

An Ecozoic Turn to Ethics as First Philosophy

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Religious Metaphysics After Modernity (PARP-6130-02)

December 15, 2022

The Mayan calendar, a cosmological religious system that began its long count in 3114 BC and cycled along for some 5,125 years, marked a significant shift on 21 December 2012 which some hyperbolically felt signaled the end of the world, despite the scientific community's reassurances.¹ Even though ten years have passed since that significant date, we do seem on the precipice of an end.

Recent scientific models produced by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany indicate that without dramatic and immediate action by world leaders, there is little possibility of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius — the threshold established by the Landmark Paris agreement in 2015.² In fact the latest global climate assessment report projects that the planet will warm an average of 2.1 to 2.9C degrees by 2100. Each fraction of a degree advances human suffering and animal extinction exponentially.³ Global warming continues to be so extreme that the *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction* concluded there is an “increasing probability of civilizational collapse.”⁴

The fall from grace into this potential apocalyptic nightmare is completely human made. If viewed as a symptom, the meta-crisis is itself an indicator of something gone drastically awry in human development. At some point humans lost their way and moved from a delicately balanced inter-human, inter-nature horizontal plane crossed by a divinely inspired vertical axis...

¹ Joshua J. Mark, *The Maya Calendar and the End of the World: Why the one does not substantiate the other*,” *World History Encyclopedia*, July 7, 2012, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/416/the-maya-calendar-and-the-end-of-the-world-why-the/>.

² Chris Mooney, Naema Ahmed, and John Muyskens, “We looked at 1,200 possibilities for the planet’s future. These are our best hope,” *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/interactive/2022/global-warming-1-5-celsius-scenarios/>.

³ Max Bearak, “Climate Pledges Are Falling Short, and a Chaotic Future Looks More Like Reality,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/26/climate/un-climate-pledges-warming.html?name=styln-cop27®ion=>.

⁴ Nafeez Ahmed, “UN Warns of ‘Total Societal Collapse ’Due to Breaching of Planetary Boundaries” *bylinetime.com*, May 26, 2022, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/05/26/un-warns-of-total-societal-collapse-due-to-breaching-of-planetary-boundaries/>.

to a nihilistic stance of being caught in the bounded crosshairs of metaphysical alienation and atheism, rational and reductive scientism, techno logicism, and competitive consumerism. To face the ensuing meta-crisis is as much a call for survival as it is an awakening to the untoward beliefs and actions of humans who are completely responsible for its apocalyptic unfolding.

In the philosophical realm, the subject-object stance of rationalist René Descartes and Immanuel Kant's human as the center of his/her own subjective reality both contributed to this unfolding along with its inherent objectification of nature. Yet their work is only a continuation of humans' self-righteous control which had begun far earlier. Western technological achievements that harnessed the power of water and wind date as early as AD 800 and the 12th century, respectively, far earlier than the philosophical work of either Descartes or Kant. Humans heralded power over nature as early as the 8th or 9th centuries with sophisticated plowing tools that did more than scratch the surface but attacked the land with the power of eight oxen. Christianity also played a pivotal role:

“Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁵

Descartes and Kant may have been merely contributors to a centuries' long unfolding, yet their views about animals illuminate the prevailing objectification with humans as center subject. For example, Descartes judged animals to be irrational, and as such found them soul-less and without consciousness; to him they were mere automata.⁶ Kant disliked the callous treatment of animals. Yet he still expressed an indifference to their well-being:

⁵ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1205.

⁶ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 11.

“So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as a means to an end.”⁷

According to Keiji Nishitani in *God and Nothingness*, the seismic split with nature in all its forms and its objectification as being soul-less, combined with humans’ ability to theorize the laws of nature, exploit, and mechanistically overturn them, is the prevailing definition of *progress*.⁸ Yet in the process an inversion has taken place wherein the “controller has become the controlled”⁹. The lives of people today have become impersonal and mechanized. Humans have become deprived of their very humanity and are today being dragged along by the technology they created and have become its slave. Nishitani writes:

“What ought to be the original Form of the relationship between man and nature seems instead to have been perverted into its opposite. This is what is meant by the frequently heard claim that man is being dragged along by the machines he himself has built. This also underlies the problem of the imbalance between the progress of science and the progress of human morality. The crux of the matter is not so much an imbalance as a movement in opposite directions.”¹⁰

Thus, we find ourselves in a nihilistic anthropocentric conundrum.

