentals’ in a way that sidesteps the fundamental contemporary axiom in so much of our speaking about reflection and method—the axiom that language cannot, ultimately, have any ‘matter’ but itself. Violating this axiom raises the spectre of claims to presence, to privilege or to totalising vision; and we (who?) know that these are the claims that we must resist on pain of losing what language is, and thus losing the only thing we can now find to say of our human essence—that it is constructed and enacted in speech, which is ‘essentially’ without privilege, in the sense that it is not amenable to closure or stasis. No position is or could be available that would have the right to arrest the process of exchange. And, if we are to find room here for the sacred, it will be only in absences, blanks and pauses in the exchange, unthematisable and alien to will and reflection.

This will do only if we fail to read ‘reality’ or ‘actuality’ as difficult. My parenthetical questions in the last paragraph were not frivolous asides: there
are issues of power wherever there are questions of proscription, and an intellectual style that declines to engage with matters of legitimacy, or even truthfulness, if we want to be primitive, is making a strong political bid. It rules out the question of judgement (in various senses of the word); and in so doing rules out what we could call the question of recognition and thus of internal critique. That is to say, there is an inescapable issue in the speech that is actually employed by material and temporal subjects that has to do with how what is said is appropriated, how it sustains intelligibility in the exchanges and negotiations that constitute our actuality. This is where difficulty lies. Another material speaker is someone whose deployment of conceptual and rhetorical strategies will be in some ways parallel and in some ways divergent in relation to mine: I recognise a strategy that is faced with what I am faced with, yet one that operates out of a distinct accumulation of past negotiation and from a different material location, whose perspectives are accessible to me only in the exchanges of language. But the material of my own negotiation in and with my environment is nothing other than these other perspectives and histories: it is in fact impossible for me to have as the matter of my thought and speech only what I generate for myself. And to speak here of negotiation with an environment is already to say that I must labour here, that I must determine and maintain a position from which to communicate. Hence what I say is questionable to myself (as well as to others); whence does it come, how does it connect in the processes of exchange, at what points does it fatally ignore another perspective, so rendering itself without effect or actual presence, at what point does it so absorb another perspective as to disempower itself in another way, by failing to own its peculiar locus in the map of exchange? These are the questions that arise in the processes of discovering what it might be to exercise a historical freedom, a determination within constraints of how my and our life is to be shaped. They are the issues where politics and epistemology are entwined, and they are notoriously resistant to general resolutions.

The aspirations of post-realism seem to be aspirations not only after a solitary career of self-determination, but aspirations to what can only be called a non-historical freedom; they look to a situation in which there are few or no issues about power arising in the context of discourse: the exchanges envisaged are not what I have called negotiations, but simply the co-existence of (at best) mutually tangential projects—what Roy Bhaskar has called ‘a succession of poems, all marginally different; and a succession of paradigm shifts, for which no overarching or commensurating criteria can be given’. As he says, this is an intelligible ideology (just) for ‘a leisured elite, in conditions of plenty.’ Indeed, I suspect that it isn’t only a matter of ‘conditions of plenty’; the situation envisaged seems to be rather one of unconditioned access to goods, since there is no pressing or significant negotiation over ownership and distribution. The tensions and aporiai of power arise, I suggest, because of primitive scarcity, in the sense that human agents

are aware of operating in an environment where desire can be and is frustrated by the access of others to goods. To find our way around in such an environment is inevitably to be brought up against exchange and labour in respect of the desire of others; so that an account of speech that ignores scarcity and the consequent problem of mutual limitation is one that has no purchase on material agency.

For all the fascination in postmodernity with difference (however spelled), and the criticisms of strategies, metaphysical or religious, that appear to privilege a return to the same, the perspective here in fact sidesteps the practical constructions of difference with some elegance. By absolutising the other, otherness becomes un-thinkable; the laborious process of evolving a practice in which my desire, my project, redefines or rethinks itself in symbiosis with others, a practice in which the presence of scarcity ceases to be simply an occasion of ‘war’, is avoided. The other becomes an area of something like sacred terror, not the occasion for a developing and often deeply ironic self-articulation, and the discovery of a way of transcending scarcity. For if the access of others to desired goods is, with my own and like my own, negotiable, revisable, it may be possible to recognise the environment as one of potential abundance. Difference, in this kind of politics, is an occasion of work, the work by which human beings constantly query what they have assumed is their interest as individuals or definite groups; as that work is carried forward, two distinct errors or misperceptions are uncovered, the illusion that any specific (individual or group) subject has unlimited access to the use of the goods of an environment, and the illusion that any (individual or group) subject can intelligibly define its good as the possession of such use in exclusion of all others. The environment is one of scarcity in the sense that goods and their use have to be the object of thought, of planning; but it is one of potential abundance insofar as it is possible for goods in an environment to be ‘underwritten’ by the intelligence of others—insofar as the work of others can secure my or our interest as the object of their thought and labour (and vice versa).

