Durham E-Theses

Living with Limits: Finitude, competition, and the economy in recent Anglican theology

NEWTON, MICHAEL,DAVID

Living with Limits:
Finitude, competition, and the economy in recent Anglican theology

By Michael <u>David</u> Newton

Abstract

If theology has any hope of speaking into the contemporary climate and biodiversity crisis it needs to attend to the limits that arise from our God-given creatureliness. This thesis thus considers some of the theological implications of the fact that we are creatures of the dust, constrained by spatial and temporal finitude. I explore these in conversation with Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams, and Kathryn Tanner. These three significant voices in contemporary Anglican discourse take as axiomatic both the non-competitive relation of creatures with the divine and the fundamentally competitive limitations of our creaturely lives. Yet, I show in this thesis that, respectively, in thinking about contemplating the divine, relating to others, or making our economic world together, they create confusions around these non-competitive and competitive logics, and so in crucial respects fail properly to attend to our material finitude. In engagement with these three scholars, I seek to provide some clarity around the competitive limitations of our existence. Stemming from this, I highlight the need for a proper distinction to be made between the effects of sin and of finitude, and for eschatological visions that keeps us rooted in the earth. Giving such theological attention to our creaturely limits matters so much as we face up to the impact humanity is having upon this planet; we cannot continue to use material resources, produce waste, and erode the ecological conditions that make all life possible, without restraint. The hope is therefore that this thesis offers a theological perspective that might better help us to learn to live with limits.

Living with Limits:

Finitude, competition, and the economy in recent Anglican theology.

By Michael <u>David</u> Newton

PhD Thesis

Department of Theology and Religion

Durham University

2024

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

To Christopher Newton

Introduction

<u>Overview</u>

This thesis starts with a very simple question. What impact might it have upon our understanding of our relationship to God, one another, and the world beneath our feet, if we genuinely and fully accept that we are creatures of the earth? In this thesis, I seek to properly attend to our basic spatial and temporal finitude, exploring what it might mean to live well within these fundamental material limits.

There has been a failure within my own Anglican theological tradition to take proper and basic account of these spatial and temporal limitations. Whether we think about contemplating the divine, relating to others, or making our economic life together, the strictures of space and time have not been fully considered.

The thesis proceeds by exploring the work of three Anglican theologians – Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams, and Kathryn Tanner – who all emphatically want to take these fundamental limits seriously. Yet, I will demonstrate that even these thinkers, who explicitly seek to stay grounded in our creaturely finitude, still fail – at some junctures – to properly attend to our lives as material beings. Along the way, primarily through engagement with their work, I will sketch out some possible corrections to this perennial underemphasis on our materiality.

The problems I identify circle around three key themes. The first of these is the overarching theme and concerns the fundamentally competitive nature of material life. Re-emphasising our spatial and temporal finitude means accepting that we are – as part of God's good creation – 'subject to fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space'.[1] You and I cannot occupy the same space at the same time; we cannot both eat the same piece of cake. Throughout this thesis the ramifications of this fundamentally competitive reality will be brought to light.

This basic competitive reality of creaturely finitude will be consistently viewed as part of God's good, created order; creaturely flourishing requires us not to seek to escape or overcome such competitive constraints but to live with them.

---

[1] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 92.

Paradoxically, the limits of, and fundamentally competitive reality of, creaturely and material life go hand in hand with an emphasis on the non-competitive relationship with the divine. The two need to be held together, but never elided. Too often though, the competitive relations between creatures can shape our understanding of the relation to the divine, such that being with God is seen to demand some kind of competitive withdrawal of the creature. Equally the non-competitive relation to the divine can lead to underestimating or even erasing the fundamentally competitive limits of material creaturely existence, as we seek in our creaturely relations to imitate this non-competitive logic. Throughout this thesis, I seek to keep the non-competitive "vertical" relation and the competitive "horizontal" relation together but distinct.

The second theme concerns a necessary delineation between the kind of experiences we ascribe to sin and the kind of experiences we ascribe to our God-given material finitude. An emphasis on our spatial and temporal limits means accepting that various forms of vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk, negotiation, failure, and difficulty, are part and parcel of finite and creaturely life and not simply a result of sin. Living in space and through time includes accepting the contingency of our lives as part of God's good creation.

The final theme concerns teleology. Correcting an underemphasis on the limits of space and time means re-shaping the images we use to think about life with God. This is necessary to ensure that we have visions of the good life which are grounded in space and time. We will not be able to face our own material finitude if all our eschatological visions take us away from our spatial and temporal limits.

In sum, to properly attend to our spatial and temporal limits means: a renewed emphasis on the fundamental competitive limitations of material life; a fuller recognition of the impact of contingency that can better distinguish between the effects of finitude and sin; and a shift in our teleology. This is what is required if we are to learn to live with limits, if we are to properly attend to being creatures both material and finite.

Having demonstrated the problems around these three themes in the work of my key interlocutors, and having indicated some possible correctives, I will show some of the outworking of this within an economic context. For the need to properly attend to the strictures of space and time becomes particularly clear given our current ecological crisis. This crisis has come about, in no small part, because of our collective failure to consider ourselves as part of the natural world – as material and finite creatures living in space and

through time. Neo-classical economic theory is premised upon our mythical detachment from the natural world. Rather than seeing the economy as part of a wider ecosphere, it has instead been conceptualised as an 'isolated system'[2] made up of capital and labour. The basic building blocks of energy and matter are not considered.

The famous Circular Flow diagram (first drawn by Paul Samuelson) shows how income flows around the economy; it makes no mention of 'the energy and materials on which economic activity depends, nor of the society within which those activities take place'.[3] Samuelson was not consciously claiming that energy and matter were irrelevant to the workings of the economy, they simply did not feature in the model of income flow. Yet the diagram has shaped our imaginative economic world, at least until recently.[4] The current need to consider both energy and waste – to pay attention to the sources that feed into and the sinks that come out of the circular flow – is now obvious to all. A growing corpus of economic literature – particularly within the field of ecological economics – is seeking to re-write the economic script.

If Christian theology has any hope of speaking into this contemporary crisis, it cannot follow in the footsteps of neo-classical economics, detaching humanity from our material home. Theology must instead be grounded in the reality of our material finitude. We need a theological outlook that can counter our collective myths of ceaseless growth in material throughput, of an unlimited supply of natural resources, and of the incorruptibility of the ecosphere. Contemporary events are making such myths crumble anyway, but theology surely has a duty to help lay the foundations for a new paradigm rather than prop up the crumbling old one.

This sets the cultural context for the question at the head of this thesis. Of course, no Christian theology would set out explicitly to deny the limitations that arise from being creatures in time and space – both the creation myth, and the incarnation, force a positive assessment of our materiality – but, in unintended ways, much of my Anglican tradition has made it harder to properly attend to the impact of our spatial and temporal finitude. And in

---

[2] Herman Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 60.
[3] Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (London: Random House, 2017), p. 66.
[4] *Ibid,* p. 66.

as much as it has done that, it has also unintentionally played into the collective myths that deny the limits of this shared earth that we call home.

The Thematic Problems

In a little more detail then, we take our three thematic concerns in turn. The first concern is a failure to properly attend to the "fundamentally competitive" limitations that come from being material creatures in time and space. Such a failure may well have come about or been exacerbated by the recent trend that emphasises and celebrates non-competition. In her early work, *God and Creation,* Kathryn Tanner makes one of the most fully developed and cogent cases in the 20th Century for a non-competitive relation between God and the world.[5] There is – she argues – no competition for agency or for space between God and creation. God does not have to get out of the way to create space for creatures to act, rather God's agency is the source of our own true agency. This becomes a fundamental axiom for Tanner and is central to all her more recent work.[6] Similar points are made by many others, for example Jeremy Begbie who talks about musical resonance,[7] or John Milbank, whose 'ontology of peace'[8] is grounded in non-competitive difference.

This non-competitive relation is fundamental for Christian theology, but problems arise when it is then applied as a model for thinking about human action in the world, whether we are considering contemplating the divine, relating to others, or making our economy together. There can be an all too easy move from thinking about non-competition between God and the world, to the good of non-competition between creatures. Indeed, in due course I will argue that Tanner herself makes this move too easily.

To avoid this, it is crucial to distinguish between the "fundamentally competitive" reality that is essential to material, creaturely existence, from other forms of competition in which one's gain only comes via another's expense. To assert the essential competitive limits of space and time is not to valorise a zero-sum game, nor is it to deny the possibility of cooperation for the common good. The necessary challenge here is to take heed of this fundamental form of competition whilst at the same time refusing to either dampen the

---

[5] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[6] See, for example, Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[7] Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 141-175.

[8] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,* 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 279.

possibilities for mutual benefit or assert the necessity of a sacrificial economy. Creaturely finitude needs to be distinguished both from the non-competitive relation to the infinite and the sacrificial logic of our sin-ridden existence. The competitive constraints of material life do not mean affirming that your gain only comes at my loss, or vice versa. This thesis thinks through what it means to build a home together within the constraints of spatial and temporal finitude in ways that neither deny our limits nor promote a sacrificial economy.

The use of the language of competition might strike the reader as initially puzzling, given the popular ideas around cut-throat market competition, but the terminology is used advisedly. Our non-competitive relation to the divine can too easily be seen, *tout court,* as the paradigm for good creaturely relations. Competitive relations – of all forms – then come to be seen as wholly negative. By contrast, this thesis seeks to acknowledge that a competitive logic is inherent to material life; it is a part of God's good creation.

The fundamentally competitive logic of our material creaturely existence comes about because of our spatial and temporal finitude. You and I cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Either I am writing this thesis, or I am doing something else. Either this piece of land is used for solar panels, or it is used for arable farming. In other words, there is, for material creatures, always some form of "either / or" logic at work.

By contrast, a non-competitive logic is one in which there is no "either / or". Think of our relation to the divine: it is not as if either God acts, or you act; it is not as if either God is present in that space, or you are. Our relation to the divine is non-competitive; our relation to fellow creatures contains a fundamentally competitive logic, an "either / or".

This fundamentally competitive logic does not seek to deny, or in any sense de-value, various forms of cooperation, or of non-competitive common goods, that can be found in the creaturely world. Nor does it seek to valorise zero-sum games in which one person's gain only comes at another person's loss. The fundamentally competitive logic of creaturehood can coincide with various forms of cooperation and win-win scenarios. A few examples may help to clarify.

Thirty years ago, Suzanne Simard was studying a plantation of firs. She noticed that weeding out birch saplings had a negative impact on the firs; the young firs deteriorated and then died. She had observed a form of mutualism instead of fierce competition between species over scarce resources.

This was the start of her dig into the soil and the discovery of mycorrhizal fungal networks. Simard discovered a network of fungi through which trees were able to communicate and share resources, and went on to suggest that a forest should not be seen as a collection of individual trees competing for resources, but as a cooperative system.[9]

This cooperative discovery clearly *does* undermine understandings of nature in which one creature's or plant's gain can only come at another creature's or plant's loss. It does undermine a zero-sum logic. It does undermine a necessarily sacrificial logic (in which, for example, the birch trees must be "sacrificed" to make way for the profitable firs). But it does *not* undermine the fundamentally competitive logic of spatial and temporal finitude. A certain size forest can only sustain a certain number of trees; at some point the forest (as a whole) is using all available resources of light, soil, and water, in that particular patch of earth. The land can only sustain so many birch and fir trees.

To move to an anthropological example, we might think of the non-competitive good of education. At one level there is no "either / or" logic at work in our learning. It is not as if I know something, or you know something. We can both grow in knowledge together. A teacher passes knowledge onto a student without any loss of knowledge to themselves. Two people in conversation may learn from one another in a form of mutualism and cooperation.

Yet, once again, the competitive logics of finitude do come into play here. A teacher cannot teach an infinite number of students; any teacher is bound by space and time, limited to teaching this group, in this place. In our technological age, we might think we can get around such spatial and temporal limitations, but we must be careful. A book requires paper and so can only be printed so many times. The internet requires electricity-guzzling servers, as well as metal-rich computers on which content may be accessed. Our digital age might seem like it has flown the spatial-temporal nest, but it is still materially grounded and therefore still subject to the fundamental limitations of material creaturely existence.

Learning is clearly not a zero-sum game. It does not rely on a sacrificial logic, such that my learning only comes at your expense. It is, more often than not, much more of a win-win experience where people learn and grow together. Yet still, a fundamentally competitive

---

[9] See Suzanna Simard et al., 'Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field', in *Nature* 388 (1997), 579-582. See also Robert MacFarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), pp. 88-91.

logic does come to bite, purely because we are creatures of space and time. Each of us can only learn so much, teach so much, converse with so many people. Indeed, this competitive logic – this simple logic of limits – is exactly why human cooperation is so crucial in all forms of learning and research. The limits we all face – the simple "either / or" logic of what we learn and who we teach – means wisdom is only found when we come together.

As a third example, I turn to economics and business theory, for even competition in markets should not simply be seen as the opposite of co-operation or mutual benefit. The Harvard Business School Professor, Michael Porter, talks about two forms of competition. He derides 'mutually destructive competition'[10], in which competition pushes companies into a singular focus on operational effectiveness. This simple drive for efficiency can hurt both employees and customers; it puts competing companies into a simple win-lose scenario. It is like two people caught in a desperate attempt to eat the same piece of cake.

Porter contrasts this to forms of competition in which companies are pushed into finding unique positions within the market. "Good" competition, for Porter, involves a company finding, within a particular market, a 'difference it can preserve'.[11] Through innovation and creativity it can find a particular corner of the market which is yet undiscovered. Here, the basic competitive logic – the inability for two companies to serve the same client in the same way at the same time using the same resources (the direct parallel of the inability for two people to eat the same piece of cake) – leads to mutual benefit, as products and services are improved. The basic "either / or" at work here (where a customer will only choose one provider of a particular good or service) drives innovation and creativity; it goes hand in hand with mutual benefit.