An Ecozoic Turn to Ethics as First Philosophy

Thomas Berry, who coined the term Ecozoic — the era of ‘the house of living beings’ — writes that “the natural world demands a response beyond scientific insight. The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul.”¹¹ The realm

⁷ Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 51.

⁸ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982), 79-84.

⁹ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 84.

¹⁰ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 87.

¹¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 55.

of philosophy and metaphysics seems to provide an appropriate means to step outside the bounds of our current anthropocentric box into a resurrection of soul.

Philosophy itself is ground, discourse, and a living into¹² that is a both relevant and indeed imperative for this turn despite, or perhaps even due to, its centuries-old existence. In the words of Henri Bergson, philosophy is “to invert the habitual direction of the work of thought”¹³ and is “the ever-renewed effort to transcend our actual ideas and perhaps also our elementary logic...”¹⁴.

On judgment, philosophy holds space for both reciprocity for its own sake (and not for some gain), and for a potential receptivity inherent in the feminine mystique. Historically, it can be argued that the feminine was undervalued in ancient Greece. Herodotus (484-425 BC), for example, wrote of the significant societal differences he observed among Egyptian versus Athenian women. Egyptian women had far greater autonomy and rights (e.g., tribunal positions, inheritors of property) than the women of Athens.¹⁵ However, in some (but not all) writings of Plato and Socrates there is a sense of equality between women and men, based on their ‘nature’ and ‘virtue’ as suited to a particular role, even that of ‘philosopher-ruler.’¹⁶ Socrates describes *Diotima* in the *Symposium* as being “deeply versed in this [love] and many other fields of knowledge”¹⁷. Aristotle, by contrast, is critiqued as believing women to be “morally defective.”¹⁸

¹² Jacob Holsinger Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 222.

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), electronic reproduction PDF, 16.

¹⁴ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 19.

¹⁵ James Pritchard, ed., “Proverbs and Precepts,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 412.

¹⁶ Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Hairy Cobblers and Philosopher-Queens,” *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by Bat-Ami Bar On, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 3-4.

¹⁷ Spelman, “Hair Cobblers and Philosopher-Queens,” 14.

¹⁸ Bat-Ami Bar On, “Introduction,” *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by Bat-Ami Bar On, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), xii.

Despite these contradictory views of women in ancient Greek society, the word philosophy, at its etymological core, suggests a masculine-feminine blending. It consists of two ancient Greek words: *φίλος*--*philos* (noun, masculine) and *σοφία*--*sophiā* (noun, feminine).

Sophia is a word rich in meaning and is defined as “being skilled in handicraft and art,” and as both “practical and philosophical wisdom.”¹⁹ *Sophia* was also one of the four female allegories or virtues reified in a statue keeping watch over the portico of the Library of *Celsus* in *Ephesus*.²⁰ Modern philosophy has witnessed the sage feminine voice coming full blossom in the writings of women such as Iris Murdoch and Catherine Pickstock. The writings of both, in particular Pickstock, will contribute greatly to the discussion about ethics to come.

Philos is something beloved and dear and is often translated as friend. Its ancient Greek meaning speaks to reciprocity where friendship is the caring and being cared for by another, and not something pursued for some end. There is a Homeric proverb that places this meaning of friend close to Levinas’s other that reads: *ἔστιν ὁ φίλος ἄλλοσ αὐτόσ α* — a friend is another self.²¹

The intertwining of these masculine and feminine essences found in this Greek word seem akin to the yin-yang unfolding of the *Tai ji* symbol — with the receptivity of *philos* representing the yin within the yang, and the logos implicit in *sophia*, the yang within the yin. Through the gaze of philosophy then, it seems possible for *anthropos* (humans) and *Gaia* (mother Earth) to engage in a true friend-like, gain-free reciprocity, which also begs us as humans to be open and receptive to the needs and wisdom of our generous host, mother Earth.

¹⁹ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, “σοφία,” 737.

²⁰ Izabela Miszczak, “Library of Celsus in Ephesus,” *Turkish Archeological News*, last modified December 7, 2019, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://turkisharchaeonews.net/object/library-celsus-ephesus>.

²¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Impression of 1st ed., “φίλος” Oxford: University Press, 1978, 865.

Philosophy, and more specifically, ethics as first philosophy may not be the only ground or resource for turning tide on the current meta-crisis. It does most certainly provide a type of consciousness or approach to living that can lead and inspire other disciplines, as it did in ancient times, and out of which non-choice decisions may fall as a given necessity²². A ‘turn to ethics’ also remediates and captures the import and secular sense of a civilization that has lost its moral, empathetic, and heart-centered compass.

For guidance, we turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish descent. He claimed ‘ethics as first philosophy’ in response to his own cataclysmic time and personal objectification as a prisoner of war in the *Fallingbosten* camp during WWII. He was held captive there for five years and somehow survived.²³ It was in the camps that he formulated his ethical philosophy that focused on ‘the face of other,’ a turn from the de-humanizing subject-object orientation to a complete caring for of other before oneself. His was not a bi-directional caring of the *I-Thou* cast²⁴, but embraced the sentiment of being “a hostage for the other, obeying a command before having heard it.”²⁵ He took the idea of ethics, good, and right action a step beyond the more equitable ‘doing unto others as you would have them do unto you’²⁶. He writes:

“...we have shown that substitution for another lies at the heart of responsibility, and thus, an undoing of the nucleus of the transcendental subject, the transcendence of goodness, the nobility of a pure *supporting*, an ipseity of pure election.”²⁷

²² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 38.

²³ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Emmanuel Levinas,” last modified August 7, 2019, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/#CiteWorkLevi>.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the Infinite,” interview by Richard Kearney, in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, edited by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 82.

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” *Philosophy Today* (Summer 1978): 137.

²⁶ Mathew 7:12. “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you: do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” (King James translation).

²⁷ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 136.

The face of other is a personal face-to-face encounter, head on, so to speak, not a side-by-side view. For Levinas, it is through the eyes that the soul is encountered. As a student of Edmund Husserl, Levinas considered himself a phenomenologist, yet did not reject the ineffable nature of the divine. One might argue that the basis of his ethical proposition goes too far with its strong language and sentiment of being ‘a hostage for the other.’ The language of his commitment to ethics has a forcefulness that seems on the brink of self-inflicted violence. Yet for Levinas ethics that demands not only responsibility for, but subjection to the other is transcendence, an awakening, and love without Eros.²⁸ It was through giving one’s life completely over to and in service of other that the trace of God was revealed:

“For ethics, it is only in the infinite relation with the other that God passes (*se passe*), that traces of God are to be found. God thus reveals himself as a trace, not as an ontological presence... It is not by superlatives that we can think of God, but by trying to identify the particular inter-human events which open toward transcendence and reveal the traces where God has passed.”²⁹

Although Levinas’s work does not capture the full extent of today’s ethical dilemma which is not only inter-human but inter-nature in essence, his philosophy stands as one of the earliest that stepped beyond the ego-centric, rationalistic subject-object horizon that held (and continues to hold) sway over the Western world. His philosophy continues to have powerful import in its baseline proposition: ethics as first philosophy and giving one’s life in service of

²⁸ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 136.

²⁹ Levinas, “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the Infinite,” 82.

that which is inclusive beyond what might be considered one's own ego-centric³⁰, subjective focus.

In this time of planetary crisis, we need ethics and morals that originate from the inside out, and from the outside in. It is a call to love, empathy, compassion, and receptivity to the entirety of the world around us that is also in us. Without this fully active and inspired inner-outer sanctum, we risk not only turning our ethics and morality over to rules created and enforced by autocratic regimes³¹, but of living out lives caught in an isolated mind-matrix that is void of meaning and purpose.

On judgment, the following principles are interior to this Ecozoic turn of ethics as first philosophy. They are offered as emancipatory themes out of the constraints of the Western mindset. It is important to note that I do not presuppose to have answers for our current world predicament. Furthermore, I am not sure that the necessary new paradigms can channel through and source from the Western realm given its prevailing subject-object and 'progress-oriented' horizons.