The question of how we are to construe difference is in the long run a metaphysical one; that is, it is not a question that can be settled by appeal to a tangible state of affairs or set of facts, yet at the same time not a question that can be relegated to a matter of taste or private judgement, since the matter is one that, as we have just seen, shapes decisively the way in which political options are understood. Is this, then, simply a plea for philosophy to produce a transcendental ground for political options already determined? a functionalising of that area of philosophy once regarded as dealing essentially with what is to be contemplated rather than used? an illegitimate attempt to give political commitments a supra-human guarantee that no human commitment can possibly have? The answer to such a challenge is not a short one. At this preliminary stage, all I shall say is this. There is a sense in which, classically, metaphysical reflection arises from the impulse
to look for a ground in the discussion of justice and injustice in political affairs: Plato’s *Republic*, after all, begins here. The *Republic’s* reflection on the conditions of judgement (mathematical, moral, aesthetic) is an inalienable part of the project described by Socrates (Rep.369 A-C) as constructing a city in speech or discourse. We might say that here the question of how we spell out the conditions of coherent thought arises with urgency only as we unscrew what it is to speak at all about an interest that is more than local; how we make sense of common life as opposed to seeing it as simply the battleground of competing bids for the use of goods. If we grasp what it is to relate in language itself, to be capable of challenging or recognizing the uses of words, asking about legitimacy, defensibility and consistency in relation to what we habitually say, we are, in Plato’s eyes, committed to uttering and exploring statements about what does not just ‘happen’ to be the case in the world of objects. Once we start creating a city in discourse, working at and testing the bonds that language requires and presupposes so as to rule out the arbitrary and the partial, the ‘passionate’ in isolation, the task before us is finally ‘metaphysical’. We may be puzzled by the question of what status we are to assign to the structures Plato believes he has uncovered, but what matters is not some discovery of a parallel world of occult objects exercising an eccentric variation of ordinary worldly causality, but simply the articulation of a discourse that is confidently about something other than casual states of affairs. If this is properly describable as the realm of the metaphysical, it looks as if, on one account at least of what intelligible political discourse demands (discourse about how we make sense of human bondedness and exchange), metaphysics is not extrinsic to the task. It is not an extra hurriedly brought in to provide justifications for commitments; it might better be called the underlying intelligible structure of the commitments themselves, what constitutes them as more than arbitrarily willed options. And thus the political location of metaphysical discourse is not the reduction of metaphysics to functional subordination within an alien setting, but something more like the laying bare of a contemplative or non-functional dimension to the political, the element of ‘seeing’ that is contained in any idea of intelligible action in a world of diverse agents.

By ‘intelligible action’ here, I mean action that can be recognized by other agents as analogous to their own; and thus action capable of being talked about, action that is not the assertion of blind will, but is bound up with the exchanges and negotiations that constitute a pattern of language. ‘Intelligible action’ is action that can be criticised and defended, understood or misunderstood. To borrow an idiom of Wittgenstein’s, it is action that can be ‘followed’. Just as in speech, we know how to continue when certain things are said, certain signals given, we recognize the conventions at work and can contribute to the enterprise, so in patterns of agency, we know or do not know how to respond or contribute. ‘Intelligible action’ can thus vary from the hackneyed example of moves in a game to matters of ritual or etiquette.
to any shared labour of planning and executing a human task. And, insofar as problems of communication in this context have to be dealt with by asking something like ‘What do you see?’ the dimension I have been calling contemplative inevitably enters in. If you are doing that, I can’t understand what you’re seeing, because I can’t make a sensible analogy with what I’m doing or might do, seeing what I do. And, in turn, if there is a solution to such problems of communication, it may lie in the critique of both prior standpoints. Intelligible action is action significantly dispossessed of the control of a ‘private’ will: the sense I make is not under my control. Thus to speak at all about action as open to critique, to understanding and misunderstanding, to the possibility or impossibility of its being ‘followed’, is at least to raise the question of what is ‘seen’ in respect of the environment, especially the human environment. In the first place, this requires certain explanatory strategies, above all strategies that will make it possible to give an account of how error arises. But this explanatory exercise takes us only so far if it seeks only to identify the distortions arising from external conditions, significant as these are. For if external conditions are in fact capable of producing distortions of consciousness, the recognition of this still entails the need for a general account of understanding and misunderstanding. To refer once again to Bhaskar, a theory of the genesis of false consciousness must be also a theory of communication and intelligibility, a theory of how meanings are constructed and negotiated in a wide variety of relations—including our relation to the ‘unmotivated conditions for our substantive motivated productions’ which prohibits a theory dealing only with actors’ accounts of their meanings.

The point is that an understanding of human action that puts at its centre the character of human existence as work or production demands not only (as any Marxist would agree) a ‘realist’ epistemology, but, more controversially, a ‘metaphysic’—an overall proposal concerning the character of reality as known by agents. The classical and fairly crude materialist realism of mainline Marxist epistemology is not, of course, free from metaphysical commitments in the wide sense. But the point at which this tradition joins hands (surprisingly) with some very different styles of philosophising over against a postmodernist discourse is in their common, though diversely articulated, stress on the involvement of work/production in the essence of the human. To the extent that ‘production’ implies the formation for some other of something that is either required or receivable or both, something whose identity is not internal to the agent’s definition, it applies to the entire range of communicative activity extending from cookery to philosophy or mysticism. What is here being affirmed against the general idiom of postmodernity is that what human beings do is characterized by the kind of difficulty that arises when the effects of action or decision are open to the judgement and interpretation not only of other finite agents as individuals or clusters of individuals, but of what is discerned as the order or structure.
of a reality not determined by anyone’s decision. To ‘produce’ or to engage in work that issues in the changing of the environment, material or conceptual or imaginative, is to accept conventions or standards, communicative and evaluative conventions, outside the power of the producing agent, if what is produced is to ‘count’ as a recognizable production, an entity capable of being described and discussed with reference to more than the producer’s will in itself.

Isn’t this exactly what postmodernist criticism itself insists upon, though, the radical ability to challenge authorial intention and the hermeneutical privilege of the producer? I suspect that this takes us back to the earlier question of how difference is construed. If the product is intelligible in entire abstraction from the conditions of its production (including the motivation of the producer), it ceases to be either risky for the producer or difficult for the interpreter; it is poised between producer and interpreter, or rather not between at all, since its place is not in any hermeneutical territory common to the two. Interpretation prescinds from the question of recognition (and so of misrecognition); it does not need the labour of analogy, the seeking of some sort of convergence in processes of production. Thus the ‘otherness’ of the work offered to interpretation hovers between the ineffability of the (quasi-) sacred and the reflexivity of something that can be conscripted into the projects of the interpreter. Two models are at work of the way in which the producer is dispossessed by production or labour. On the post-modernist account, the producer is effectively wholly alienated from the work; any claim to the contrary would be to reinstate a ‘metaphysics of presence’, author and authority. On the account I have sketched, locating itself in the passage between politics and metaphysics, the producer’s dispossession is a move in a collaborative (at least potentially collaborative) project, the construction of a meaning, a set of signifiers systematically organised, not determined by any individual decision or project, challenging agents to reconceive their goal and interest in what is other.