This fundamentally competitive logic – this "either / or" which is integral to material creaturely life – does not stand opposed to various forms of cooperation, mutualism, and non-competition. Indeed, sometimes, as highlighted above, the basic competitive logic of our existence is the grounding for cooperation and the building of the common good.

In the recent theological trend that celebrates non-competition, competitive logics have inevitably been derided. There has been a failure to properly attend to these competitive logics partly because they have been seen as the opposite of cooperation and mutualism.

---

[10] Michael Porter, *On Competition,* Updated and expanded edn. (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2008), p. 37.
[11] *Ibid,* p. 38.

But the "either / or" logic that is basic to our material creaturely existence does not mean life is a zero-sum game; it does not mean that one person's gain only comes at another's loss; it does not write sacrifice into the heart of creation. Rather, the limits of life, in space and time, forms the basis on which we build a home together, on this earth.

The second concern is a failure – within my own Western-Anglican tradition – to properly distinguish between the effects of finitude and of sin. So, for example, John Milbank, in his *magnus opus,* seeks to expound his claim that Christianity encodes 'transcendental difference as peace'.[12] But, as various commentators have noted, his vision seems to leave little or no room for learning through struggle, for negotiation, for misrepresentation, for things risked, mistakes made, or conflicts worked through.[13] Such experiences do not simply occur – as Milbank would want to argue – because we inhabit a postlapsarian world, but more fundamentally because of the reality of our contingent and material lives. To suggest this, is *not* to write sin into the heart of existence, but simply to attend to the reality of our spatial and temporal limitations.

In a world of contingency, where we do not know what will happen next and we do not know what others are thinking, making a common world is necessarily difficult. In a world in which resources are limited and space and time constrain us, we develop forms of cooperation that must be *worked at.*

At the heart of the criticisms of Milbank's work is a broader debate around sin and finitude. What is a result of our temporal and spatial finitude, and what is the effect of our fallen propensity to make damaging choices for self, others, and world? This is one of the questions at the heart of this thesis, and seeking to delineate the confused territory around sin and finitude is crucial for this thesis.

The third concern is a failure within my tradition to provide eschatological imaginings still constrained by the limits of space and time. For example, Eugene Rogers writes about our incorporation into the divine life, and the way in which humans will 'need no room of their own to act in, when they inhabit God's infinite roominess'.[14] Here is an eschatology that ignores, or even seeks to overcome, our fundamental spatial limitations. Rogers' vision

---

[12] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory,* p. 6.

[13] See for example, Graham Ward, 'John Milbank's Divina Commedia', *New Blackfriars*, 73 (1992), 311-318.

[14] Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside of the Modern West* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 222. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

comes at the end of a book in which he emphasises just how important it is that the 'Spirit rests on bodies' (p. 14). He chastises the talk of the last century in which the Spirit 'has been ever more evoked, and ever more substance free' (p. 1) and contrasts it to ancient Greek and Syriac texts in which talk of the Spirit was always tied to 'talk of holy places, holy people, and holy things' (p. 1). So here one might expect an eschatology that takes our materiality with proper seriousness. Yet, in his eschatological musings, meaningful talk about bodies, as we understand them (as things that occupy space and move through time) is transcended.

This is not necessarily a problem for eschatology itself. There is no reason to assume that, just because it is unintelligible for us to conceive of a human identity without space and time, such a possibility cannot exist within the life of God. We must surely learn to rest with such apophaticism. The problem instead is how such an eschatology feeds back into our hopes and dreams for *this* world. As Sallie McFague points out, at least part of the work of eschatology is to help us consider an 'imagined world both prophetic and alluring',[15] that we might seek to make it a reality on *this* earth.

At least some of our eschatological visions should judge the present and present visions of what might be. If, instead, our imaginings transcend material finitude there is no possibility of eschatology helping us build a better tomorrow. To keep us grounded, to ensure that we remember we are but dust – and can build a home together with that dust – we need eschatological visions that remain wedded to our creaturely material finitude. As Mary Midgley puts it, 'The way in which we imagine the world determines what we think important in it'.[16] Our future imaginings will shape our priorities. Only with visions grounded in space and time will we be able to have any hope of speaking into the crises of our day.

Hence, even if we accept the need for apophatic eschatologies unmoored from our understanding of space and time, we need – alongside them – visions of the end that enable us to build a better future. We need a *telos* that is this-worldly. This is the third and final central theme that will come up repeatedly through the thesis. If we are seeking to properly attend to the impact of creaturely material finitude we cannot just imagine its overcoming, but need goals for which to aim, visions of hope for *this life,* of what might be possible in our

---

[15] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 198.
[16] Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

relation to God, others, and the world, within material limits. As Mike Berners-Lee suggests, 'We don't spend enough time imagining good futures'.[17]

In various unintentional ways then modern theological motifs have, at the very least, unintentionally played into cultural myths that deny our spatial and temporal limitations. A rightful acknowledgement of the non-competitive relation between God and creatures can lead to a neglect of the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space. An emphasis on an ontology of peace does not give proper attention to our essential contingency. Visions that transcend the limits of space and time provide no imagining of a better tomorrow in this world. In as much as our spatial and temporal finitude is underplayed in contemporary theological discourse, it leaves us alone to our destructive fantasies of a world without limits.

These three motifs thus provide us with the three areas of contention that are central to this thesis. There is a conversation about the fundamentally competitive strictures of space and time. Clearly a non-competitive structure is crucial in thinking about the relation between God and creatures, but it cannot be simply applied to creaturely relations. There is a debate about sin and finitude. The effects of creaturely contingency need to be clarified. There is a question about *telos*. We need visions of God's Kingdom on earth that do not seek to transcend material finitude.

By explicitly focusing on the limits that come from living in space and through time, my hope is that we are better enabled to speak into the crises of our day; to undercut the myths that detach us from our earthly home, and to re-root us in the dust from which we come and to which we will return.

The Route Map

There is a plethora of ways into this terrain. One way would be through so-called contextual theologies which have often given significant attention to our materiality and embodied particularity. We might think of eco-theologies,[18] body theologies,[19] or black

---

[17] Mike Berners-Lee, *There is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 8.

[18] For example, Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

[19] For example, Michelle Voss Roberts, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

theologies.[20] However, writing as a priest in the Church of England, I am choosing to work with some of the major theological voices within my own theological tradition, seeking to bring an internal critique within an Anglican purview.

I will explore this disputed terrain via an in-depth engagement with the work of Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams, and Kathryn Tanner, in turn. These are three contemporary and widely read Anglican theologians who are all trying to pay attention to creaturely materiality. All three seek to properly attend to the strictures of space and time. Much of their work circles around the questions we have already noted: of competition and mutual flourishing, of sin and finitude, of purpose and end. And yet, I will argue that all of them take a wrong turn somewhere or other in relation to one or more of these three areas of contention. They forget the fundamentally competitive limits of time and space, or conversely write sacrifice into the heart of creaturely life; they confuse sin with finitude; they fail to give teleological visions grounded in space and time. Often, we will see through their work that these three areas of contention are entangled with one another. These three thinkers thus provide an ideal trio for this thesis.

Most of Sarah Coakley's work pivots around the locus of contemplation. She attempts to construct a theology on its knees, constantly making the connection between our contemplation of God and our contemplation about God, all in the context of our materiality, and specifically our embodiment. So, for example, she constructs a genealogy of early Trinitarianism in which a prayer-based emergent Trinitarianism gave way over time to a relegation of the Spirit, due to issues of gender, sexuality, and power.[21]

Coakley presents a picture of life with God which is avowedly non-competitive. She, for example, takes aim at a host of writers who she sees as construing a competitive Christology,[22] and at the same time she is manifestly serious about attending to our creatureliness, particularly in the guise of gender and sexuality. Yet (as others have pointed out) she appears to bring in competitive constructions into the God-human relation,

---

[20] For example, Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of* Race (London: Yale University Press, 2010); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race and being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

[21] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 100-151.

[22] See Sarah Coakley, 'Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis' in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying God,* ed. by C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 246-264.

implying over and over again that unity with the divine requires creaturely withdrawal. Such criticisms can however fall into the opposite error: rather than bringing the competitive logics of temporal and spatial finitude into life with God, they instead push the non-competitive logics of divine relation into the fundamentally competitive relations of creatures. Coakley's own focus, as well as the arguments of those critiquing her (particularly Linn Marie Tonstad) thus provide an excellent way in to consider the impact of our spatial and temporal limitations on our contemplation of the divine.

The first section of the chapter on Coakley will consider her theological method, which she names *théologie totale.* This seeks to 'bind questions of theological method, contemplative practice, and desire into a new tether'.[23] Such a method seeks to ensure that our relation to God and reflection about God are engaged with both bodily practices of prayer and the lived experiences of pray-ers, through the insights of the social sciences. On the surface this appears to be a promising method which ensures that consideration of our relationship to God is tied to consideration of our embodiment, and more generally our experience as material and finite creatures in this world. Yet, in the course of the exploration, I will suggest some concerns – not so much with the broad contours of her method, but with the concrete shape it takes.

Having explored Coakley's methodology, I will take an excursus into her Christology. A prayer-based approach to theology requires thinking about Jesus' own relation to the Father. If we are concerned primarily about 'right contemplation of God'[24] then we must consider the contemplation of Christ, and for Coakley this means specifically thinking about his *kenosis* (his self-emptying). In this section, questions of competitive and non-competitive logics come to the fore. Ultimately, I will suggest that the way in which Coakley parses Christ's *kenosis* – as a form of contemplation that we are to emulate – creates several problems. Indeed, I will suggest that her interpretation of Christ as the one in whom we see the concurrence of 'non-bullying divine "power" *with* "self-effaced" humanity'[25] is the basis for most of the questions that follow.

Her Christological construction creates questions around sin and finitude, purpose and end, and non-competitive logics. Is self-effacement the stance of human flourishing or the

---

[23] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 35.
[24] *Ibid,* p. 2.
[25] Sarah Coakley, '*Kenōsis* and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing' in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 3-39 (p. 31).

necessary orientation for purgation? (In other words, is self-effacement an ethical good connected to creaturely finitude or a necessary purgative stance connected to sin)? If it is a stance that we should adopt for the process of purgation are there more positive ways in which we might talk about the goal and orientation of contemplation? And finally, does Coakley's Christology set up a competitive logic between God and Creation?

These are then the broad questions that set the agenda for the final section that considers what Coakley has to say about rightful contemplation of the divine. For Coakley – as we will come to see – contemplation is inevitably entangled with questions of vulnerability and power, sexual and gendered symbolics, spatialization and competition. Coakley is surely right to point out such entanglements if our reflection about, and relation to, God is ever going to properly attend to our temporal and spatial limitations as material creatures. And yet, in all three of these areas I identify ways in which Coakley's own exposition of these entanglements undermine her intention to make matter, matter. I end by suggesting a different style of eschatology which holds onto the limitations of material life and offers a positive *telos* for our contemplative journey.

The second chapter seeks to consider the impact of our spatial and temporal limitations on our relationship to one another. I do this in conversation with Rowan Williams. Questions of sin and finitude, purpose and end, and non-competitive logics are never far from the surface in his work. For Williams, relationship is at the very heart of existence itself. It is at the heart of God, of creation, and of what it means to be human. The chapter thus begins with an exploration of this relationality, charting the centrality of relationship to all of Williams' thinking.

This lays the groundwork for a consideration of two intractable characteristics of such relationality, for us who are bound by space and time, namely difficulty and risk. The competitive limits of our existence mean that we are inevitably caught up in unavoidable forms of difficulty and risk. We must negotiate through incompatible goods, desires that are in opposition, ways of thinking which cannot be brought into easy synthesis. Any engagement with another person, or even another thing, creates some form of resistance to our own ego. Relation to others requires negotiation such that together we can establish a shared world. There is an inherent difficulty about this, that comes not just because of our sinful egos, but because we are contingent beings who all occupy a slightly different place in

the world. Mistakes, misunderstandings and mishaps are a part and parcel of finite life. We are confronted with difficulty.

Along the road, we will consider the difficulties inherent in language, in which misrepresentation is always possible, and in which no word is ever final but always leads to new questions. We will think about the difficulties that arise from being people who grow through time, who learn by making mistakes. We will explore the difficulty of negotiating difference, and the way our own identity and our inclusion in a wider community necessarily means our sense of self and of others is always something that must be negotiated. We will consider how relating well to others requires the difficulty of letting another be properly *other* to our own agenda and desires.

Equally, as creatures bound by the competitive constraints of materiality, we are confronted with risk, or uncertainty. We must walk into the unknown, chart one course and forsake another. To be a contingent being is to be uncertain about what is to come, and to be unable to bring the future entirely under one's own control. We do not know how another will respond, or whether they will understand what is trying to be conveyed, or how they might use or even abuse what has been offered to them. There is always the possibility for misapprehension; for what we do and say to fail to have the consequences we desire.

Through an exposition of the difficulty and risk that come from the competitive limitations of our creaturely existence, questions around the effects of sin and the implications of finitude are central. There is no doubt that greater clarity in Williams' own work in this area would be helpful.

In the final part of this second chapter, I turn to consider Williams' use of the rhetoric of dispossession that pervades his corpus. I argue that the rhetoric is unnecessary and unhelpful, and in fact pushes against what he wants to say about the centrality of relationships, as well as the importance of difficulty and risk. I take issue with the way in which Williams uses the idea of dispossession as a way to think about the human vocation. In particular – and again returning to the three themes outlined above - I suggest that his use of the rhetoric confuses questions around sin and finitude, does not manage to give us any coherent *positive* vision for this life, and fails to properly attend to the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space. To do away with the rhetoric may well help Williams' work provide a more coherent and positive vision of what it entails for us to relate to one another in ways befitting our creaturely material finitude.