However, with these caveats in mind, I offer three principles or themes that are gleaned from the lineage of philosophers who questioned a reductionistic, analytic, or existentialist course which concurrently stripped philosophy of its metaphysical substance and contributed to humans' (and consequently the planet's) fall from grace. Each will be explored in turn. They are:

- "Unselfing" and Stepping Outside the Cartesian Subject-Object View,
- Reconsideration of the Myth of the Given, and a

³⁰ This is not to disparage the importance of having an individuated sense of self, and is not equivalent with the Self of Jung's individuation process or the personal Dao of a Daoist philosophical perspective.

³¹ Jacob Sherman, "Philosophy in a Time of Crisis," PARP-6060-01: Introduction to Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness (class lecture, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, July 5, 2019), accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOo7XuL9CM4>.

- Re-engagement with the Participatory Ritual Experience.

“Unselfing” and Stepping Outside the Cartesian Subject-Object View

There are a number of contemporary philosophers who have sought to explore the nature of being that steps outside the Cartesian subject-object view — a view which makes the world and nature dead and inanimate and seen purely as a ‘collection of objects’ out there.

Iris Murdoch offers up ideas for an ‘unselfing’ through the giving of deliberate attention to the beauty of art and nature. Murdoch sees transcendence beyond romanticizing in the beauty of trees, mountains, birds, and animals and likens their mere independent existence as the mystical in and of itself.³² Art, or ‘good art’ as she defines it, is a sacrament that offers an experience that takes us out of our self-absorbed obsession, and “inspires love in the highest part of the soul.”³³

Along similar lines, Jean Gebser views art as the bridge to the numinous. He writes:

“The capacity for numinous experiences loses its energizing intensity in proportion to the increment of consciousness... and ...as the possibility diminishes for numinous experiences from nature there is a proportionate increase for such experiences from art as created by man.”³⁴

William Desmond’s work with what he terms primal ethos and metaxological philosophy is a beautiful exemplar of how the world might be re-experienced and perceived beyond the dualistic I-It, culture-nature, human-non-human Cartesian gaze. Desmond describes the modern

³² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 82-83.

³³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

³⁴ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984), 202.

human dilemma as stemming from a kind of ‘epistemic irritability’ with the ‘equivocity of being’:

“This equivocity is a perplexing ambiguity in things whose significance often eludes us. Of this we are tempted to think we ought to be master. The drive to be the determining measure and a kind of ontological irritation and impatience go hand in hand. We must construct modes of knowing and active interventions that make us the measure of what is other to us, especially as so elusively equivocal.”³⁵

This quote calls to mind the research of Iain McGilchrist which identifies the lead tendencies of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Desmond’s ‘epistemic irritability’ that results from ‘equivocity’ is in sync with the left hemisphere’s proclivity toward analysis and need for the literal and finite. Anger and disgust serve as its two primary emotions. As such, McGilchrist describes the current crisis as humans under the spell of “left brain chauvinism.”³⁶

Desmond’s metaxological philosophy provides a way of stepping outside the dualistic entrapment that is inherent in the univocal, equivocal, and dialectical senses of Being. The univocal sense, which at first glance appears non-dualistic, implies dualism, nonetheless. According to Desmond, it invokes curiosity and the need for a determinate solution to a determinate problem.³⁷ Thus, as ‘one’ it sets itself apart from ‘another’ revealing an implicit duality. The equivocal sense activates ‘erotic perplexity’ and the diversity between mind and being, or between self and other. It is a state strongly desirous of resolution as there is a discomfort in its bifurcation between the ‘two.’ The dialectical sense mediates as a conjunction

³⁵ William Desmond, “The Metaphysics of Modernity,” in *Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, edited by Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward, June 2013, 7.

³⁶ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 2nd ed. (London: Perspectival Press, 2022), 248.