And so to come at last to Gillian Rose, and to why I elect to discuss her work as a vehicle for thinking about the genesis of metaphysical concern, and even, specifically, of metaphysical concern in a religious context. In an unusually direct passage, part of the introduction to her collection of essays on Judaism and Modernity, she identifies in the postmodern ethics she is attacking a failure to engage with the ‘Other’ as enacting concrete intentions within a limited cultural and institutional space, so that

‘The Other’ is misrepresented as sheer alterity, for ‘the Other’ is equally the distraught subject searching for its substance, its ethical life ... New ethics would transcend the autonomy of the subject by commanding that I substitute myself for ‘the Other’ (heteronomy) or by commending attention to ‘the Other’. Yet it is the inveterate but occluded immanence of one subject to itself and to other subjects that needs further exposition.
Simply to command me to sacrifice myself, or to commend that I pay attention to others makes me intolerant, naive and miserable ... [T]he immanence of the self-relation of 'the Other' to my own self-relation will always be disowned.⁵

Central to Rose's concern is the philosophical importance of error and the recognizability of error. To recognize misperception is to learn; to learn is to reimagine or reconceive the self; and this in turn is to encounter the 'violence'—a crucially significant and difficult word in Rose's recent oeuvre—that is inescapably involved in our position towards others and towards ourselves. It is because this violence is always presupposed by our particular positions in any network of relations that law is required in our sociality. And the insistence on a sociality never 'mended' in a final way (another recurrent theme) is precisely what raises, obliquely but inexorably, a religious question; not the facile and tempting question of law's relation to grace, but the harder one of how the very experience of learning and of negotiation can be read as something to do with God. As Rose herself is pretty clear, this is, of course, a repristination of the Hegelian project in something like its full ambition. But to see how this is so, we need to look at what Rose actually says about that project.

The Uses of Error

According to Rose, the most spectacular misunderstanding we could have of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to suppose that it is an account of how consciousness absorbs its objects, overcomes the duality of knower and known so that consciousness is left with no 'outside'.⁶ To read the *Phenomenology* adequately we have to enter upon a process that will show us that we have not yet understood the nature of thinking; thinking the thoughts of the *Phenomenology* is discovering the ways in which 'natural consciousness' repeatedly undermines itself and by so doing advances—not towards a conclusive theoretical reconciliation, but towards a practice of scepticism that, so far from inducing despair or withdrawal or apathy, empowers us to attempt transformative action in the clear recognition that any liberation from the distortions of 'natural' thinking is a necessary step to the removal of those social relations that reflect and intensify untruthful consciousness. This is not a process that can necessarily of itself deliver a social ideal, a programme for concrete improvement; it is simply a project that, by insistently showing us that the model of consciousness as a kind of property owner, accumulating known objects, is a myth incapable of coherent statement, keeps us uneasy about patterns of both speech and relation (the two, of course, not separable) that continue to take as axiomatic the model of contending 'proprietors'.
The proper implication of this is that any scheme of thought that proposes to eliminate the difficulties of 'natural consciousness' is going to be an obstacle to emancipatory thinking and practice. Contrary to some textbook accounts, Hegel (especially in the *Phenomenology*) does not offer to dissolve natural consciousness, with its specific objects of knowledge; how could he? For it is in the continual renewal of the 'natural' errors of pre-speculative thinking that speculation (self-aware thinking, thinking that thinks the nature of thinking) is itself renewed. Of course we go on having determinate experiences of objects that we think of as other to the natural consciousness; it is in a continued re-engagement with these experiences that we move constantly and afresh into the properly speculative mode in which we 'unmake' the natural consciousness. The question we must then raise in respect of any conceptual scheme is that of how far it proposes or threatens to remove the direct otherness of the natural consciousness's objects *at the outset* of the thinking process. That we misrecognize the character of thinking by entertaining the deliverances of natural consciousness is all-important: entertain the particular in its strangeness, and out of that will, properly, come the speculative recognition of the unsustainable character of the 'natural'. The thinking subject over against the object thought succumbs to the contradictions of this opposition. Yet—and here Rose is boldest in her reading of Hegel—every moment of recognition is also a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a *position*. The truth lies in the 'system', which is *not* the theory that the mind can possess at one moment, but the entirety of the path, the project, of critical dissolution of the positional and partial definition. 'This idea of a whole which cannot be grasped in one moment or one statement for it must be experienced is the idea of the system.'