The third and final chapter considers the impact of our temporal and spatial limitations on our relationship to the world, and specifically on our economic thinking. How might we "make home together" within material limits? To think this through I take a more interdisciplinary approach, engaging with the field of ecological economics. For economics, at least etymologically, is all about home-making. How might we re-think our economic paradigms in such a way as to consider the earth beneath our feet, and not just the circular flows within the house?

The chapter begins with a brief survey of the field of theological economics. In accord with one of the recurring motifs of this thesis, I outline a broad consensus on the need to consider questions of *telos* and purpose. Such an emphasis is a direct attack on the neo-classical economic paradigm that focuses purely on utility, on maximisation of individual preferences. A similar kind of attack is also found within the discipline of economics itself, as the imaginary figure of *homo economicus* is increasingly disparaged for more realistic understandings of how humans actually behave and what drives them.

Unfortunately, much theological economics appears to simply stop here, with a focus on the question of purpose. Having critiqued an emphasis on utility, questions of policy are often left to others. I want to push beyond the teleological questions, suggesting constructive economic proposals that are aligned with the theological motifs of this thesis.

In doing so I am of course not moving into unchartered waters. Albino Barrera – for one – has sought to bring theological ideas to bear upon economic policy. For example, he makes a strong theological case for the need to address injurious pecuniary externalities.[26] Another who seeks this more constructive work is Kathryn Tanner, and my third chapter engages with her work in detail. She moves beyond questions of purpose to think through how central theological ideas might construct and critique our current economic practices and policies.

---

[26] Whilst neo-classical economic theory often attempts to address technological externalities (e.g. pollution), it does not seek to address pecuniary externalities (e.g. job losses via outsourcing) which are seen as simple by-products of over-all global efficiency gains. Barrera makes the case that economic security should be seen as a gift of God for all, and that particularly injurious pecuniary externalities should be addressed. He then turns to consider the agricultural protectionism of developed nations, which seeks to address the possible injurious effects on farmers that could arise if agricultural trade was liberalised. He boldly criticises the policy, because of the harmful effects on the developing world, but also ironically sees it as pointing 'to the promise and possibilities of systemic assistance for victims of adverse pecuniary externalities'. Albino Barrera, *Economic Compulsion and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 211.

In *Economy of Grace,* she considers how God's non-competitive, unconditional, and universal gift-giving might be a model to shape our economic policy making.[27] Whilst there is undeniably a huge amount of worth in the theological foundations and in the constructive proposals, I find myself ultimately questioning whether Tanner has properly contended with the limitations of our material planet. Again, returning to the overriding pre-occupation of this thesis, I argue that the non-competitive logics of God's relationship with the world are applied too directly to our home-making; the inherent competitive limitations of space and time are underplayed.

In her other major book that engages with economics, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism,* Tanner explores how a (particular) Christian understanding of time stands radically opposed to the implicit understanding of time embedded in capitalism today.[28] Two basic problems come to the fore in my exposition of this work. The first is that Tanner seems to read our current capitalist system rather one-dimensionally, as a fixed and unified beast. Second, I question the way in which Tanner thinks about time. For her, grace creates radical time discontinuities: the past is something we are free from, the present is something we are free to live in moment by moment, and the future is something entirely other. Whilst clearly grace does enable liberation and new beginnings, Tanner advocates something so radically disjunctive that there is no time in which to grow, to learn, and to change. Our God given and good temporal limitations appear overcome in the cross and resurrection.

Three key themes come out of my exposition of her work: the need to attend to planetary limits; the need to attend to the complexities of economic life; and the need to think about being creatures who move slowly through time. These then create the building blocks for the second half of the chapter which seeks to think about the implications of our creaturely material finitude for our home-making, for our economic life together.

I first consider the limits to growth on a finite material planet, and, from this, I consider the need to build a post-growth economic system. I suggest that we need to change what we measure, moving away from the singular and singularly unhelpful GDP figure, towards something that take seriously the complexities and multi-layered realities of our lives, and is (in accord with the themes of this thesis) focused on *telos,* on purpose. Second, I suggest a need for our financial system to be reformed in ways that seek to slow money down, and so

---

[27] Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
[28] Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2019).

parallel our own slow walk through time, re-connecting finance to the slow work of making home together.

Neither of these suggestions are new or novel in economic literature. Instead, what I hope to do in this thesis is connect these ideas with a theological emphasis on our material finitude. In other words, I hope to show there are good theological reasons to take these kinds of economic ideas seriously. For, behind these economic proposals lie the same broad set of questions that the thesis has circled around throughout. Questions of sin and finitude, of telos and purpose, and of competitive logics are all swirling around as I consider the limits to growth. What kind of limits to growth are inherent to our creaturely lives, rather than a product of sin? How might we re-think an end or goal beyond growth? And most fundamentally, what might it mean to properly attend to the competitive logics of creaturely existence, of our usage of matter and energy? Asserting the limits to material growth, considering goals beyond growth, slowing finance down to re-connect it to our material world, are some of the economic corollaries of a theology that is rooted in our material home.

In all, I hope that this work helps us to properly attend to our spatial and temporal limitations. We contemplate the divine, relate to one another, and make our home on this earth together, as finite and material creatures. May we learn to live with limits.

Chapter One: Contemplating

1. Foundations

1.1 Introduction

What impact might it have upon our understanding of our relationship to God, if we were to properly attend to our fundamental spatial and temporal finitude? This is the overarching question for this chapter and forms the first part of the tripartite question that this thesis seeks to explore.

It will do so through engagement with the texts of Sarah Coakley. Her work represents a sustained attempt to put contemplation at the heart of theological reflection and human flourishing. Importantly, Coakley asserts that we cannot begin to contemplate the divine – which includes both our relation to God in prayer, and our reflection upon that relationship – without paying attention to our lives as embodied, finite, and material creatures.

Through the exploration of Coakley's work, we will find ourselves drawn inexorably, again and again, to the major themes of this thesis – around competition, sin and finitude, and eschatology. Through Coakley's corpus, we see that any attempt to develop a contemplative theology will inevitably lead to discussions around these three themes.

Foremost in the arguments of this chapter is an attempt to disentangle the complexities around competition and non-competition, that arise in relation to contemplation. Coakley is explicitly committed to the fundamentally non-competitive relationship between creature and Creator, and, at the same time, also explicitly committed to drawing attention to our creaturely materiality and the impact this has upon our contemplation of the divine. On one hand then, there is the axiomatic non-competitive relationship between creatures and God, and on the other, there is the requirement of the contemplative to make space, both in themselves and (quite literally) in the diary, for contemplation. In Coakley's work, we see the non-competitive relationship between God and creatures set alongside the reality that the transformative work of prayer requires competitive forms of space making – inwardly we push aside egotistical desires; outwardly we push aside other pressures on our time.

It is perhaps almost inevitable then that there is some elision, or slippage, between these non-competitive and competitive paradigms in Coakley's work. As we will see, she ends up smuggling competitive concepts into the "vertical" human-divine relation. It can appear as if

our creaturely limits need to either be transcended and escaped from, or alternatively, smashed up and broken through, as we come to contemplate the divine.

Linn Marie Tonstad has thus (rightly) been critical of how Coakley's explicit commitment to a non-competitive construal of divine-human relations conflicts with an actual competitive construal of that relation in her writings. Yet, such criticisms of Coakley can (and indeed do) fall into the opposite error: they erase creaturely limits and forget the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space. To do proper justice to the non-competitive relation to God, we must also properly attend to the necessarily competitive aspects of our world and human experience.

Coakley – in trying to do justice to some of that competitive reality – unwittingly slips competitive notions into what should be a non-competitive paradigm. But she can perhaps be defended for this in her desire to attend to our inevitably competitive materiality with proper seriousness. Tonstad, in contrast – in wanting to ensure the priority of the non-competitive divine-human relation – seems to forget the fundamentally competitive space making of material, creaturely existence.

The non-competitive and competitive paradigms have been elided, confused, and distorted. The major task of this chapter is to map this terrain and – as far as is possible – distinguish the two paradigms.

Doing so leads us to explore the other major themes of this project, around sin and finitude, and around eschatology. Much of the contestation around inappropriately competitively paradigms in Coakley's work might well be undone if Coakley was clearer about the kind of contemplative work that we should regard as being part and parcel of our creaturely finitude, and the kind of contemplative work that is purgative. Similarly, misplaced competitive constructs may have been able to be avoided if Coakley had a more fully formed eschatology. As it is, we are left with either a contemplative withdrawal in which creatureliness disappears in dazzling darkness; or, alternatively, we are left with a never-ending purgative journey in which the creature is constantly being broken open. Other, more positive, and materially bounded, visions are needed if competitive and non-competitive paradigms are going to be rightly ordered. It is on this eschatological note that the chapter will end.

Exploring all this will be done via exploration of explicit loci in Coakley's contemplative theology. First then, we will explore vulnerability and empowerment. We cannot think about contemplation without also considering the patriarchal oppression of so much of the Christian tradition. The ideas about the power of a creaturely father, and the protection of a creaturely lord, are all too easily writ large onto the divine. God's power can be seen as patriarchal power over us or as power that empowers. Coakley thinks about vulnerability and power in novel and interesting ways that inevitably also raise some questions. In the terms of this thesis, the way in which she thinks about vulnerability provides a helpful avenue through which to continue our exploration of sin and finitude. Coakley will help us map out and think through the connections and complexities of power and vulnerability in relation to sin and finitude.

Second, we will consider gender and sexuality. For Coakley, sexual desire has its origin in divine desire. She states that desire is 'an ontological category belonging primarily to God'[29]. It originates in God's very own life; it is the 'plenitude of longing love'[30] that God has for God's self and that pours over into creation. Hence, the climax of volume one of her systematics is entitled 'The Primacy of Divine Desire'.[31] For Coakley, all our erotic desiring has its beginning and end in the desire of God. As Pseudo-Dionysius suggests, God's yearning catches up our yearning into itself.[32] Freud is turned on his head – our desire is founded in God's 'proto-erotic desire' for us.[33] To be caught up in divine desire is not about a reduction or replacement of *eros* but its intensification and transformation. Prayer is seen as erotic, and the Spirit's tug is 'felt *analogously* also in every erotic propulsion towards union'.[34] We are creatures who desire, and we are caught up into divine ecstasy only through the tug of our creaturely desire that pulls us outwards and so also upwards.

Sexual desire then is grounded in desire for God; this is axiomatic for Coakley. Wedded to this is gendered language, for sexual desire is gendered in one way or another. It can either be gendered in very traditional heterosexual ways – as we find in much of the tradition – or it can be queered in manifold ways. However precisely it is handled, the crux for Coakley is

---

[29] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 10.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] *Ibid,* p. 308.
[32] See Pseudo-Dionysius, 'Divine Names', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* trans. by Colm Luibheid, with Paul Rorem and others (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 47-132.
[33] Sarah Coakley, 'Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality', *Anglican Theological Review,* 80 (1998), 223-232 (p. 230).
[34] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 14.

that desire for God, sexuality, and gendered renderings of that sexuality, are all intrinsically bound together. Through this exploration we will find ourselves propelled towards our thematic questions around sin and finitude, and non-competitive and competitive logics.

Finally, we will explore competitive and non-competitive logics head on, bringing the explorations of the chapter together. Again, this locus of her work is grounded in her thinking about desire. If desire "belongs" primarily to God, it is also – in Coakley's thinking – nothing less than the 'constellating category of selfhood'[35] and the wellspring of contemplation. As such, divine and human desire cannot, must not, be pitted against each other. We do not desire another creature *or* the Creator. For her, *eros* is seen as that 'precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source'.[36]

Yet, this non-competitive paradigm is complicated by the competitive logics that arise both from our creaturely limitations and from sin. Coakley shows this implicitly in much of her work, but she rarely (if ever) properly maps this terrain. Charting her steps and mis-steps, I hope to clarify some of the complexities around competitive and non-competitive logics, especially as they are touched by creaturely finitude and sin. How the fundamentally non-competitive creature-Creator relation shapes (or distorts) eschatology will then be explored, at the end of the chapter.

In sum then, we will consider the loci of Coakley's work: power and vulnerability, sexuality and gender, competitive and non-competitive logics. For her, we cannot think about contemplation of the divine without proper consideration of these areas. As we focus on these loci, we will find ourselves facing the questions at the heart of this thesis around sin and finitude, purpose and teleology, non-competitive and competitive logics.

Before we get there though, we stop to consider the methodology of Coakley's contemplative theology. For in her method, we see a sustained attempt to attend to our creatureliness, both by putting the practice of contemplation at the heart of theology, and by engaging with the empirical sciences.

---

[35] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 26.
[36] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 10. See also Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 96.

1.2 *Théologie Totale*

As has already been briefly noted, contemplation carries a *double entendre.* First, we contemplate, meaning we wait 'on God in prayer'.[37] Coakley's theological method puts the practice of contemplation at the heart of theology; the purging and refining of our desires is part of (and not extraneous to) what it means to do good theology.

Second, we contemplate, meaning we think about what we mean (and aim to have our thinking and seeing transformed) when we say Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Specifically, to aid such reflection, Coakley suggests that theology needs fuller engagement with the social and natural sciences, allowing some of the classic categories of these disciplines (gender, race, class, evolution) [38] to provide theological pivots around which to think. To study theology is thus not to stand apart, hermetically sealed from other disciplines, but rather to be drawn into dialogue with those disciplines that are rooted in experiences and observations of the world.

To know and speak of; to relate to God and think on that relation. Together these twin poles make up our contemplation of the divine. For Coakley, the two are never even properly distinguished lest they could ever be divided – they hang together as one. For, 'contemplation is the unique, and wholly sui generis, task of seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly'.[39] The practice of contemplation, alongside an exploration 'of the many mediums and levels at which theological truth may be engaged'[40] thus provide the two axes of Coakley's theological method[41] and together make her *théologie totale.*[42]

These two axes are held together by the understanding that theology is not a settled state but rather lives on the road. Coakley wants to be our pilgrimage guide, and even in her

---

[37] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 19.