³⁷ William Desmond, “Being, Determination, and Dialectic: On the Sources of Metaphysical Thinking,” in *The Review of Metaphysics* 48, no. 4 (June 1995), 762.

and reintegration of the ‘two’ — one might even consider it a potential middle path. Yet, Desmond qualifies that it is limited to the self. Thus, as a turning within oneself that is personal (self-determining) it still holds the dualism of this own self-containment versus other.³⁸

It is only in the metaxological sense that something new is opened. Its very languaged articulation which includes ‘meta,’ which is of course also ‘meta’-physical, encompasses the dual sense of the term, both ‘above’ and ‘within.’³⁹ It is a placed attention on the relational and the ‘in the between’ whereby the mind and being are in communal relationship in a fashion that transcends self and embraces other. Thus, it is a simultaneous, present moment pluvosity which awakens what Jean Gebser refers to as “the concretion of the spiritual”⁴⁰ and which Desmond describes as “the pre-objective community of mindfulness and being that is inarticulately given in the original astonishment.”⁴¹

The appearance and ability to see that which elicits original or agapeic astonishment, such as witnessing a beautiful sunset, being mesmerized by the light of the moon, taking in the full crimson redness of a rose, or contemplating a beautiful work of art, is a calling out of our subjective being. It takes us out of ourselves. It is what Desmond refers to as an “overdeterminancy⁴²”. It is a calling (or a lure, in the words of Catherine Pickstock) to the good, the beautiful, the true. It is what might be thought of as a moral calling... out of which evokes an ethical, a right, a good response.

³⁸ William Desmond, “Being, Determination, and Dialectic,” 762.

³⁹ William Desmond, “Being, Determination, and Dialectic,” 768.

⁴⁰ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 541-2. He writes: “The grand and painful path of consciousness emergence, or, more appropriately, the unfolding and intensification of consciousness, manifests itself as an increasingly intense luminescence of the spiritual in man.”

⁴¹ William Desmond, “Being, Determination, and Dialectic,” 763.

⁴² William Desmond, “Being, Determination, and Dialectic,” 763.

Metaxological metaphysics, if not a morphogenic equivalent, is of the same family as Gebser's states of consciousness. Its senses of Being — the univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological — align to some degree with Gebser's archaic, magical/mythical, mental, and integral states. Both philosophies hold the same distinction in that the metaxological sense and the integral consciousness state consist of a *diaphaneity* (to coin a Gebserian term) whereby all states/senses are simultaneously present in their pluvosity. It is only through this simultaneous holding and experiencing that something new is opened and a given transcendence can be realized.

Ethics as first philosophy in the Ecozoic is a quest for knowledge, for the good, and for right action that is not unilaterally imposed by humans, but that strives to transverse and transcend the nature-culture divide. It suggests a participatory epistemology for the collective truth to be revealed. After all, one does not philosophize or explore ethical behaviors and actions in isolation. Thus, there appear to be two additional themes in service of the potential openings implicit in ethics as first philosophy. Both are iterations of what could be considered a relational call and response — an open frame reciprocity and ongoing *becoming* whose only finite determinacy is indeterminacy and a constant unfolding. The first is a reconsideration of the 'myth of the given,' and the second is a re-engagement with participatory ritual experience.

Reconsideration of the Myth of the Given

In pre-historic times humans were in communion and in conversation with each other (with or without language) and also with nature. Humans and nature participated in a shared intelligence and knowing which allowed for food appropriation and plentitude and extended to feats considered impossible from a modern perspective. An example is found in the North

American tribal people (100 BC to AD 500) who knew the seasons, terrains, rivers, and star movements so well that they could coordinate ritualistic ceremonies lasting only five to six days even though they lived hundreds of miles apart.⁴³

Primordial gift exchange, the foundation of every human society⁴⁴, served to facilitate the creation and cohesion of human-to-human relationships, and was also ritualistically enacted by tribal peoples with animals and spirits⁴⁵ through ritual offerings and sacrifice. Catherine Pickstock calls our attention to the importance of this reciprocal exchange and proffers that there might be new learning for modernity through “a reversed enrichment of such pre-modern notions [inner-outer linking that is simultaneously corporeal, linguistic, and social] by a newer sense of the importance of body, language, time, and community in the attainment of knowledge...”⁴⁶. Ethics as first philosophy is not ethics in search of a reductionistic finality or finite determinancy, but rather ethics seeking means and ways of being that provide openings to new insights, knowledge, moments of agapeic astonishment, and a caring communion and friendship with Gaia.