If we turn from Rose's Hegel to Rose's presentation of the various thinkers dealt with in her most hermetic and taxing work, *The Broken Middle*, we may be able to make better sense not only of the three declared themes of the book ('anxiety of beginning, equivocation of the ethical and agon of authorship'), but also of the recurrent and at first sight teasing discussion of 'violence' here. The ideal of 'love without violence' is characterized as lacking in faith: in reality, love is always found to be involved in violence, and the attempted reversions to a beginning or an end free from violence found in writers like Thomas Mann or René Girard in fact condemn the human agent to the alternatives of an *agape* beyond structures and negotiations or a conflict without containment. Love and violence are both involved in *law*—that is to say, in strategy and social form. The underlying *riskiness* of strategy cannot be circumvented: all strategy is 'agonistic', involved in a struggle of the will against the resistance of an environment, and it becomes impossible to disentangle this from some account of violence. The difficulty arises when violence is given a wholly negative definition; in which case (as in Girard), it is given a solidity and identity that cloud our reflective possibilities.
Violence negatively constructed suggests a primordial situation of equal or 'parallel' subjects, each in possession of itself, a situation that violence proceeds to disarrange (Girard again); but in fact there is no such situation. Subjects are always already unequal, and the processes of negotiation work with a fiction of equality as a critical tool for thinking and changing the relations actually subsisting. The abstract universalism and egalitarianism of enlightened social philosophy must be simultaneously exposed as fiction, shown to fail in respect of specific human groups, and still used obliquely: this is the task Rose sees being variously performed in the authorships of Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt—all of them, as women and as Jews, excluded from the universalist fictions of the Enlightenment and the rhetoric of universal Christian agape. In very diverse ways, each witnesses to the temptations of the reflective consciousness in the modern age—the withdrawal into the private cultivation of a 'beautiful soul', the revolutionary divorce of means and ends that lures socialist transformations away from their properly political task, and the isolation of a kind of timeless culture of friendship and civility, alien to the labour of public construction.

In varying degrees, all three writers return us to risk: to 'the anxiety of beginning, the equivocation of the ethical and the agon of authorship'. What do these reiterated and gnomic expressions mean? The detailed discussion of Kierkegaard as well as of the three Jewish women already mentioned clarifies this a little. Thinking is afraid to begin; or rather, it looks for a beginning that is not a risk, a beginning that already controls or contains its goal. It is therefore constantly in flight from the recognition of the 'already' that locates all our putative beginnings in an unsought and uncontrolled middle. The only honest beginning is with difficulty; that is to say, we cannot 'start thinking', but 'begin' only with the acknowledgment that what we say is already put in question, already involved in the fertile error or misperception that Hegel and Kierkegaard alike identify as, in the most ironic sense, natural to thinking. But why do we look in this way for a beginning that gives mastery? Because the involved, the 'middle' situation where we are in fact located, is an ambiguous place. We do not occupy a place in which we can originate, make what is new, where our desire or our intelligence can make terms with the environment unconstrained by prior determinations of action and possibility and speech. It is the constraining 'already' of such determination, the whole of what Rose conceives as 'law', that in fact defines what power we really possess; the failure to acknowledge this imprisons us. But this liberating awareness of an imperative actuality prior to, and powerful in respect of, our specific desire is also a 'beginning of anxiety', the moral and conceptual source of how we understand what it is to fail. When a culture effectively loses the sense of what it is to fail (which is what Kierkegaard believed to be true of his Christendom), the ethical is broken: that is, the agent is left poised unhappily between an external order which, because it has forgotten what failure is, ceases to be a source of
power, and an internal critical self-perception, an anxious self-perception, that likewise has no access to power, no resolution of its own impotence. What Kierkegaard called the suspension of the ethical has its place in this context. There is a necessary moment in which we must simultaneously know and not know the ethical, the presence of empowering constraint; what we know is a universal condition, a definition beyond our power and choice, but one that cannot here and now compel or create 'witness'. In order to recover the possibility of an act that will have the character of 'witness', the character of powerfully setting in being a state of affairs other than the existing uncritical order, we must 'suspend' the existing order understood as a system that has forgotten how to fail, a system that guarantees successful performance. But it is suspense, not abolition, that we are talking about here. Any proposal to abolish the ethical, the givenness of constraint, the already that grounds any present act of will, is an attempt to take us out of time, and thus to seal our powerlessness once and for all.16

The extremely dense argument on this point in The Broken Middle is an effort to lay hold of a paradox in intelligible acting. Without the awareness of what constrains us, which is not only the given material environment but the history of negotiation with other agents that surrounds our projects before they are articulated or formed, we cannot act so as to initiate or change; yet the act itself that changes or introduces the critical, the possibility of failure, requires that we stand over against the ethical as order, recognizing that the action we inaugurate is not in advance specified as successful, well-formed or orderly. It is involved with 'violence'. But, in turn, that violence is rendered recognizable, capable of being criticised, by the fact that the ethical is not abolished; the act of inauguration does not establish an anti-order of arbitrary free-for-all.17 The action taken in the moment of suspending the ethical is an act not of self-assertion but of self-dispossession or even self-gift.18 It is a renunciation of the self-possession that is content with never failing; because (and here we have to look back to earlier and more fundamental discussions of the nature of thinking) such putative self-possession, invulnerable to the judgement of the other and the prior, issues in the contradictions from which speculative thinking is meant to free us. To act in the equivocation of the ethical is to renounce the finality of my judgement on myself—which is, of course, what I do when I initiate any kind of communication, any speech.

This argument can be read as a protest against the essentialising of violence: against the isolation of violence (qua struggle or strategy) as a factor amongst others, or rather a 'lowest common denominator' in action, an element either always present (which induces cynicism) or capable of being totally extruded (utopianism or 'totalist' politics, claiming an order that is peaceful and timeless). Instead, violence is only to be thought of as the risk entailed in power, the presence of the possibility that my action, by inevitably in some measure misrecognizing the nature of the interest of others,
establishes a new imbalance of power and justice. Yet there is no way of being actively and historically within the ethical without such risk, since the ethical without risk is powerless—that is, it is incapable of truthfully negotiating the otherness, the differences, that it always contains (in both senses of the word). The issue can be put in another way, in terms of the unresolvable tension between attention to the particular and commitment to the universal. Since the abstract universal is present in our history only as a disempowering and would-be timeless sameness, and since the purely arbitrary assertion of the particular can never found a social practice, with its necessary temporal involvement, truthful action is inescapably shadowed, but destined to achieve only by confronting its shadow. Not to confront this means—in fact—the kind of society we inhabit, in which properly political life is made functional to the economic exchanges in civil society, but civil society is constantly being eroded in favour of collective interest, defined in terms of whatever group currently possesses hegemony. The modern pattern is the steady removal of intermediate institutions, local corporations, in such a way that the fundamental conflicts of interest are between two abstractions, the state and the individual.20