[38] The first volume of Coakley's systematics considers sex and gender; the second volume of her systematics is to consider race, the third, looking at both prisons and hospitals will presumably consider class (although as far as I know she has not been explicit about this). See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. xv. Elsewhere she says the fact 'That gender, race and class, amongst other categories related to such oppression, are still matters not generally discussed in systematic theology, is a telling comment on the state of the undertaking.' Sarah Coakley, 'Is there a future for Gender and Theology?: On Gender, Contemplation and the Systematic Task', *Criterion,* 47 (2009), 2-12 (p. 6).

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid,* p. 7.

[41] See Coakley, *God, Sexuality and Self,* pp. 33-36 for the clearest explanation of these twin axes.

[42] Coakley presumably coined this phrase having originally spoken about a *christologie totale,* which she intentionally used to parallel the notion of a *l'historie totale,* that aimed 'in its historical construction to do justice to the motivations and feelings of every stratum of society'. Sarah Coakley, *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)*,* p. 194, n. 3.

explication of method, wants to be seen as 'not so much clearing [her] throat as redirecting the mind'.[43] She describes her theological method as theology 'in via' (p. 15) which picks up 'eucharistic fragments' (p. 33) along the way. Coakley's hope is that as we walk the pilgrim road with her, our desires and vision will begin to be changed. We might not change what we say (we were reciting and still recite the creed) but what we say will mean different things, things those same words could not have meant when we left Wigan Pier (pp. 69-76).[44]

Walking this new methodological way of pilgrimage will enable us to learn what it means to speak Father rightly (or so Coakley argues). Orthodoxy for Coakley is not some propositional assent, but a lifelong project. It is 'elusive' (p. 327) for, as scripture reminds us again and again, the lure of idols is ever present. Having our ideas straight is not enough, and Coakley is critical of some who are overly optimistic about the 'power of theological ideas to change political and economic structures'.[45] In Coakley's view we need something deeper that can only happen when we go on a journey within, and this means ensuring our theological method is grounded and rooted both in the practice of contemplation and in engagement with other sciences. We consider these in turn.

Contemplative Practice

Implied in much of Coakley's work is that *eros* is intricately connected with our sight. What and how we see has obvious erotic effects. So, to begin to *see* the world differently and to *see* God differently will mean our desires and our thoughts – and so also our actions in the world – slowly begin to change. In Coakley's understanding then we cannot disentangle epistemology from hermeneutics and morality. How and what we see (or contemplate), how we interpret that sight, is inevitably bound up in how we act in the world.

So, to contemplate – to begin to "see" the empty space above the cherubim and not simply the reflections of our sinful egos – is central to the re-ordering of desire. Hence she suggests that there might be *'ascetical* requirements for a mature appreciation of dogmatic

---

[43] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 34. Further references to this book, in the remainder of this section, are given after quotations in the text.

[44] Coakley thinks the tide of faith that was washing out on Mathew Arnold's "Dover Beach" has now come back in via some strange waterways, leading us to Wigan Pier (a metaphor for a variety of modern theological options including high authoritarian institutional Christianity, Radical Orthodoxy, or the re-making of Christian claims as fits the cultural mileu). Coakley wants to steer beyond all of these.

[45] Sarah Coakley, 'Why Gift?: Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner', *Scottish Journal of Theology,* 16 (2008), 224-35 (p. 228).

questions'.[46] Only through the lifelong ascetic practice of contemplation can our sense of grasping God (idolatry) be 'blanked out' and replaced by the sense of *being grasped* by the 'blankness of the darkness that nonetheless dazzles'.[47] Such contemplative practices allow 'forms of belief to emerge that could not otherwise be accessed.'[48] Coming to see is paradoxically about coming out of the light and into the darkness where mystery stirs us in ways no verifiable object ever could.

To unpack the centrality of the metaphor of "seeing", Coakley re-enlivens the historic discourse on the Spiritual Senses. These are not, for her, separate senses, that work in some analogous way to the five physical senses. Instead, and following Gregory of Nyssa (as she so often does), Coakley thinks of these spiritual senses as the 'transfigured workings of ordinary perception.'[49] Through contemplation and other ascetic practises, there is a 'cleaning, reordering and redirecting [of] the apparatuses of one's own thinking, desiring and seeing'[50] such that we see the world and God anew.[51] We are trained to see aright.

Much more will be said about what contemplation (as crucial ascetic practice) might entail in Coakley's schema in due course. But here – as we focus on the method of Coakley's theology – several aspects of this training regime are worth drawing out.

First, Coakley suggests that our contemplative training is virtually always disruptive. The practices of contemplation interrupt our usual ways of thinking about and relating to God. In the darkness, and the silence, and the discomfort of contemplation we find our usual

---

[46] Sarah Coakley, 'Introduction: Gender, Trinitarian Analogies and the Pedagogy of *the Song',* in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa,* ed. by Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) pp.1-13 (p. 2).
[47] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* pp. 23, 325,
[48] Coakley, *The New Asceticism,* p. 102.
[49] Sarah Coakley, 'Gregory of Nyssa' in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity,* ed. by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 36-55 (p. 48) Coakley sees Origen as expounding the idea that the spiritual senses are separate cognitive faculties and chooses to follow Gregory of Nyssa's approach instead. Benjamin Myers takes issue with Coakley's polarisation of Origen and Gregory here, suggesting that Gregory actually builds on Origen's understanding. He also suggests that Coakley's emphasis on 'contemplation' misses the role of scripture in the patristic understanding of the spiritual senses. But these debates on patristic exegesis are of little significance for the argument at hand. Benjamin Myers, 'Exegetical Mysticism: Scripture *Paideia,* and the Spiritual Senses', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016) pp. 1-14 (p. 9, 13).
[50] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 20.
[51] Coakley clarifies for her readers that she does not want to see asceticism and contemplation as synonymous. Contemplation refers to prayer that receives divine grace in all its dazzling darkness. This is crucial to the wider ascetic project which concerns the 'the sorting and ordering of desires'. See Sarah Coakley 'Response to My Critics', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology,* 26 (2017), 23-29 (p. 26). In exploring the transformation of our perception Coakley is following (although not imitating) Troeltsch, for whom truth claims did correspond to external reality but were 'constitutively affected by the framework, perspective, or context in which [they were] enunciated'. See Coakley, *Christ Without Absolutes,* p. 43.

patterns interrupted. As Coakley comments on the resurrection narratives, the disciples are with Jesus and yet do not recognise him without some 'undoing of epistemic blockage'.[52]

Second, such ascetic training also has an aesthetic hallmark. It is about discerning the beauty of God through an 'epistemological deepening via the Spirit.'[53] And what we begin to see as beauty is no longer light, but dazzling darkness which cannot be grasped or comprehended or – most importantly – controlled by our own egos. Sitting under the blank of noetic darkness our epistemological tools are altered and our spiritual senses are awoken to see God, not as an object to behold, but as that which sees us and transforms us.

Third, for Coakley, this contemplative training is difficult, and perhaps we could even say risky, for the contemplation of God is only a hairs breadth away from projection of idols into the sky. Dangerous perversions lie next to right understandings. In her early collection of essays Coakley makes this explicit. For through the practices of contemplation, she writes, we see the possibility of human empowerment *and* the possibility for gender distortions and abusive relationships. 'As so often, devilish perversities lurk around the arena of deepest truth.'[54] Again in an unusual essay on the *Akedah,* Coakley talks about two types of sacrifice – one as a necessary purgation, the other (patriarchal sacrifice), a 'dark mimic [that] ever hovers as a seductive and demonic alternative.'[55]

Coakley's constant rhetoric around complexity and the subtlety of her argument is undoubtedly grating, and it is open to the charge of elitism – a charge she is not unaware of.[56] However, it is more than a rhetorical flourish that enables her to claim that her critics

---

[52] Sarah Coakley, 'The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor, in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage,* ed. by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 301-319 (p. 313).

[53] Sarah Coakley, 'Reconceiving "Natural Theology": Meaning, Sacrifice and God', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures: Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God* (online video recording, Youtube, 3 May 2012) <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/sacrifice-regained-evolution-cooperation-and-god> [accessed 22nd May 2023].

[54] Sarah Coakley, 'Visions of the Self in Late Medieval Christianity: Some Cross-Disciplinary Reflections' in *Powers and Submissions,* pp. 71-88 (p. 71) See also Coakley, *'Kenōsis* and Subversion', p. 36.

[55] Sarah Coakley, 'In Defense of Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac', in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion,* ed. by Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 17-38 (p. 31). Linn Marie Tonstad calls this a 'rather strange essay'. Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 108.

[56] There is some reference to complexity or subtlety at the start of most chapters of *God, Sexuality and the Self,* pp. 2, 36, 67, 100, 152. This is all in service to her attempt to work through the difference between 'engagement with the trinitarian God in prayer' and a 'distorting and sinful false consciousness' that leads to idolatry (p. 268). Yet even given this, the (patronising) tone is somewhat problematic. Tonstad scathingly refers to the notion of 'elite practitioners' that Coakley's work seems to imply. Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 109.

have simply misunderstood her. Rather, it is central to her theological method. The moral, affective, and intellectual patterns of our desire can be very subtly distorted. Moving from contemplation of idols to contemplation of the living God is therefore complex and subtle; the idolatrous perversions of truth are, by definition, always close by.

Coakley knowingly leads us on an unusual pilgrimage by making the act of contemplation central to her theological method. It is the training ground through which we might see God and the world with transformed eyes. Only by paying attention to this practice might we be able to navigate the narrow path that lies between idols towards the living God.

<u>Engaging with natural and social sciences</u>

If the practice of contemplation forms the "vertical" axis of Coakley's *théologie totale,* the "horizontal" axis is formed by an engagement with the natural and social sciences. Perhaps we should be unsurprised that such engagement has become a central tenant of Coakley's theological method given her initial academic post at Lancaster University (with its emphasis on sociology of religion), and her PhD thesis on Ernst Troeltsch, who sought 'for a fruitful *rapprochement* between theology and the emerging social sciences.'[57]

Where contemplation may enable a purged and renewed seeing through 'moral and epistemic stripping', it is the engagement with other disciplines that force 'destabilization and redirection'[58] and 'interruptions from the unexpected' (p. 49). Coakley has thus engaged extensively with psychology, evolutionary theory, gender theory, and feminist theory. In doing so, she has sought to recast the 'central categories of thought' (p. 41) that are at the disposal of systematic theology, and to sit 'light to the burden of traditional *loci*' (p. 43), whilst remaining sceptical of modern quasi-theological categories currently in vogue, such as gift.[59]

How she engages in the social and natural sciences is, of course, more significant than the simple fact that she does. In her *Gifford Lectures,* that build on her forays into evolutionary theory and cooperation, Coakley disparages two specific ways of engagement. First, she

---

Coakley insists that she is 'non-elitist' in her use and understanding of contemplation, but it is for the reader to judge whether this is properly conveyed. Coakley, 'Response to My Critics', p. 25.

[57] Coakley, *Christ Without Absolutes,* p. 1.

[58] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 48. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

[59] She suggests the category of gift is 'in danger of flattening doctrinal subtleties that the older categories protected' (sin, grace, sanctification etc). Coakley, 'Why Gift?, p. 229.

declares a 'correlationist' approach to be a 'false move'.[60] This approach seeks to find some parallel between the science and the Christian narrative and then cling on to the science uncritically.[61] The second false move abandons theological commitments in order to adjust for new insights from the sciences.

In *God, Sexuality and the Self*, Coakley names three other false moves: a return to high authoritarian institutional Christianity; Radial Orthodoxy (in all but name) which re-asserts a classic theological metanarrative against the bankrupt modern secular reductionisms; and casting loose from credal faith to re-make Christianity in ways acceptable to feminist goals. In Coakley's view, the first two refuse the messiness of lived Christianity, the third leaves us with a god that 'cannot change *us*'.[62]

Coakley is thus after something more hermeneutically sophisticated, in which there is critical dialogue and the possibility of transformed vision. Her own adumbrated method for engaging with these other sciences begins with stressing the importance of contemplation, to navigate such treacherous waters without succumbing to dangerous currents. Only, she says, can a 'pneumatological dispossession'[63] guard us against the false moves outlined above. Only this will allow us to travel with the wind of the spirit and so actually learn from engagements with the natural and social sciences.

Beyond this contemplative approach to the sciences, Coakley calls for a relationship with them which is both 'creative *and* critical'.[64] Both sides of this are crucial to her – she refuses to simply dismiss the tradition, nor does she approach it uncritically.[65] In all her work, Coakley refuses simple dichotomies and works on the assumption that life is messier and infinitely more complex than simple binary options allow for. For example, she suggests that the work of the Trinitarian God interrupts and makes labile the 'stuck, fixed and repressive

---

[60] Sarah Coakley, 'Stories of Evolution, Stories of Sacrifice', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures,* Youtube, 17 April 2012. [accessed 22nd May 2023].

[61] Coakley suggests that the same false move can be made in relation to the social sciences as well. She thus criticises Jürgen Moltmann for importing secular gender categories into his theology without critique or redaction. Sarah Coakley, 'The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered', in *God's Life in Trinity,* ed. by Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Augsburg: Augsburg Press, 2006), pp. 133-142 (p. 138).

[62] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 77.

[63] Coakley, 'Stories of Evolution, Stories of Sacrifice'.

[64] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 77. See also pp. 71-76.