In *Aspects of Truth*, Pickstock traces the demise of the primordial gift exchange into a versioning of an ‘inert given’ of logical propositions and structures void of any trace of theological or psychological renderings.⁴⁷ As such the divinely inspired ‘gift of being/Being’ took on a fantastical, non-real sense and was nominalized as the ‘myth of the given.’ With the transformation of the primordial gift exchange into an ‘inert given’ humanity lost many of its implicit relational qualities, such as there being a symbolic binding together that is inter-human

⁴³ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 456-463.

⁴⁴ Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 42.

⁴⁵ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 46.

⁴⁶ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 31.

⁴⁷ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 50 & 59.

and inter-nature; an ongoing relational covenant that resists contractual closure; and a paradox of ‘bound freedom’ and ‘obligatory gratitude’ that transgresses the Law of Non-Contradiction.⁴⁸

This transgression steps reality outside the horizon of pure rationalistic logic and leaves space for what Thomas Aquinas spoke about as a kind of felt-sense intending that embraces both *verbum mentis* and *verbum cordis* and which Pickstock contends “was both affective and imaginative”⁴⁹.

Pickstock turns to Jean-Luc Marion in reconsideration of the ‘myth of the given.’ Unlike Heidegger or Husserl who allow for little or no hermeneutics of the phenomena that are given or that make an appearance, Marion allows for a richer, more meaningful, interpretation of phenomenon (or donation) with his three-fold typology: 1) phenomenon weak in intuition (intended abstractions), 2) daily utilitarian objects, and 3) phenomenon ‘saturated’ in intuition.⁵⁰ The third typology calls to mind Desmond’s references to art, nature, and religion as catalysts of agapeic astonishment.⁵¹ However, Pickstock posits that Marion is unable to commit to the possibility of the sublime or luminous within this third typology due to his resistance to any type of Catholic analogy.⁵²

Despite Marion’s conflicting views that this — the most saturated donation or gift — is on the one hand holistically received and inherently complex with facets appearing that were always there but hidden, and on the other hand deficient in some way and in need of human hermeneutics to complete its meaning, he denied any shared or interpretive reciprocity when it came to the ‘pure gift.’⁵³ Thus, even though for him the most saturated phenomenon is the

⁴⁸ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 68.

⁴⁹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 63.

⁵⁰ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 76.

⁵¹ William Desmond, “Neither Deconstruction nor Reconstruction: Metaphysics and the Intimate Strangeness of Being,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 157, vol. XL, no. 1 (March 2000): 47-48.

⁵² Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 80.

⁵³ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 81.

Levinasian ‘other’ which he views as an ethical gift and as a call for love⁵⁴, he still conceives of the ‘pure gift’ (a non-lived gift, if you will) as unilateral and devoid of any circular connection other than a generalized sense of gratitude given to an anonymous donor from an anonymous recipient. It is a gift void of heart-mind, imagination, reciprocated connection, communicated intention, and the ‘free binding’ paradox of its most primordial form. Thus, Pickstock views his ‘pure gift’ as one of “ethicised nihilism”⁵⁵.

Pickstock’s analysis and reconsideration of the ‘myth of the given’ leads back to the primordial idea of gift exchange that necessitates interaction with people and with living and non-living things. She writes:

“It is these interactions, shaped by theologies of the gift and philosophies of participation, that can be a site of the ‘conformation’ of mind with reality which is the arising or event of truth.”⁵⁶

If ‘being’ is once again embraced as the ‘gift given’ to humans then, as she states early in the chapter, “to know is to make a kind of appropriate asymmetrical return in response to being; to know is in some way to offer prayer and worship”⁵⁷.

Whether or not one is open to prayer and worship, there are indeed many actions and participatory acts that can be in service of recognition, gratitude, and care for the preciousness of nature and of our living planet. Realization of the gift is perhaps an initial step followed by a return that is explicitly made and consciously intended. It begs consideration of not only what our appropriate response is to the Divine who begat our being/Being, but to our cosmos and

⁵⁴ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 67.

⁵⁵ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 82.

⁵⁶ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 83.

⁵⁷ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 48.

nature kin, of which we are but a genus, who for centuries have nourished, supported, and made possible our very Being as beings.

Re-engagement with the Participatory Ritual Experience

In the midterm précis for this final paper, I indicated that I planned to discuss ‘pure logic and analysis as incomplete in capturing the scope of the human (and non-human) experience’ as the third and final theme of the Ecozoic turn to ethics as first philosophy. However, after reading Catherine Pickstock’s *Aspects of Truth*, I realized that the participatory ritual experience not only captured this step outside pure logic and analysis, but offered a ‘reversed enrichment’ of a pre-modern, pre-historic notion of how knowledge and insight might be given.