'The agon of authorship is to remain with anxiety of beginning and equivocation of the ethical'.21 That is to say, thinking the tensions of truthfulness in action and about action must resist an insupportable and menacing pull towards false reconciliations, towards what Rose calls the 'holy'—peace beyond time. Any imaginable claim for such a state will in practice be a commendation of some sort of political totalism. Authorship is the staking of the intelligent self, a risky act, once again like any act of communication: an invitation of judgement; thus, too, a declaration of faith. The author has to refuse divinity, or rather the pretence of divinity, not by refusing to make judgements but by knowing the risky and 'violent' nature of the judgements s/he cannot but make, staking a position that necessarily involves claiming something over against an other, while remembering that the other still imperiously requires to be understood, to be thought. This is why it is (or should be) difficult to do philosophy, especially political philosophy.

One of the things that is striking about the conclusions of The Broken Middle is the way in which the basic problem identified is that of the relation of universal and particular: one problem that pervades Aristotle's metaphysical discussion is whether the individual or the generic sense of 'substance' is basic;22 and this echo brings into sharp focus the way in which Rose's agenda, like Hegel's, insists on the interconnection of the political and the metaphysical. In an essay on Derrida,23 Rose interestingly dubs Derrida's evocation of 'spirit' 'meta-metaphysical',24 after noting how Derrida's genealogy of Nazism involves a huge and vague range of mediating institutions in such a way that the life of social institutions (their actual determinations in history) is effectively rejected. Meta-metaphysics is meta-politics; the seduction of the one is practically identical with the seduction of the other. The
discourse of metaphysics and politics is one that is faithful to ‘the difficulty of actuality’; both registers of reflection, when they are doing their job, properly leave us stranded in history, which is where we ought to be. Both, by insisting on a universality of perspective, hope, or communicative intent and upon the inalienable capacity for the empowering of specific action that is contained in the thinking of thinking itself, reacquaint us with our situation in time. It must of course immediately be added that both the metaphysics and the politics in question belong to ‘modernity’ to the extent that they are aware of their own processes; we are not talking about the importation of orders from elsewhere, known as given structures in an unproblematic way. What metaphysics faces now is the challenge to reconceive Aristotle’s *aporia* in terms of consciousness and social/communicative action, since this is the place where we now engage with what does not just happen to be the case, that which is *not* negotiable in our environment, not subject to will.

There of course is the intrusive ‘we’ again; to define the political/metaphysical task in terms of what ‘we’ can and cannot do ‘now’ is surely to be bound in the same paradoxical historicism that postmodernity’s rhetoric (as I indicated at the opening of this essay) constantly slips into. The defence that Rose—or anyone who had digested Hegel anywhere near adequately—would offer is that the thinking of thinking inescapably involves a ‘staking’ (to use one of Rose’s favourite terms, especially in her recent work) a claim on what it is that human agents, or subjects as such, are answerable to and engaged in; without this there is no conversation and so no change. Yet, as we have seen, the staking in turn involves the possibility of error and critique. There is, in other words, an irony in the ‘we’ here that is arguably absent from the ahistorical historicism of the postmodernist understanding, with its indifference to the conditions of the production of meaning.

‘Irony’ is an important word in this connection. In an essay on Adorno, Rose notes the way in which Adorno misses the ironic dimension in Hegel’s system and accordingly remains at the level of a dialectic that fails to think itself consistently. Adorno appears as the apostle of irreconcilable non-identity, the renunciation of comprehensive theory; but to arrest the dialectic as dialectic is to leave the terms of the contradictions of dialectic untouched. By contrast, Hegel’s thinking insists not on a return to identity but on the ‘speculative’ projection of a continually self-adjusting, self-criticising corporate practice—which can, from another point of view, be described as a politics. ‘Pure’ dialectics becomes another strategy for avoiding strategy, violence, time and error. The same point is approached in a piece on Benjamin, a particularly dense and significant reflection. Benjamin plays dangerously with the notion of Messianic time, the interruption that forces or ‘shocks’ history into unity or intelligibility; for history is the history of irredeemable loss (fascism is always already victorious), and only a divine violence can save. But when saving violence is construed as divine, what disappears is the crucial self-understanding and self-critique of the ‘violence
in love' that features in *The Broken Middle*. In Benjamin's perspective, 'Only the violence of God or the general strike, which is invisible because total, can counter the partial and bloody violences of the law. This divine or sovereign violence abolishes law by destroying boundaries without making new ones. It is boundlessly expiatory; without demanding sacrifices, it accepts them.'

Over against the world of loss and concrete violence stands the divine in its purity; and because it is pure, it is accessible not through mediation but only in reproduction, correspondence. Thus the inauguration of change comes about not through thinking, critique, strategy and risk, but by the undiscussable, unfollowable irruption of lawless unification. Benjamin's famous image of the *Angelus Novus*, looking back on a history of catastrophe, effectively impotent in horror as the paradisal wind blows him towards the future, captures the sense of history as a record of what is lost, abandoned and beyond reclamation: memory serves only to keep alive the truth that oppression is victorious, so that we do not cease to mourn.