[65] This duality is perhaps best seen in her famous essay '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' in which she both takes seriously the criticism of Daphne Hampson and yet creatively builds a case for feminist, Christian empowerment. In this essay Coakley is responding to the essays by Daphne Hampson, 'On Power and Gender' *Modern Theology,* 4 (1988), 234-250, and 'On Autonomy and Heteronomy' in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed. by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 1-16.

twoness of the *fallen* gender binary'.[66] She argues that we need to think about ourselves as inherently unstable – as people *in via,* beyond the dualisms that fail to contend with the entanglements of passion and rationality, mind and body.[67] So, for example in her *Gifford Lectures*, Coakley makes clear that there is no simple rejection or acceptance of evolutionary co-operation. Instead, she seeks to be interrupted by new scientific insights, whilst questioning scientific reductionism and complexifying simplistic definitions.[68]

This creative and critical approach comes to the fore in *God, Sexuality and Self.* Coakley undertakes a series of 'foraging raids'[69] that build up a genealogy of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity based on a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval.[70] Her patristic, sociological and iconographic investigations draw on her engagements with feminism and gender theory. So she asks: what do the patristic sources suggest was being experienced be people who prayed, and what kind of experiences were being suppressed? What do interviews of Charismatics in the 20th Century show about people's experience of God more recently? What does art show us about what was considered orthodox interpretation of the life of God as Father, Son and Spirit? Such foraging is an attempt by Coakley to take seriously the experiential, psychological, social realities that are at play in theological discourse. It is an attempt to 'tell a different story' (p. 4) about the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

---

[66] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 57. Tonstad suggests that Coakley falls into a kind of 'theological numerology' here. Tonstad sees a difference between arguing that human relationships must be transfigured by the divine and saying that divine "threeness" 'resolves all dyadic fixations.' Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 107. Coakley's number "play" (especially in *God, Sexuality and the Self, pp.* 56-57) is open to Tonstad's critique. However, in my reading Coakley's point is not so much that the threeness of God overcomes binaries, but that our experience of God is tri-faceted and that the Spirit is forever 'interruptive' of our idolatries (which so often settles into easy binaries).
[67] See Sarah Coakley, 'Dark Contemplation and Epistemtic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila', in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology,* ed. by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 280-312 (p. 312).
[68] See, for example, Sarah Coakley, 'Evolution, Cooperation and Ethics: Some Methodological and Philosophical Hurdles', *Studies in Christians Ethics,* 26 (2013), 135-139.
[69] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 266. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.
[70] This is most clearly explicated in her dialogue with Hampson where she states that her job is 'to unfold, with painstaking care, the ways in which our doctrinal (as well as our story-telling) heritage has been shot through with androcentric bias, and then attempt an equally painstaking reconstruction.' Coakley, 'Response', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?,* pp. 144-149 (p. 147).

So, for example, in her patristic forage Coakley seeks to take seriously the '*specific* intellectual, political, social and ecclesiastical circumstances'[71] in which trinitarianism emerged. She argues that the Church had 'politico-ecclesiastical reasons for preventing'[72] a certain emergent trinitarianism that prioritises the work of the Spirit. Concerns around power (the threat to the centralized church of Rome) and sexual loss of control (given the connection between *eros* and the divine) led to a certain relegation of the Spirit.[73] This is her hermeneutic of suspicion at work. Interpreting generously, seeking to retrieve from the history, she refuses to simply reject patristic authors because of certain patriarchal assumptions they may have made. She thus seeks to find creative ways to read Gregory of Nyssa today, whilst aware of the ways his writing is culturally enmeshed in assumptions and systems of oppression we would want to oppose. In Coakley's view, such a hermeneutic of charity is crucial to avoid both a new idolatry of 'anger stuck in victimology'[74] and a reductionism that reads classic texts as '*mere* invitations to abuse or sexist submission'.[75]

In sum then, Coakley wants to think about how doctrine was formed and how it works today by drawing on insights from natural and social sciences, with a hermeneutic of suspicion and charity, being both critical and creative. She wants her own theologising to be grounded in the complexity of our lives in such a way as to avoid reductionism or simple dichotomies. She wants to ensure we pay heed to the lived experience of prayer as a proper starting point for theological reflection.

All this– the "vertical" and "horizontal" axes – lead her to the conclusion of her Trinitarian project. Namely, that we think of God as three because this accords with the 'pray-er's total "experience" of God [as] ineluctably tri-faceted'[76] – the Spirit draws us to the Father and into the likeness of the Son. In this way, the 'problematic "third" in God [becomes] the "first" in human encounter'.[77]

---

[71] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 11. This approach seems to be rooted in her early study of Troeltsch who argued that 'no area of history, however sacred to Christianity, can escape the probings of historical critical investigation', Coakley, *Christ Without Absolutes,* p. 67.
[72] Mark Oppenheimer, 'Prayerful Vulnerability', in *The Christian Century,* 120 (2003), 25-31 (p. 28).
[73] See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* pp. 101-102.
[74] *Ibid,* p. 84.
[75] Coakley, 'Visions of the Self', p. 71.
[76] Sarah Coakley, 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles,* ed. by Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 29-56 (p. 37).
[77] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 334.

This *théologie totale*, this methodological approach with its twin axes of contemplative practice and engagement in the natural and social sciences amount, in Coakley's view, to nothing less than 'the renewal of systematic theology'.[78] It charts a course in which our theologising is never abstracted from our messy and complex lives and our actual engagements with God in prayer. As such, this method, this *théologie totale,* gives some promise for helping us to contemplate the divine in ways that befit, rather than resist, our lives as material, finite, and embodied creatures.

1.3 Methodological Omissions

Even at this point, stuck as we are on method, there are considerable questions to be asked. For despite all the engagement in the messy and complex world we live in and the emphasis on embodied contemplation, parts of her method *implicitly* undermine the gift of materiality and embodiment, distorting our view of what it means to contemplate the divine in ways befitting our material and finite lives.

The thorniest issue circles around the centrality of contemplation in Coakley's theological method. Contemplation is regarded as the primary ascetic practice that will purge our thinking, desiring and seeing. Our practices of prayer are regarded as central to our epistemic and moral transformation. What such contemplative practice looks like will be explored later, yet even here – as a methodological coping stone – problems appear.

First, in Coakley's view, contemplation is supposed to guard against the perennial accusation thrown at systematic theology, namely, that it operates with a covert desire for mastery and control.[79] In Coakley's view contemplation is supposed to 'inculcate mental patterns of un-mastery'.[80]

However, there are several difficulties with this line of argument. In the first place, it is very difficult to adjudicate whether un-mastery has been found. Coakley's answer to a problem with the theological academic *polis* is something *private*. The claims of mastery and control are batted away, not with a collective shift in the way theology is approached, but with spiritual exercises that are supposed to change how one perceives the theological task. This

---

[78] Janice McRandal, 'Being George Eliot: An Impossible Standpoint?', in *The Future of Systematic Theology,* pp. vii-xi (p. xi).
[79] See Coakley, 'Is there a future?' pp. 2-12. Coakley argues for her approach to systematics against the charges of onto-theology, hegemony and phallo-centricism.
[80] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 43.

shift can be claimed to have happened "within" even as nothing material may have changed at all. Hence, the practice of contemplation could, at worst, simply provide an excuse for systematic theology to continue on, unreformed and now justified by hidden disciplines of mental and spiritual practice.

Next, Brandy Daniels suggests that Coakley's theological method unwittingly 're-performs mastery'.[81] Put simply, the one who has (or is perceived as having) mastered contemplative un-mastery now finds a new source of power. Hidden practices of contemplation provide a new locus for covert mastery and control. Daniels claims that Coakley's desire to set sail from "Wigan Pier"[82] on the sails of contemplative practise only re-asserts the privileged power of theology. Instead, we need to risk losing sight of shore altogether, eschewing tidy categorisation for the unsystematic and surprising insights that other social sciences might bring.[83]

For Daniels, the practice of contemplation simply establishes another technique that can 'bolster the hegemonies of power'.[84] The hegemony of systematic theology – that Coakley is trying to work against – can now be underwritten by a particular spiritual approach. For example, I might claim spiritual practices of un-mastery to back up my theological prose. The one who speaks the right language before God *and* in the academy becomes utterly unassailable; mastery and hegemony are reinforced not undercut.

Third, Coakley seems to rather overstate what contemplation might actually and concretely achieve. She claims contemplation 'welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the other, and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglements of sexual desire and desire for God.'[85] High hopes indeed. Can contemplation alone foster all this? After so much talk of complexity the approach suddenly seems rather simplistic, mechanistic even. Our embodied lives are surely more complex and need a far wider range of acts, experiences, and practices to purge and transform our desires.

This leads us to the most significant difficulty with contemplation as a methodological coping stone: there are, in fact, other practices through which God might be known and spoken of.

---

[81] Brandy R. Daniels, 'Getting Lost at Sea? Apophasis, Antisociality, and the (in-) Stability of Academic Theology', in *The Future of Systematic Theology,* pp. 67-97 (p. 68).
[82] See note 41.
[83] Daniels, 'Getting Lost at Sea?', p. 77.
[84] *Ibid,* p. 81.
[85] Coakley, 'Is there a future?', p. 5.

Nicholas Lash might ask his successor in the Norris-Hulse professorial chair quite why she considers contemplation, rather than human encounter, the site through which God might be known and the practice through which our desires might be transformed.

For Lash, we learn something of what it means to relate to God *as* we relate to others. It is in discovering the mystery and incomprehensibility of another person that we begin to see what it might mean to relate to the mystery of God.[86] For getting to know any other person requires a 'kind of unknowing' (p. 235). Every other person we encounter is always a subject beyond us and not just an object for us; they may not remain opaque to us, but they certainly do not become transparent. There is always more to discover about them, there is always a depth that defies easy rhetoric or explanation. And so, in any encounter with others we learn something about the encounter with that inexhaustible Other; we learn something of the apophasis experienced in relation to God.

More than that, relating to another is in itself an experience of the mystery of God's very self (p. 246). For Lash, God is experienced (at least latently) in every situation, in the mundane ordinary living, as much as in contemplation (p. 271).[87] Prayer then is less a distinct activity that one does, but something one discovers is happening in our everyday activities and encounters. We find God in the face of others. As such, Lash is critical of those who think about religion in terms of feelings or practises because this puts God into a box, confines God to an object to be coerced (p. 289). Instead, if God is found in relation to others, God is always mystery, always beyond us, always a subject, a "Thou" to be encountered.

Coakley would not deny any of this, it is just that her starting point is always contemplation, as a distinct practice. Bringing her seminal text to a finale, Coakley is explicit:

> What is at stake here, at base, is a slow but steady assault on idolatry which only the patient practices of prayer can allow God to do in us: in the purgative kneeling before the blankness of the darkness which nonetheless dazzles, the Spirit is at work

[86] Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 230. Further references to this book, in the next three paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.

[87] See also Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), p. 163.

in this very noetic slippage, drawing all things into Christ and recasting our whole sense of how language for God works.[88]

In her understanding it is only attention to God that then enables radical attention to another.[89] Our vision and rightful (non-patriarchal) expression of powers and submissions cannot come through political or theological fiat, but only through '*right* primary submission to the Spirit'.[90] The personal must come before the political.[91] For Coakley, the ordering is crucial. It is only in learning that we are grasped by Love, only by being empowered by (this radically different) Power, only by having our desire and sight transformed in encounter with the divine, that we might appropriately be attentive to and respond to another who stands before us. The vertical moment always precedes the horizontal one. The transformative moment is in contemplation, in purgative kneeling before divine darkness. For Coakley, the steady assault on idolatry is *only* possible through the practices of prayer. It is this "only" that is the problem.

Could it not be instead that the transformation of our desires might be triggered by and begin precisely *in* encounter with another? Equally, could it not be that the "real" work of transformation happens in and through such an encounter? Might not radical attention towards another be the crucible through which we learn to attend to the mystery of God, and learn of God's attention upon us? Might we not discover that we are loved and held *through* our relationships with others? Might not the interruptive work of the Spirit come through other people? Might we not be trained to see aright in conversation as much as in contemplation? These are the implicit questions that Lash raises for Coakley's contemplative vision.

On this alternative account explicated by Lash, action, not contemplation, is the site of transformation. Growth in faith is 'acquired and sustained in a common life and through common activities'.[92] In the end, Lash almost gives up on what we can legitimately say, but maintains that there is much 'we may discover the courage to *do*' (p. 182). In his view, it is in the hard work of transforming our human practices and institutions that we begin to

---

[88] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 325.
[89] See, for example, Coakley, 'Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity', p231.
[90] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self,* p. 322.
[91] See Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', in *Powers and Submissions,* pp. xii-xx (p. xvii).
[92] Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach,* p. 56. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

understand what it means to speak of God, as we ourselves become – rather than use – images of God.

Following in his footsteps, Susannah Ticciati makes similar apophatic moves. For her, God-language is not descriptive, nor referential, nor does it gesture beyond 'into the darkness of the unknown'.[93] Instead, 'God is discovered in the difference he makes' (p. 188). Language about God thus tells us where to look in order to find God: 'God is there where creaturely wisdom, goodness and love are to be found' (p. 242). God is found, known and spoken about in and through our relationships with others. In encountering others – especially people who are different, difficult, and destitute – we are transformed and learn to see aright. Encountering the other may in fact paradoxically be the site where we learn to contemplate the divine and have our idols purged.

There are other routes to consider as well, that might also enable a steady assault on idolatry. For example, Lisa Isherwood argues that if the female body is going to be the place where 'alternate realities are lived and where patriarchy is actively resisted'[94] then female masturbation might be the bodily good than can teach young women that their bodies are good and that they are agents who are not to be objectified by others. She suggests that such bodily practice – that challenges penetrative and procreative norms – might be akin to celibacy of ancient times which held out a hope of life to women beyond the 'narrow confines that antiquity offered' (p. 153). Further, she suggests that as much as such a practice helps women to stop seeing themselves as 'consumable goods for the delight of men' (p. 161) it might affect the way they consume and so have both economic and ecological impacts. In sum, for her 'the way we and others relate with our bodies sets the pattern for relations beyond the edges of our skin' (p. 163).