Henri Bergson was already poetically theorizing in 1903 about how something could not be truly known through description, history, and analysis alone. Although he did not mention participatory ritual per se, his philosophical work called for intuition *sans* analysis and a type of metaphysical transcendence where self and other were joined to realize integral knowledge.⁵⁸ He wrote: “This empty and immobile space which is merely conceived, never perceived, has the value of a symbol only. How could you even manufacture reality by manipulating symbols?”⁵⁹

An important aspect of the ritual experience is that it engages the whole of the being and is a call to remind humans of the totality of their intelligence that is found in centers of the body beyond the thinking brain⁶⁰, and in the Bergsonian sense, that makes allowance for the appearance of intuitions without interference from the analytic mind. Even Husserl who

⁵⁸ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1-2.

⁵⁹ Bergson, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 12.

⁶⁰ Jack Meserve, “Your Brain and Your Body Are One and the Same,” *New York Magazine: The Cut*, November 19, 2015, <https://www.thecut.com/2015/11/your-brain-and-body-one-and-the-same.html>.

disallowed hermeneutics from phenomenology since aspects “are all [that] one can conceive of a phenomenon ‘in itself’”⁶¹ saw the body as a border between subjectivity and objectivity. He found touch as pre-eminent over vision since it was a reciprocated sensing where both participants are affected by the shared interaction, while vision was limited to an intersection of two simultaneous one-way gazes that leave both parties unaffected.⁶²

Participatory ritual also entails an important communal experiencing which Pickstock believes is a condition for finding truth, transcendence, and the notion of common sensing:

“The link between the sense of the individual bodies in shared meaning is ‘transubstantiated’ into the link between all the sensing bodies into that shared cultural sensibility which was the earlier meaning of ‘common sense’ present in more judgmental daily use.”⁶³

Raimon Panikkar underscores this communal importance when he writes in *Rhythm and Being: The Unbroken Trinity* that “an individualistic thinking of our destiny is as impossible as a private language”⁶⁴. He is in good company as Thich Nhat Hanh too was predicting as early as 1993 that the *sangha* would lead the way over the individual:

“It is possible the next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community...”⁶⁵.

Communal ritual is a primordial call and response that is both active and passive (‘active receptivity’) and includes both the inner and outer realms of Being with the body as the pivot between subjectivity and objectivity. It is a participatory inter-change that is inspired both

⁶¹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 51.

⁶² Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 57.

⁶³ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 115.

⁶⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 60.

⁶⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Next Buddha May Be a Sangha,” *Inquiring Mind* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1994), https://www.inquiringmind.com/article/1002_41_thich-nhat_hanh/.

horizontally (inter-human, inter-nature) and vertically (divine). It is a way of connecting and communicating with that which does not have language or voice. It is transformative. In light of the current meta-crisis and the necessity of the human inter-nature exchange these latter two benefits are of crucial importance.

Pickstock introduces the idea and significance of participatory ritual through her discussion of Christian liturgy. This liturgy incorporates the ritualistic characteristics mentioned above yet does so within a religious context which is believed to foment a “redemption of the world” by “increasing the absorption and fulfillment of human and cosmic life within liturgical celebration.”⁶⁶

Despite the Christian liturgy’s specialized intention, Pickstock offers gleanings from it that contribute to our understanding of the power of ritualistic experience in general, whether it be secular or theological in nature. For example, there can be both personal and universal learnings revealed through indigenous shamanic rituals with entheogenic substances. These plant medicines offer insight and learning from Mother Earth herself as they are the progeny of her experience and wisdom. Learning, transformation, and revelation are also experienced through extended periods of communal meditation or prayer, such as the multi- and non-denominational Bearing Witness days-long ritual retreats that Roshi Bernie Glassman initiated at Auschwitz in 1996.⁶⁷ Meditation and prayer bring about an attentive state that is both relaxed, yet actively open to that which might be silently communicated from without and within.

⁶⁶ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 139.