One thing that this interrogation of Benjamin implies is that the common ground of politics and metaphysics is a particular kind of reclamation of history, history as a 'coming to learn'. The danger of turning this into a totalising and falsely reconciling theory of historical unity is real only when the thinker forgets that the act of interpreting, expressing 'learning', is itself historical, strategic and without guarantee. But the nature of thinking about thinking requires precisely a thinking of the past as empowerment (which is vitally different from thinking the past as 'justified', as inevitable, as simply convergent). Talking about history is talking about the record or deposit of speech, in every possible sense, including very obviously the paradoxical speech of those silenced in history by the voices of others; the enterprise of reading history as intelligible, as generative of understanding and strategy now, is, it seems, the unavoidable form of thinking about thinking, once we have understood that what we can say and think is empowered by what has been said and thought. This is ultimately to return us to Hegel's fundamental insight: history is how we do our metaphysics, how we reflect on what we non-negotiably are and what are the conditions of our concept-formation. Not that history as record delivers to us a map of the constructions of the universe, or a comprehensive account of natural kinds or a compelling thesis about the nature of reference; but engagement with history lays bare for us the character of thinking as engagement, as converse, conflict, negotiation, judgement and self-judgement. What we discover in the attempt to think the past is our nature, and so the possibilities that present dispositions of power and administration may obscure. What we discover is a steady formal presence in this process, the form of what I have called dispossession: at each stage of reflection, we are made aware, if we do not run away from the contradictions and difficulties; of the impossibility of thinking reality in terms of individuals 'owning' selves, ideas, property in a fixed and uncontended way. We are always redistributing, never timelessly
sure of our 'interest'. Thought unsettles any definition of my interest or our (specific group) interest, and it does so largely through the tracing of the changes of consciousness in history. This does not seek to provide a teleological or evolutionary story in a simple sense; but it does or should lay bare to us the character of thought as sensing its own misrecognitions and non-communications, as dissatisfied with its self-positioning even though it never avoids self-positioning. And this appears constantly as also a story of power and its distribution, since the possibility or otherwise of recognition or intelligibility is a profoundly political issue (one could define injustice radically as the situation where recognition of common or convergent interest fails; but that is only to paraphrase Hegel again).

Rose's reading of Hegel and her subsidiary readings of numerous other figures leave us, then, with an apprehension of how the metaphysical task might (should) be conceived. The price of post-realism is 'post-political' withdrawal, itself an unquestionably political strategy refusing to know itself. The authentically political, the project of continually challenging localised and incommunicable discourses about human interest, arises out of a commitment to thought in a certain mode, thought aware of its own production, its own vulnerability and its own commitment to risk. This carries an account of reality-as-such, not in the sense of talk of unreal objects or invisible but discussable entities, but in the sense that it uncovers what we cannot but do if we are concerned with truthfulness. A negative metaphysic, comparable to a negative theology? Perhaps; this needs more unpacking. But a metaphysic undoubtedly, and so too an ethic for both thinking and acting.

A Theological Coda

Gillian Rose's work has had far less discussion than it merits; but one quite searching essay on her earlier writing about Hegel and Marxism is that by Peter Osborne in 1982, a strongly worded contention that the re-worked Hegelianism Rose commends is incapable of understanding the specific determinations that shape consciousness. Hegelianism deliberately settles for a phenomenological critique of consciousness, consciousness dismantled and reconceived 'immanently' through the examination of its innate stresses or contradictions, its ineluctable movement of self-subversion. But, Osborne claims, this effectively prohibits a social theory, and, in so doing, prohibits also a genuinely transformative practice. All Rose allows, on this showing, is a recognition of how consciousness is always already distorted; transformation can only be seen here as a bare negation—'not this'. As the last paragraph of his essay makes clear, Osborne assimilates Rose's argument, at the end of the day, to Adorno's, a dialecticism that is 'impotent in the face of contemporary reality'.

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Clearly such a critique would be harder to sustain in the light of Rose's later work; we have already noted the way in which she distances herself from Adorno and the pathos of the perpetual negation. But is Osborne right in seeing in the phenomenological method itself an incapacity to think the concrete and so to think its transformation? Much of what I have so far written might serve to answer this. And Rose would, I think, justifiably object that Osborne simply repeats the fundamental misunderstanding of Hegel by Marx, the 'Fichtean' reading that reverts to a mythology of spirit diffusing itself in nature and fails to break through the opposition between thinking and the given, between the active Inside and the passive Outside. 'Immanent' critique is not an analysis of objectless thought; to talk about thinking itself is always to talk about thought thinking its concrete determinations. All immanent critique, in this sense, is 'social theory'; and a social theory that is not ultimately a thinking of thinking is still stuck at a pre-speculative and so (strictly) pre-political stage. Rose's fundamental Hegelian insight is, I have suggested, that it is the understanding of the basic character of deformed consciousness as the myth of the subject in possession that grounds not simply a 'negative dialectic' but a clear speculative recognition of the inevitable need for negotiation of goods. Without the speculative, the understanding of what invariably goes wrong with consciousness, social reconstruction, transformative practice or anything else will not advance beyond a rearrangement of existing power relations.

Speculative thinking, in the Hegelian sense, is in fact nothing if it is not the thinking of specific determinations, specific deformations of consciousness; if it tries to be other than historical and concrete in its proceedings, it thinks something other than its own real processes. And it is at this point that we might venture a tentative theological comment. Thinking is itself a learning of some sort of dispossession, the constant rediscovery and critique of the myth of the self as owner of its perceptions and positions; thinking unsettles all claims to a final resolution of how we define and speak of our interest. This much has emerged from our earlier discussion. Insofar as this is always critical thinking about particular historical varieties of unfreedom or inequality, it is in fact always suggesting specific kinds of historical liberation, directions in which we can look for change, even if the speculative alone doesn't and could never deliver a 'programme' for political action, since this (ex hypothesi) could emerge only through the particular negotiations that are necessary and possible in a particular setting; to think otherwise would be to surrender to the temptation to apocalyptic resolutions, ends of history, final solutions. But the constant is this: that truth requires loss. Or to put it slightly differently, the constant is that existence as a subject is recognized or re-learned all the time as a process of self-displacement, a never-ending 'adjustment' in search of the situation where there is real mutual recognition and thus effective common action, because we have moved away from the illusions of rivalry. This is not something that can be avoided by a short cut

enjoining total self-cancellation before the sacredness of the Other: this would be to flee the claims of understanding, the painful job of discovering my moral substance in relation and so honouring the other’s moral substance in the process of uncovering and understanding my own. The other is not honoured by my undialectical abnegation, because the other is configured, in such an encounter, as itself beyond negotiation and so beyond understanding; and there is a hairsbreadth between this and the violent denial or repudiation of the other as beyond understanding.