The key point is that there are a whole host of practices – other than the purgative kneeling of contemplation – that might have deeply transformative effects for self and society. There is no reason why relational practices, sexual bodily practices and contemplative practices should not all be significant for epistemic and moral transformation. Indeed, putting a range of practices – contemplative, relational and bodily – at the methodological heart of her

---

[93] Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 236. Further references to this book in this paragraph are given after quotations in the text.

[94] Lisa Isherwood, 'Erotic Celibacy: Claiming Empowered Space' in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism,* ed. by Lisa Isherwood (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 149-163 (p. 159). Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

project would, it seems to me, have been *more* in line with the thinking behind *théologie totale.* It would be more expansive, more transformative, more embodied, and less capable of re-asserting mastery. The problem for Coakley is that contemplation as a distinct practice crowds the pedestal such that there is little room for anything else.

Building such a *théologie totale* would have meant making clear that none of these practices suffice on their own. This is partly because they are far too entangled with one another (to borrow a favourite image from Coakley). It is also because every practice is liable to distortion and perversion. Coakley makes this point often enough in relation to contemplative practices: she is acutely aware of the way in which dangerous (patriarchal) perversions of contemplation lie very close to transformative encounters with the divine. The same is true for relational and sexual practices. The practices themselves are not enough and can easily be twisted to be ineffective or worse. Encounter with another can only become a transformative experience if we are attentive enough and humble enough to be shown ourselves in new (and uncomfortable) ways. Sexual self-exploration can only be transformative if not encumbered by layers of guilt or taboo.

Yet, for Coakley it seems that the transformation of our epistemic and moral lens can only be inculcated through contemplation. But, as argued above, whilst the interpretive lens is crucial there is no *a priori* reason it must come from this "vertical" contemplative moment. The process is surely far more dynamic, whereby the interpretative lens itself is shaped through ongoing engagement in the world. A patriarchal form of contemplative practice might be rudely awoken by sexual self-exploration; an inattentive and arrogant spirit might be purged by a voice that somehow (by the Spirit!) manages to cut through to facilitate transformative encounter; an honest conversation with a friend might enable liberation from sexual repression which in turn opens up new ways of seeing the empowering power of God. Contemplation cannot be the only entry point.

Coakley's adumbrated method, *théologie totale,* represents an exciting attempt to ensure that the practice of contemplation, the experience of pray-ers, and insights from the sciences are all brought to bear upon systematic theology. The breadth of this project with its forays into foreign fields is commendable. However, in many ways it still remains too narrow, too fixed and ordered, to be anything approaching the *totale* it is aiming for. It re-asserts a form of mastery over its subject whilst pronouncing the importance of un-mastery. It misses relational and sexual practices that might lead to epistemic transformation. In the end

Coakley's methodology does not lose sight of shore quite as much as is required if we are going to risk the venture of a true *théologie totale.*

2. The Contemplative Christ

2.1 Christ's *kenosis* as perfect contemplation

Coakley's theological method has shown us something of what may be required for a material theology. Her *théologie totale* goes some way – but not far enough – in attending to the impact of our creatureliness on our contemplation of the divine.

Having looked at her contemplative method it is now time to begin to unpack Coakley's contemplative vision. Whilst sympathetic to much of this vision, I will show how some of the ways in which she unpacks her contemplative theology are problematic; they undercut any attempt to accept and celebrate our embodied and material natures, our spatial and temporal limitations.

We begin by considering her Christology, for it is here that we begin to see some problematic competitive logics creep into her theological thought. Whilst avowedly espousing a non-competitive paradigm for creature-Creator relations, and specifically for the relationship between the divine and human in Christ, Coakley appears to inadvertently fall back on the very competitive logics she seeks to refute. This problematic Christological construct lays the foundations for some of the concerns that will come to the fore as we explore – in the major section of this chapter - the content of Coakley's contemplative theology. Before that then, we take a Christological excursus.

Taking Romans 8 as her guide, Coakley considers our earthly vocation as gradual conformation to the pattern of Sonship in the power of the Spirit, that we might contemplate the Father rightly. [95] She writes, 'God the "Father" in and through the Spirit, both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son.' [96] Hence, if we want to know what contemplation entails for Coakley we must begin by looking at Christ, the one whom we are to imitate. His pattern of relation to the Father becomes the pattern for our contemplation.

Christ's incarnation is an obvious entry point into thinking about our God-given material limits. Alongside the creation narrative which so clearly grounds us as creatures of the dust,

---

[95] For one (amongst many) explicit references to Romans 8, see, Coakley, 'Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity', p. 223.
[96] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 6.

the incarnation reveals the positive way in which we should regard mortal flesh. For God did not scorn the material world, instead, 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'[97] The incarnation gives us every good reason to seek to properly attend to our basic spatial and temporal finitude, for in the incarnation the Word takes on the full and fundamental limits of material creaturely life. In Christ, God bound Godself to space and time. But none of this gets us far in the tightly contested Christological space. The real questions begin as one tries to explicate in more detail what on earth it might be for Christ to be fully human – and so bound by the fundamental limitations of space and time – and yet also fully divine.

For many Christian thinkers down the ages the assumption of material and creaturely limits in a fully human life have been the essence of Christ's *kenosis,* his self-emptying (as described in the hymn of Philippians 2). But not all have thought of Christ's *kenosis* as a reference to the incarnation. Not all have seen it as referring to his coming down from above, the unique event by which the Word assumes mortal flesh. Rather some – including Coakley – have understood Christ's *kenosis* as an ongoing stance or attitude that Jesus displays before the Father, throughout his ministry.

It is her understanding of *kenosis,* and her rejection of other understandings, that is crucial for us here. For Christ's *kenosis* – in Coakley's scheme – is the pattern for our kenotic contemplation. And whilst Coakley drops kenotic language in *God, Sexuality and the Self,*[98] the kenotic stance of Christ – as explicated in her essay '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' – lays the foundations for her explication of contemplation in all her later work. Hence, she writes that 'what rightly distinguishes Christian feminism from various secular versions of it must necessarily lie in this disputed christological realm'.[99]

For Coakley, Christ's *kenosis* is nothing other than perfect contemplation of the divine and thus the model for our contemplation too. 'What Christ… instantiates is the very "mind"

---

[97] John 1.14 (NRSV).

[98] The term appears neither in the index nor (as far as I have found) in the text itself. At first sight this is surprising given the programmatic essay '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' with which she opens *Powers and Submissions*. However, given the fraught history of the term (both as a theological term and as it has been (ab)used in gendered power relations) perhaps we should expect nothing less. Outside of the debate with Daphne Hampson, Coakley perhaps wisely sees the term as a distraction. In later work 'self-effacement' seems to be the direct parallel.

[99] Coakley, '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' p. 3. Further references to this article, in this section (3.1), are given after quotations in the text.

that we ourselves enact, or enter into, in prayer' (p. 38). This is the crux of the matter in Coakley's corpus.

In more detail then, we turn to explore Coakley's construal of Christ's *kenosis,* and (as importantly) the various explications of *kenosis* that she rejects. She is, as ever, alert to the gendered overtones of the various theological options. She is also concerned to reject any construal of the relationship between the human and divine in Christ as competitive, not least because such competitive construals inevitably bring with them patriarchal assumptions.

So, on one hand, Coakley rejects the idea of *kenosis* as a retraction of divine characteristics in the incarnation, as explored by those following Gottfried Thomasius.[100] Coakley is particularly critical of the images developed by British kenoticists in the wake of Thomasius, packed – as they are – full of 'gender and class evocations' (p. 22).

She is even more critical of those who, following these thinkers, suggested that *kenosis* could define God's very self. If *kenosis* is written into the very being of God then – in her view – God becomes *defined* by a retraction, by a self-limitation. It is, she argues, one thing 'to *redefine* divine "power" creatively, another to shear God down to human size, to make God intrinsically power*less,* incapable of sustaining the creation in being' (p. 24).

Such thinking, she muses, is the outworking of masculinist guilt; the product of those powerful and privileged men who saw their own need to divest power and inflected such a need onto the divine life. The problem is that this 'new kenoticism' endangers 'the very capacity for divine transformation' (p. 30). Once again, we see – for Coakley – theology as a recommendation for life; theology exists to change us and purge us.

On the other hand, Coakley rejects the idea of *kenosis* as an addition, whereby humanity is somehow "added" to the life of the Word in the one person of Jesus Christ. For her, this route has some troubling connotations which imply divine control of an inert human body. She thus criticises some contemporary analytic philosophers of religion who – whilst clinging

---

[100] Thomasius suggested that some classical attributes (omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience) were only 'relative' whilst divine love remained essential; Christ was emptied of all but love. See Bruce McCormack, 'Kenoticism in Modern Christology' in *Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 444-457, for a useful overview of Thomasius and (Western) kenoticism since Luther.

to omnipotence and orthodoxy (as Coakley may indeed commend) – seem oblivious to the 'unexamined masculinist assumptions' (p. 30) of this schema.

Coakley is critical of Cyril of Alexandria for similar reasons, suggesting that in his work we see the 'spectre… of a divine force that takes on humanity by controlling and partly *obliterating* it' (p.15). Coakley wants to defend Chalcedon without 'endorsing a vision of divine power as forceful obliteration' (p. 16). The Alexandrian emphasis on the oneness of Christ – to her mind at least – is a dangerous and potentially docetic image which leaves the humanity of Christ as little more than a puppet.

In Coakley's view, to think of *kenosis* as a retraction inevitably means emphasising the human at the expense of the divine; conversely to think of it as addition inevitably emphasises the divine at the expense of the human. She argues that both ideas attempt to squash the divine and the human into a single '*plane* and make them into a "coherent" package'.[101] Both thus imply a competitive paradigm that Coakley is deliberately eschewing; the incarnation is no 'flat package'[102] in which humanity and divinity are vying for the same space. More humanity cannot mean less God. More God cannot mean less humanity.

Charting an alternative course, accepting neither *kenosis* as "retraction" or reading *kenosis* as "addition" Coakley embraces a reading of Chalcedon that 'owes more to the Christology […] of Antioch' (p. 38) than Alexandria. Christ's hypostasis is *'confected out* of the "concurrence" of the human and the divine, not simply *identified with* the invulnerable pre-existent Logos' (p. 38). Hence, she concludes, in Christ we see the concurrence of 'non-bullying divine "power" *with* "self-effaced" humanity' (p. 31). Christ's *kenosis* is defined as the human refusal to grasp worldly power and which therefore finds a power-in-vulnerability through 'space-making' and 'yielding' to divine power (p. 35). This is the contemplation of Christ that we are to emulate.

---

[101] Coakley, 'Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?', p. 248n.

[102] See *Ibid,* p. 261. Coakley refers here to the 'excellent' work of Kathryn Tanner in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, which makes non-competition central to thinking through divine-human relations. Similarly, Richard Norris also contends that Christology has consistently tried to 'fit two logical contraries together into one' rather than 'dispense with a binary logic'. Richard Norris, Jr., 'Chalcedon Revisited: A Historical and Theological Reflection' in *New Perspective on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff,* ed. by Bradley Nassif (Eerdmans: Cambridge, 1996), pp. 140-158 (p. 158).

2.2 Christological Problems

This idea is programmatic for Coakley's thinking, and virtually all that is to come in this thesis chapter (and in Coakley's own thinking) is itself "confected" out of this densely loaded idea. Hence, although this Christological section takes us on an excursus, it provides the context for all Coakley has to say about contemplation. So, it is worth critically considering her Christology in a little more detail.

Within the themes of this thesis one concern stands out, namely the possible competitive implications for the divine-human relationship written into Coakley's Christology. At first glance this may seem odd, as she is explicitly seeking to avoid such a competitive paradigm. Indeed, she rejects the idea of *kenosis* as retraction or addition in part to avoid a competitive construal. She dismisses the idea that Christ's *kenosis* refers to the incarnation in order to avoid the competitive problems associated with retraction and addition. In her understanding, if *kenosis* is about retraction then God has to get out of the way in order for Jesus to be fully human, and if *kenosis* is about addition then the human in Christ may well simply be overshadowed by the power of the Word.

Yet her rejection of Cyril of Alexandria on this basis, out of a concern that the humanity of Christ becomes displaced, is misguided. As Brian Daley suggests, it is precisely in the Cyrilline construct – the emphasis on the oneness of Christ – that we see that the Word 'does not swallow up or obliterate all traces of the man who is "his own"'.[103] For the Logos – who remains the subject – now acts as a human being.

Cyril manages a unified account beyond competition, an account that avoids the overshadowing of the human by the divine, or the retraction of the divine. In Cyril we see no attempt to put the divine and human into a single plane, but a non-competitive construal that emphasises (without metaphysically explaining) the one-ness of Christ.

Contra Coakley, it is in some of those who came before Cyril that we see the spectre of obliteration of either the human or the divine. For Apollinaris of Laodicea, the human intellect was replaced by Wisdom itself. 'Christ, having God as his spirit – that is, his intellect – together with a soul and body, is rightly called "the human being from heaven"'. [104]

---

[103] Brian E. Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 230.
[104] Apollinaris of Laodicea, 'Fragments', in *The Christological Controversy,* trans. and ed. by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 82-85 (p. 83).

Here was a proto-monophysitism borne out of a supposed need to unite incompatibles. A human body and soul are seen to be united with a divine mind. Here – quite clearly – is an attempt to bring the divine and human into the same plane, with the result that we are left with half of each. This is a form of addition, in which God takes over one part of the human. Here we certainly do have a divine force controlling a human body.

Others, also before Cyril, pushed the other direction. Those of the Antiochene school were keen to emphasise the boundary between created and Creator, to maintain the ontological distance which ensured divine transcendence. Theodore of Mopsuestia thus affirmed an indwelling of the Spirit, such that Christ may be 'counted one person'[105] and in which the work of the human Jesus was 'faithfully guarded by the cooperating work of God the Logos'.[106] The two natures were carefully kept separate, whilst at the same time a union between the two was affirmed.