⁶⁷ Bernie Glassman, “Buddhism, Reconciliation and Auschwitz: An Interview with Zen Mater Bernie Glassman,” interview by Ari Pliskin, *Huffington Post*, July 16, 2010, last updated May 25, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/buddhism-reconciliation-a_n_646879.

Pickstock traces the history of ritualistic practice and its inherent purpose from the eating and sacrificing rites at *Göbekli Tepe* (9000 BC) in southern Turkey⁶⁸, to pre-monastic ritual where inner purpose and outer gesture were yet undivided, to post-French revolution ritual that functioned primarily as a means of keeping peace, to the fusion of life and liturgy reflected in the ‘mixed creature’ mythos of Christian anthology and the human need for redemption.⁶⁹

She describes the beauty of the Christian liturgical process in its reliance on the lead system of the body. The body is viewed as the mediator of truth, and as capable of teaching the mind that which it does not yet know. The heart-mind is also opened.⁷⁰ There is a belief that in participating in the entirety of the liturgical cycle, with its seasonal and life milestones occurrences, one is gradually transformed through the mystery of revelation.⁷¹

Chanting is undertaken to fuse language and sensing and to elicit the reverberation of the words throughout the entirety of one’s being. Chanting also works to cohere the gathered collective into a living and acting work of art.⁷² The senses are intentionally engaged through music, incense, touch and posture (e.g., kneeling, standing, hands touching, hands and arms raised) to heighten spiritual intensity and enchant matter so that symbolic objects become ‘hyper-real.’⁷³ The ‘partially concealed divine order’ is revealed; lived-life becomes infused with spirit; and one is reminded of life’s sacredness to which one gives thanks continuously as part of the ongoing ritualized liturgical practice.

There is an interesting facet to participatory ritualistic practice and its lead system of the body and the activation of the senses. Iain McGilchrist’s research into the right and left

⁶⁸ I had the privilege of visiting the site in June of 2013 at a time when fighting was just beginning to break out near the Syrian border some 30 miles away. No one was there when I visited. It was an extraordinary site.

⁶⁹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 119-126.

⁷⁰ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 116-117 & 122 & 127.

⁷¹ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 125.

⁷² Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 116 & 129.

⁷³ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 129 & 134.

hemispheres of the brain notes how the left hemisphere, the analytic brain, does not have a good integrated sense of the body.⁷⁴ The full body is known and felt through the right hemisphere, the hemisphere which is the center of creativity, activated through music, movement, and flow, and attends to in-the-moment experiencing. The analytic left hemisphere, by contrast, interferes with creativity especially in its generative stage when new ideas and connections are coming to light.⁷⁵ These hemispheric insights come back full circle to the body as the mediator of truth and of teaching the mind that which it does not know. It is also the right hemisphere that “unlike the left hemisphere...places a premium on truth.”⁷⁶

Participatory ritual experience with its lead system of the body opens the possibility for new creative insights, new ways of perceiving, and new ways of listening to, caring for, and experiencing *Gaia*. Analytics and pure dialectics are not enough. They may even hinder opening to the inception and reception of new possibilities and creative solutions. Ritual provides a means to sense the appropriateness and timing of all as it is inherently relational and mediates the in-between.

The Earth is On Fire

Ethics as first philosophy as presented in this paper is a radical turn. Its internal themes are all significant departures from today’s Western mindset. In summary, they are: 1) ‘Unselfing’ and the pluvosity of integral consciousness and metaxological sense that live in-between and reveal agapeic astonishment and the concretion of the spiritual; 2) Acknowledging the gift of Being/being and its generously given reciprocated return to the Divine and *Gaia*, and, 3)

⁷⁴ McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 188.

⁷⁵ McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 259 & 280.

⁷⁶ McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 179.

Activating the individual and communal body-mind (through all its senses) as the mediator between inner and outer, self and other (human, divine), and culture and nature.

Such radical departures recall the extreme commitment and conviction of Levinas in his words of 'being hostage to the other' and 'obeying a command before having heard it.' His was a philosophy inspired by the dire conditions of a concentration camp where there remained only a thread between life and death. Caring for the other might or might not save her life but helped keep death from becoming a meaningless and lonely end. Drastic times demand drastic actions, new beliefs and perspectives, and new ways of thinking and being. We are now in such a time.

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