But what does it mean to speak here about a ‘constant’? It is one way of restoring a language for the ‘absolute’ in less alarming terms, I suppose, to look for ways of articulating what is non-negotiable in being a thinking subject. And if the understanding of what it is to be a thinking subject in fact tells us how we are to construe the real, if the phenomenology of consciousness is also an ontology, the patterns of thought are ‘the sinews of substance’, to adapt Knowles’ phrase about Aristotle. Within the Hegelian perspective, to deny that phenomenology of consciousness is ontology would be to reinstate the lethal confusion about thinking represented by the idea that there is a clear difference between active mind and passive stuff, between the mind and its intellectual property or acquisitions, between language and ‘objects’, those mysteriously self-contained or self-defined things lying around waiting to be noticed and collected.

The metaphysical tradition we have been discussing and working with here would indeed agree that, if thinking is ineluctably a pattern of self-displacement, the fundamental category that operates in speaking about the final constraints of reality, the constants in language, is self-displacement. We cannot think a reality in which substances exist as atomized systems whose goals (or interests) can be specified in mutual isolation; the being of things is on the one hand marked by authentic difference, and hence difficulty in conceiving and reconciling, but on the other hand by the everlasting ‘slippage’ of definition away from the model of labelling discrete lumps of stuff. To return to observations made at the beginning of this essay, we are pressed towards a metaphysic in which difference is neither (at any moment) final, a matter of mutual exclusion, nor simply reducible, a matter of misperception to be resolved by either a return to the same or a cancellation of one term before the Other.

Hegel’s question—not one raised in these terms by Rose, yet insistently in the background of what she writes—is how, historically, we come to think of thinking in the framework of dispossession; and his answer is, of course, that this requires a history that can be told as the narrative of the absolute’s self-loss and self-recovery. Hegel’s genius is to read the Judeo-Christian narrative as precisely this. His reading requires a fair bit of strain at a number of points, and it takes wholly for granted a version of Jewish identity circumscribed by the Christian, and more particularly Lutheran, account of Judaism as primarily and simply that Other that Christianity overturns. Both
historically and theologically, we cannot repeat that reading with a clear conscience now; but is there a way of re-reading the underlying point? We might start from the other, or another, end: thinking about thinking as dispossession and negotiation is made possible not by an abstract analysis of the processes of thought removed from temporal contingency; what then conditions or makes possible such an account in the material histories of social units? The theologian could say that the answer to this lay in the history that claims to be a history of God-in-relation to an historical community. The Jewish and Christian narrative is one in which the absolute is bound: by covenant for the Jew, by covenant and incarnation for the Christian. That is to say: the concrete articulation of divine (founding, creating) action is in what is other to the divine, in the life of the covenantal nation, in the life of the human agent who carries the divine meaning. The supreme disinterestedness of the divine, which, by definition, has no ‘positional’ corner to defend, articulates itself in the interest of a human community—a profoundly dangerous moment, since the interest of the community can then easily be elevated into a pseudo-independence of history. But the paradoxical reality of a community believing itself to stand for the ‘interest’ of a God without interest or favouritism is somewhere near the centre of how reflective Judaism and reflective Christianity have tried to imagine themselves. As Gillian Rose sees so clearly, the temptation for both is to lose the paradox—and so to lose the political vocation implicit in the paradox, the task of realizing a corporate life whose critical practice constantly challenges sectional interest and proprietorial models of power or knowledge. In the language of both traditions, though in dramatically different ways, the people of God are a specific and vulnerable human group whose perception of their interest is as flawed and liable to violence as any other’s, but who understand their fundamental task as embodying the ‘non-interest’ of God, the universal saving generosity of divine action. God is spoken of here as (mythologically) surrendering the no-place of an abstract absolute being, enacting the indiscriminate love or inclusive compassion that eventuates from divine life in an historical process (Israel, Jesus, the Church). And the contingent reality in which this enactment takes place is itself dispossessed of its own self-definition, as an ‘interested’ or sectional presence in the world: Israel’s identity becomes bound up with exile, Jesus’ identity with the cross, the Church (in some of its more primitive self-reflection) with the imagery of the ‘resident alien’.

The point is that in this narrative and reflective tradition, the most fundamental reality that is (in some sense) thinkable requires to be spoken of in terms of dispossession or, to use the overtly theological word, kenosis. This is not an emptying of God without remainder into the otherness of history or contingency: what is enacted in history is the divine life, but living in its other, realizing its ‘interest’ in its other. If, in simple terms, this is how God is, this is how God’s creation also is, its very otherness to God the occasion of something like work, in the transformation of the contingent not out of its
contingency but into the quest for a convergence always 'real' and always elusive. And for Christianity in particular, there is the further twist to the argument represented by the doctrine of the Trinity, which seeks to give some reflective substance to the 'always real' of that last formulation. In some sense, the existence of identity in otherness, neither term sacrificed, is not something that has to be thought as an ideal to be worked towards, but is timelessly actual. For the Christian theologian, this can be spelled out in connection with the history of the community of God's people—though it would be important to say that the reality in question was not the product of this or any history.\footnote{35}