Nestorius (who unlike Theodore, was later labelled a heretic) took Theodore's thinking further still. It was his work that Cyril of Alexandria directly responded to. Nestorius spoke of the one Christ, but he was unwilling to think of unity in terms of ontology. Unity was only ever a matter of *prosopon,* or face. In his view, we could think of a 'single prosopic reality' designated as the Christ, but "behind" this one prosopon were two distinct levels of reality which must be kept separate semantically.[107]

In the Antiochene approach there is something akin to a retraction of divine characteristics. The transcendence of God is persevered by – in one way or another – being kept distinct from the humanity of Christ.

Neither Apollinaris of Laodicea, nor those associated with the Antiochene school, could entertain the idea that the human and divine might somehow be in the same "space". For Apollinaris, the human intellect was replaced by divine Wisdom; in the Antiochene school the divine and human were kept in separate spheres such that the notion of Christ as one person became stretched.

It was Cyril who moved beyond these competitive construals. In his thinking we see neither the replacement of human attributes by divine ones, nor a simple conjunction of the divine

---

[105] Theodore of Mopsuestia. 'On the Incarnation', in *The Christological Controversy,* pp. 87-94*,* (p. 90).
[106] *Ibid,* p. 91.
[107] See John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology and Texts* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), p. 152.

and human, but a hypostatic union.[108] Rather than wanting to emphasise divine otherness and the boundary between creator and creature, Cyril focused on divine involvement. Less concerned with strict semantics and more concerned with deification, Cyril shared much with the Cappadocians who happily spoke of a "blending" or "mixture" (before such language was anathematised). For Cyril, whatever Jesus did was what God was doing in the world; this is what the *henosis* of Christ meant, and it built on the assumption *not* of forceful obliteration, but precisely that the human and divine did not need to be brought into one plane. They could be in the same "space", united in Christ, because there is no competition between creature and Creator.

In light of this patristic excursus, it therefore seems rather surprising and counter-intuitive that Coakley explicitly aligns herself more with the Antiochene school than the Alexandrian one. The Antiochene school, in emphasising the separation between the human and the divine in Christ, certainly does keep the human and divine in separate "planes". But it does so only by suggesting that the two natures be kept somehow apart. In contrast, in Cyril we see them brought together, united non-competitively.

In advocating for an Antiochene construal then, Coakley ironically appears to set herself up to *re-instate* a competitive paradigm. In keeping the human and divine in Christ separate the possibility for a divine take-over raises its head. And indeed, despite her explicit desires to avoid this, it seems she veers in this direction in seeing Christ's *kenosis* as the *human* refusal to grasp at worldly power, as the concurrence of 'non-bullying divine "power" *with* "'self-effaced" humanity'.[109] The humanity of Jesus retreats as (non-bullying) divine power comes forth.

The human Jesus is effaced by divine powering. The human begins to be erased. It is hard to see how this "confection" does not imply more God and less human. Much more will be said on competitive construals of the divine-human relationship when we turn to consider our own contemplation of the divine, but whatever problems we will find there may well be rooted in this rejection of Cyril in favour of an Antiochene construal of Christ's person.

Coakley wants to steer a course that avoids *both* the masculinist assumptions and dangerously competitive overtones evident in some who advocate *kenosis* as addition, *and* the masculine guilt associated with those advocating *kenosis* as retraction. This she may have

---

[108] See Cyril of Alexandria, 'Second Letter to Nestorius', in *The Christological Controversy,* pp. 101-104.
[109] Coakley, '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' p. 31.

achieved, but at what cost? For in parsing *kenosis* as she does, we are left with a problematic model for our own contemplative journey. Turning to this journey is where we head next, as we let Coakley be our pilgrim guide on the path of contemplation.

3. Contemplating the Divine

At last, then, we turn to consider what it might mean to contemplate the divine, and what kind of language is most apt for helping us think through such contemplation. For, as we will discover, language and attendant symbols are crucial here. This is not just about semantics but articulating the difference between continued (gendered) oppression within a patriarchal milieu and the liberating empowerment that might come through (rightful) contemplation. Navigating this narrow path – which Christ marks and models – is Coakley's aim.

To be clear, it is a "narrow path" because the difference between worship of the living God and its idolatrous perversion is small, subtle, and complex (to use the kind of language that Coakley often draws on). Quite consciously and deliberately then Coakley takes us on a "dangerous" journey, using language and metaphor which make many uncomfortable, as she delineates between a repressive patriarchy and a liberating encounter with the Spirit.

On our pilgrimage we are thus led near three cliff edges. The first cliff edge concerns the place of power and vulnerability; the second, the place of sexual symbolics; and the third, the place of competitive metaphors. It might be suggested that we take a different route that avoids navigating these cliffs. Yet, in Coakley's schema this is not an option: she wants to attend to the actual messy entanglements of our erotic lives – including questions of power and vulnerability, of sexuality, of patient and repeated bodily practices – with our contemplation of the divine. The question before us then is not so much whether an entirely different route is possible, but whether she manages to navigate these cliffs successfully without slipping or falling, or without leading others over the edge.

Coakley's work on these three areas of contention thus provides a helpful way to explore the central question of this chapter, namely, around the impact of our material finitude upon our contemplation of the divine. Clearly the three areas Coakley explores are intrinsically tied to our materiality. We are all vulnerable and all have forms of power – physically, psychologically, emotionally. We are physical and erotic beings, whose intellectual apparatus can but include sexual and gendered symbolics. We are material creatures, in a finite world, and so inevitably bound to the competitive limitations of time and space.

As we navigate these three sets of cliffs, and so consider contemplation in light of our material finitude, we will find our concerns around sin and finitude, teleology, and competition rise to the fore once again.

3.1 Vulnerability and Empowerment

At the heart of Coakley's collection of essays, *Powers and Submissions,* is 'an insistence that the apparently forced choice between dependent "vulnerability" and liberative "power" is a false one'.[110] We must face instead, she argues, the difficult and problematic 'semantic cultural admixtures' (p. xv) of both, as entangled in our lives.

Of course, simplistic short cuts or alternative routes are seductive. We might seek to dispense with talk of submission and vulnerability and – following Daphne Hampson – suggest that, whilst men may need to imitate Christ's *kenotic* vulnerability to counter masculine models of domination, it is not a helpful paradigm for women who have been oppressed under a narrative that emphasises both a rightful submission before a Father (God or human) and an innate vulnerability that needs protecting by a Lord (God or human).

Alternatively, we might be tempted to reconceive or dispense with traditional notions of divine power and instead valorise 'Christic "vulnerability"' (p. xiv) and with it a concomitant emphasis on divine self-limitation. This might be a tempting way to avoid the host of problems divine power throws up: questions of theodicy, and (more pertinent for us) the manifold problems that come from the conception of God's (and therefore also "Fatherly") power 'over' us.[111]

Yet Coakley is not content with either approach. Taking her lead from both Hegel and Foucault, Coakley wants to contend with the ways in which we all have some form of power.[112] We all therefore have responsibility to wield the power we have in ways which empower others rather than oppress. For feminism the explicit danger, so Coakley argues, is to 'impose programmes of reform without considering *self*-reform and *self*-knowledge; to up-end "patriarchal" power without considering the possibility of the mimetic *feminist* abuse of power' (p. xvii). Coakley argues that we therefore cannot side-line all talk of submission and vulnerability – they are necessary if we are going to learn to relate well to others, navigating the power(s) that we might hold over them.

---

[110] Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', p. xv. All references to this article, for the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotes in the text.
[111] See Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 7.
[112] Coakley points to Hegel's slave/master parable and to Foucault's suggestion that 'the complex exchanges of societal power-relations' exclude few from having some form of power. See Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions' p. xiii, p. xvii.

At the same time, to entirely eschew divine power in favour of vulnerability may well have even worse affects: 'An abused God merely legitimates abuse' (p. xv). A disempowered God may also be unable to save, unable to transform. It is not accident that Alcoholics Anonymous appeals to a Higher Power. To abandon all Power and instead only emphasise divine Vulnerability may well leave us hopeless.

If we all have power of one sort or another (and therefore have to navigate through our own and other people's submission and vulnerabilities) and if we cannot do away with divine power then we have no choice but to walk a precarious path that requires both a special form of human vulnerability and a particular form of divine power. These then are the first set of cliffs we must navigate in our contemplative journey.

For Coakley, Christ marks and models the way. In Christ, so Coakley tells us, we see the concurrence of non-bullying divine power with self-effaced humanity. In human vulnerability Christ refuses to grasp at power, and instead is empowered by the gentle power of the Father. Here is the 'paradox of power and vulnerability'[113] that our contemplation is to imitate, as it seeks to avoid 'victimology', 'gender stereotypes', and forms of vulnerability that legitimates 'sexual and physical abuse' (p. 33).

Such 'power-in-vulnerability' (p. 37) is best expressed and reflected upon – so we are told – through the practice of contemplation – the imitation of Christ's *kenosis* as parsed above. Contemplation involves a 'regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine', a 'silent waiting' in which we '"make space" for God to be God' (p. 34). It is a 'special' form of vulnerability that is not an invitation to battery or silencing but is rather the root of our empowering (p. 35). It is 'the willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence' and a 'spiritual *kenosis*' (p. 36).

Definitions and strategies of containment become crucial for Coakley to ensure that we are speaking and enacting the *right* forms of power and vulnerability. We speak of a *special form* of vulnerability. Vulnerability is certainly not praised 'in general'[114] but rather only in terms of this special stance before the divine.

---

[113] Coakley, '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' p. 34. Further references to this article, in the proceeding paragraphs are given after quotations in the text.
[114] See Annette Pierdziwol, 'The "How" of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* pp. 15-48 (p. 45).

Divine power is redefined and contrasted to 'worldly power' (p. 32) as the source of our empowerment: God's power is manifest in that it gives us power. More specifically, it is the empowering of God than enables us to 'meet the ambiguous forms of "worldly" power in a new dimension, neither decrying them *in se* nor being enslaved to them, but rather facing, embracing, resisting or deflecting them with discernment.'[115]

Here, in 'yielding to divine power' (p. 35) we are taken beyond Foucault's 'net of power'[116] (beyond the worldly principalities and powers) and to a different form of power that transforms us and equips us.[117] God's power is what enables our discernment; God's power is what enables us to walk the narrow way and avoid the power of idols. Hence, this empowering is known by its fruits, namely 'personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry' (p. 38). Only here, in this 'power-in-vulnerability' (p. 37) is the politics of peace and equity made possible.

Of course, Coakley is aware of how difficult (and dangerous) this path is, acknowledging that however contemplation, power, and vulnerability are defined, nothing is beyond the 'reach of either self-deception or manipulation by others' (p. 36). This *special* vulnerability before divine power is easily wedded with manipulative and abusive forms of power, especially within the context of spiritual direction.[118] Yet not content to abandon all forms of vulnerability or divine power, Coakley suggests we must take this high road.

<u>Dependency or Vulnerability?</u>

Does she then manage to navigate us through these particular cliffs of power and vulnerability without causing us to fall? There is of course, no easy answer. And indeed, I expect that Coakley would be the first to say that we might only know the answer by walking the road and seeing where it leads us. Here is theology *in via;* a recommendation for life. This contemplative 'power-in-vulnerability' (p. 37) will either lead us over the edge as both 'power' and 'vulnerability' are abused and perverted, or it will liberate us to produce

---

[115] Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', p, xviii.

[116] Janice McRandal, 'Power, Sin, and Epistemic Transformation in Sarah Coakley's Theology: Reading Coakley with Foucault', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* pp. 187-201 (p. 199).

[117] Anna Mercedes critiques Coakley for maintaining a conception of God's power as 'power-over' us which only re-asserts all forms of 'imperial domination'. Mercedes, *Power For,* p. 23.

[118] We might think of how "respected" figures such as John Howard Yoder and Jean Vanier abused power in this way.

the fruit of empowered resistance. Context may well be crucial here – Coakley's navigation tools may lead to different places in different hands, as read through different eyes.

Unlike the Spiritual Director though, Coakley cannot give different navigational tools to every pilgrim. Thus, despite the contextual caveats, we must ask whether her general guidance to the pilgrim is good advice. The tools might be entirely unfit for purpose and lead *everyone* over the edge, or alternatively they might be too risky – okay for some, but dangerous in the hands of others. If either of these are true, then it might well be that we should indeed look for a different path. One that does not avoid the cliffs - for we cannot avoid powers and submissions – but at the very least finds a different "semantic field" by which to cross.

At first glance at least, the decision to work with the language of vulnerability and submission does seem misplaced. Not only is it dangerous, it seems to imply all sorts of wrong-headed ideas. If we are vulnerable before God then the implication is that we are open to harm from God. If we are to submit to God then the implication is that we are surrendering to a foreign will. These implications are certainly *not* what Coakley intends. Coakley is clear that our pilgrimage is about our desires being transformed and re-aligned to divine desire

Why not then speak of dependency instead, with Schleiermacher in the background? Anne-Louise Eriksson has argued that Coakley would have been better served in '*Kenōsis* and Subversion' by parsing our spiritual *kenōsis* as 'acceptance of dependency'[119] instead of vulnerability. Indeed, she goes on to suggest that it is simply too dangerous to preach any form of 'submission' to women. In her view submission to God cannot be untangled from submission to men; neither linguistic fiat nor the work of contemplation can get around this cultural and contextual web.[120]

To properly contend with our dependency on God would necessarily require all the practices of contemplation Coakley points to: patient waiting, or space making; ceding and responding to the divine. Coakley is surely right in suggesting that we cannot escape the entanglement of powers and submissions, that we must contend and transform the power we inevitably do hold over others, and that we must hold on to divine power as the only

---

[119] Anne-Louise Eriksson '"Behold, I am the Lord's Handmaiden, not the lords'!": On Sarah Coakley's *Powers and Submissions*' in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift,* 85 (2009), 70-74 (p. 73).
[120] Eriksson, "Behold, I am the Lord's Hadmaiden', p. 72.

possible grounding for our own empowerment. But the language of dependency might be able to do all of this. Indeed, there is a clear partial conflation between dependence and vulnerability in Coakley's work. And, in Tonstad's view, no explanation for this is ever given.[121] Advocating for a *special* form of vulnerability or submission before this *special* form of (divine) power may take us far closer to the cliff edge than necessary; the language of dependency may do all the work necessary.