We had better try to clarify what all this does and does not claim. It does not claim that there is a given metaphysical structure to which religious or doctrinal talk must conform. It does not claim that Christian doctrine either specifies a metaphysical structure or gives 'information' about invisible states of affairs. It does claim that certain models of thinking come to be available because of the presence of certain narratives about God and God's people, narratives that insist on speaking of divine displacement in one sense or another. It also claims, implicitly, that to reflect on these narratives pushes inexorably towards a particular vision of what the constants must be in human reflection and negotiation; that is to say, it is difficult to reflect here without simultaneously generating a discourse about fundamental ontology and a discourse about politics.\footnote{36} As to why the narratives are to be entertained in the first place, there can be no tidy or systematic answer; but it might be worth observing (to return to the starting point of this paper) that what stories we entertain as authoritative or revelatory has something to do with how or whether we do in fact construe actuality as difficult. And this in turn has to do with a certain leaning towards intellect rather than will as telling us basic things about ourselves-in-the-world. It may sound odd to associate what is, in effect, a theology of the cross with 'intellectualism'. But it is an important corrective to a version of the \textit{theologia crucis} that resolves itself into an ethic of sacrifice that 'leaves me with no way to understand my mistakes by attempting to recover the interference of meaning or mediation',\footnote{37} or into an anti-metaphysical rhetoric of sacrificial faith that is ultimately sentimental because it refuses to \textit{labour} at its own substance. Hegel explicitly, and Rose more ironically and guardedly, both locate the theology of the cross (in something other than a strictly dogmatic sense, certainly) between politics and metaphysics. Thinking what is difficult, thinking in dispossession, is essential to a politics that is anything other than a programme for the alternation of tyrannies and the unthought conflict of unreflective interest; thinking what is difficult, thinking in dispossession, insists on an ontology of some sort, capable of holding together the reality of difference and the imperative of work (i.e. reconciliation).

But how is a story of the death and resurrection of meaning, God in dispossession, generated? The theologian's proposal is that there is a narrative

lens through which the political and the metaphysical can be synoptically envisioned, a human narrative about divine (constant or absolute or creative) action. It is not so much that we have to look for a borderland between theology and metaphysics, as if there were two territories in need of identifying a common frontier and perhaps concluding a non-aggression pact. But we have for too long been sheepish about the theology in metaphysics and the metaphysics in theology—the narrative echoes and underpinnings of what is said about general ontology, especially in an intellectual context in which we are better attuned than we once were to the materiality of our knowing; and the pressure of our narratives towards a practice of self-understanding, which in turn obliges us to think the conditions of our thinking. To be interested in thinking how we learn about learning is a condition for politics (including ethics), theology and metaphysics alike: and learning to see each of these in and through the others leaves us with plenty of labour to get on with. At least it will free us from the eccentric tribalisms that isolate these discourses and so fix and institutionalise an error that needs to be exposed if our intellectual health is to flourish and if our unthought modern repressions are to be challenged.

NOTES

2 In the sense of ‘continued’ in the same frame of meaning, as in the Lectures on Aesthetics, but also with allusion to the question of knowing how to go on, ‘following a rule’, etc., in the Investigations.
3 Bhaskar, op.cit., pp. 148, 155-6; see also the same author's earlier book, The Possibility of Naturalism (Brighton, 1979), pp. 69–82.
6 See David Kolb, The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger and After (Chicago, 1986), p. 87: [Hegel] is elevating our awareness of our own existence to an awareness of our full necessary conditions and context. There is no move from inside to outside ... For Hegel we are involved in a whole we can come to recognize; we cannot get outside'.
8 Ibid. p. 182.
10 Ibid. ch.4, passim.
11 Ibid. pp. 150–1.
12 Ibid. pp. 155–6; I think that Rose’s criticism, while weighty, does less than justice to Girard’s association of the roots of violence with the anxiety of mimesis. It could be said that Girard, at least by the time of Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, is proposing an understanding of violence as itself the product of a mimetic process of equalization between primitively unequal agents.
13 Arendt is judged most severely of these three as failing to conserve the tension between public and private, i.e. allowing a morally unambiguous place to the self-contained ‘private’ in certain spheres; see ibid., pp. 223–236.
14 Rose, ibid. ch.5 passim.
22 Rowan D. Williams

15 Ibid., pp. 29–30 for a suggestive set of juxtapositions.
16 Ibid., pp. 153 ff., 258–264.
17 Ibid., pp. 147–52.
18 Ibid., p. 148.
19 One could read this as parallel to Augustine’s argument on the nature of evil in Book VII of the Confessions: if evil is a kind of substance, it is either present or absent in a situation, and there is no such thing as moral risk; we are either doomed or safe.
20 Ibid., p. 303; see the whole of pp. 287–307.
21 Ibid., p. 296.
24 Ibid., pp. 75–6.
25 Ibid., p. 5.
26 Ibid., pp. 60–3.
28 Ibid., p. 188.
29 Ibid., p. 182.
30 Ibid., p. 209.
31 The essay on Benjamin sketches the distinction between ‘aberrated’ and ‘inaugurated’ mourning (ibid., pp. 186–7, 209–10). The former is associated with desertion and catastrophic loss; the latter with the sense of being the object of knowing, being known or named by what we do not know or cannot speak of. Rose’s conclusion is that only the latter leaves open the way to forgiveness, because it issues in silence—words give way to a speechlessness that may signify dependence or grace. Benjamin, says Rose, is trapped in ‘aberrated’ mourning, where existence is itself construed as a kind of loss and fall, with grace located in an impossible historical or metaphysical elsewhere.
32 Ibid., p. 8.
34 Ibid., p. 15.
35 Against what seems to be the argument of Jürgen Moltmann in The Trinity and the Kingdom of God (London, 1981) and other works.
37 Rose, Judaism and Modernity, p. 8.