Yet we must be careful we do not jump to such a judgement too quickly. Certainly, some of Coakley's language around vulnerability is problematic: for example, she spoke once of allowing 'God to invade one's vulnerability'.[122] Yet it may be that there are good reasons Coakley wants to hold on to the specific language of vulnerability and submission, despite the dangers (that she so clearly articulates herself).

Two such reasons seem evident in Coakley's own work. The first is contextual. In a context in which 'power' is being championed and all forms of submission are rejected, Coakley explicitly wants to chart a different course. She therefore intentionally takes up the very vocabulary that has been spurned. Where autonomy and agency and freedom are the watchwords, Coakley wants to push back at this 'cultural resistance to "submission"'.[123] For rejecting all such language might, Coakley argues, have equally dangerous affects. Hence, in her view, the Enlightenment resistance to all forms of submissions, and the individualism that comes with it, has spawned an 'economic system that ironically guarantees the continuation of multiple forms of oppression' (p. xiv). Again, in a context where vulnerability has rightly been critiqued, Coakley wants to suggest what positive work it could do. It should not therefore surprise us that in this context, Coakley seems to speak of 'submission, dependency or vulnerability' (p. xiv) as overlapping (synonymous?) categories.

The second reason is more explicitly about the positive work the language of vulnerability might be doing and therefore – specific academic context aside – why Coakley might want to maintain it as able to articulate something *more* than the language of dependency ever could.

---

[121] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 110.

[122] Sarah Coakley, *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire: The Drama of Love and Betrayal* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014), p. 22.

[123] Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', p, xiii. Further references to this article, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

Vulnerability implies risk. To be vulnerable before God is to risk certain things: 'disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the "unconscious"';[124] the *'purgation'* (p. 13) of human desires; the possibility of 'arid vacancy' (p. 19) in prayer where God seems absent; the inevitability of 'spiritual pain'[125] and the attendant dark night of the soul. These are all purgative moments as we journey deeper into divine darkness. More generally, we might speak of the riskiness of any journey in which we seek to learn more of ourselves and more of God. Our own 'epistemological certainties are held in suspense as we encounter a jarring divine desire.'[126] We learn of our own failure to name Father rightly. We risk psychological discomfort, we risk feeling God's absence, we risk seeing those dark corners of ourselves that we would prefer remained hidden.

To be vulnerable in this sense then is not so much about the possibility of suffering genuine harm at the "hand" of God, but about risking self-knowledge and the exposure of our hidden idols. Such exposure might even be called "painful" (at least by metaphorical extension). We have all experienced moments of "painful" self-knowledge, where our own sin or folly has been called out (whether in private prayer or through relationship with others, or both). To be people on the road is to be vulnerable; it is to risk the dislocation and disorientation that new insight might bring.

So, despite the attendant dangers, Coakley seems to show us that we forsake the language of vulnerability (and submission) at significant cost; the language of dependency cannot quite do the same work. Dependency does not carry with it the same associations of risk. However, that does not automatically mean we should turn to this more dangerous language. Yes, we lose something (subtle and complex no doubt) by eschewing the language of vulnerability and submission, but is this a price worth paying to avoid the cliffs?

Could we not speak of a *special* form of dependence which has to navigate "painful dislocation" as we come to face our own distorted desires? We cannot know the answer in abstract, instead the question must forever remain live in theology, preaching and pastoral

---

[124] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 19. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotations in the text.

[125] Sarah Coakley, 'Palliative or Intensification?: Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites', in *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture,* ed. by Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 77-100 (p. 79).

[126] Scott Kirkland, 'Prayerful Dispossession and the Grammar of Thinking Theologically: Sarah Coakley and Gillian Rose' in *New Blackfriars,* 95 (2014), 662-673, (p. 672).

encounter. At the very least, Coakley misguides us in suggesting that this question can be answered by her *théologie totale* once and for all.

Material Vulnerability

Three further problems remain as Coakley seeks to navigate us through the cliffs of powers, submissions, and vulnerabilities. And it is here that we begin to draw out, more overtly, the connections to the overarching themes of this thesis.

First, it is never entirely clear in Coakley's corpus whether our vulnerability *before God* is connected to our humanity (as finite material beings) or our sin. As parsed above, I have intentionally suggested the latter: that this *special* vulnerability is interwoven with a purgative form of contemplation. We are vulnerable before God precisely because we need to be weaned off our idols. But this connection is never explicitly spelled out by Coakley. Tonstad thus simply accuses Coakley of having 'difficulty distinguishing between sin and finitude'.[127]

Second then, in making so much of this *special* vulnerability before God (and before no other), Coakley seems to pay little attention to the ways in which we are inherently vulnerable as finite, material beings. Coakley is concerned that we are vulnerable before God, opening ourselves up to all sorts of psychological risks, but she rarely – if ever – considers our fundamental creaturely vulnerability on this earth. This is surely problematic: as we negotiate the principalities and powers of this world, and as we deal with the material contingencies of our earthly lives, we cannot make ourselves into fortresses that are only vulnerable to God's heavenly attack.

We must instead face up to the vulnerabilities that come from our materiality. Coakley does briefly contend with these in her writings on pain.[128] Yet despite connecting the psychological and spiritual with the physical, and then thinking about the meaning and interpretation of pain within this context, she does not (perhaps surprisingly) connect this to her writing on vulnerability. Her notions of vulnerability continue to be tied solely Godward.

Yet we all are and know we are materially vulnerable. We fall over and break a bone. We burn ourselves in the fire. Or 'Suppose someone goes into the forest with another to cut

---

[127] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 99.
[128] See Coakley, 'Palliative or Intensification?'.

wood, and when one of them swings the axe to cut down a tree, the head slips from the handle and strikes the other person who then dies'.[129] To be material is to be vulnerable.

Further, to be material is to face the inevitability of death. We are vulnerable because we are mortal. Ernest Becker famously suggested that 'the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man [sic]'.[130] If this proposition has any truth to it then the contemplative task must include learning to face the prospect of our own death without fear. We are, so Becker argues, a living paradox. We have a symbolic nature that leaves the dust behind, that can contemplate metaphysics and meaning, and yet we are 'housed in a heart-pumping, breath gasping body' that is 'food for worms' (p. 26). We are, crudely, animals that defecate, and animals that die. To transcend such materiality, Becker argues that we chase after the heroic – attempting to create something that outlasts us (usually through violence). Such violent dreams can only be shattered by faith in God who brings meaning and hope to our creaturely lives. In God (or in Becker's language, in 'infinity' (p. 91)) we can find a 'cosmic heroism' whereby our lives find 'ultimate value' in 'the very service of God' (p. 91).

We do not have to accept the entirety of Becker's psychoanalytic package, nor his outdated (and sometimes offensive) comments on mental illness, nor even his adoption of Kierkegaardian Faith, to find helpful connections to our theme. We are material creatures who are therefore vulnerable and face the inevitability of death. Contemplation of the divine – in which our own insignificant and death-bound lives are given 'meaningfulness on the largest possible level' (p. 196) – becomes the way out of the destructive desire to avoid death.

Both Coakley and Becker find dialogue with the psychoanalytic tradition helpful (even if they are both critical of Freud). They both reject the idea that repression is the problem and libertinism the solution. And they both see that our lives might only be brought to fruition and fulfilment in relation to the infinite.

Yet, in Coakley's schema we are to become vulnerable before God and shore up other potential vulnerabilities. In Becker's schema, it is only in knowing ourselves to be held

---

[129] Deuteronomy 19.5 (NRSV).
[130] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, repr. 2011), p. xvii. Further references to this book, in the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.

invulnerable before the infinite that we can face the reality of our material vulnerabilities. Only as we see that the meaning and significance of our lives is *invulnerable* to the contingencies and vagaries of material existence, can we face death without fear, and so without recourse to violent attempts to become a hero. Only in contemplation can we begin to accept (and possibly even appreciate) the intrinsic vulnerabilities of our human lives.

<u>Vulnerability and Risk</u>

Third and finally, we return to the theme of risk. Living is risky because we are materially vulnerable; we live in a contingent world. The above deals with this in the passive tense. We are acted upon as creatures in this world, things happen *to us*. Yet, we can also think about risk and vulnerability in an active tense. We put ourselves in more, or less, risky situations; we make ourselves more or less vulnerable in order to work for justice, fight oppression and serve those in need. This too needs consideration if we are to think seriously about vulnerability and empowerment.

It is not as if Coakley denies this, but any exploration of power and vulnerability in this field is scant. The extent to which prophetic resistance might be risky is simply never mentioned; risk is virtually always psychological. For Coakley, it is principally in contemplation that we can let our guard down; God is the only one with whom we need 'no safe word'.[131]

Yet, if we are truly going to bear the fruit of empowerment in the world then we must surely venture forth. As Anna Mercedes suggests, such a movement into life is risky, offering 'no assurance of safety or purity or predictability'.[132] But, she maintains, it is only in this *pro nobis sein* (echoing Bonhoeffer's Christological language) that true life is found.

Again, as Nicholas Lash puts it, our *belief in* the Trinitarian God is a pledge to venture forth (rather than a statement about something); it is a response to the summons 'follow me.'[133] Even more forcefully, Herbert McCabe states quite simply that 'if you do love effectively, you will be killed.'[134] Polemic aside, the point is similar. In love (for God and neighbour) we venture forth into the unknown where 'there is always this background of risk'.[135] The

---

[131] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 100.
[132] Mercedes, *Power For,* p. 150.
[133] Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1992)*,* p. 73. Here Lash himself is following John Henry Newman's emphasis on venture.
[134] Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987), p. 218.
[135] McCabe, *God Matters,* p. 94.

failure to take this risk, McCabe argued, is a 'failure to respond to the summon into life',[136] it is another name for sin.

It is far from clear where such active risk-taking would fit within Coakley's schema, and in what ways she might want to caution us against it. To venture forth is to risk abuse, oppression, ridicule, and of course failure. It is in this movement outwards, towards others in love than we truly see our vulnerability, far more than in any psychological vulnerability before the divine. Taking Coakley's language but using it differently, we could say that contemplation empowers us to risk being vulnerable in the world.

On rare occasion Coakley appears to move towards this kind of thinking, as she outlines the importance of sacrifice[137] or asceticism[138] *in* the world (and not just in our contemplation of and transformation before the divine). Yet it is revealing that it is *these* two specific terms that Coakley extends the reference to creaturely relating. Ceding control, dispossession, arid waiting, vulnerability, *kenosis,* and so on, are not so extended. There is of course good reason for not extending the use of these terms given how such terms are so open to abuse, but the same could also be said for any call to sacrifice or to asceticism.

What is distinctive about these two terms is that both imply an element of control and choice. I choose my own ascetic path. I choose what I sacrifice for the sake of others. Both terms imply pre-meditated and controlled risk. In contrast, to venture forth into the world, accepting our own vulnerabilities and the precariousness of all relations in the world, is to precisely *let go* of control (and quite possibly choice as well). It means to be prepared to accept the risks of human encounter *without knowing* whether it will be life affirming or life draining, whether it will demand unmitigated cost or lead to hedonistic delight.

We have already heard accusations that Coakley's project refuses to leave sight of shore and remains too controlled to ever inculcate habits of un-mastery properly.[139] We are seeing it again here. In theology as in the call to action in the world, control appears

---

[136] *Ibid.*

[137] Coakley speaks of the sacrifice of every mother in pregnancy, birth and lactation, and of the role of sacrifice in any society that seeks to serve the poor. Coakley, 'Reconceiving "Natural Theology"', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures,* [accessed 5th June 2023]; and Coakley, 'Ethics, Cooperation and the Gender Wars: Prospects for a New Asceticism', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures,* 26 April 2012, [accessed 5th June 2023].

[138] Coakley suggests there will need to be 'ascetic voluntary loss' if we are to recover from the financial crisis of 2008. See Coakley, 'Reconceiving "Natural Theology"'. Coakley also uses the language of asceticism in relation to marriage, See Coakley, *The New Asceticism,* pp. 129-143.

[139] See Daniels, 'Getting Lost at Sea?', p. 68.

paramount. The risks associated with losing sight of shore, as well as the adventure that it enables, are thus severely restricted.

None of this is to suggest that one should venture forth seeking intentionally to be in harm's way. Rather, it is about accepting that the pursuit of justice, the work of love, may lead to situations which are risky or leave one vulnerable. Purpose remains paramount. Yet in this world, the call to love cannot but entail some form of risk or vulnerability. Held invulnerably in God, we can step out in love.

Summary

We have seen that these cliffs must be navigated somehow or another; there is no way to avoid thinking through the plethora of issues around power and vulnerability as we seek to contemplate the divine. We saw that whilst different semantic fields could be used something would be lost by axing the language of vulnerability and submission. Switching to the path of "dependency" was certainly not a clear and easy new route. Thus far we followed our pilgrim guide.

Beyond this though it became harder to follow. Coakley seemed to suggest that the route laid out in her *théologie totale* was the only one possible, yet in reality the best language to use to "safely" navigate these treacherous cliffs will be highly dependent upon context. Indeed, in attempting to assert *special* forms of vulnerability and submission and power by *fiat,* it is inevitable some will be led over the cliff edge.

Next, as we surveyed the cliffs in more detail in became apparent that Coakley's preferred path was itself problematic. The connections between vulnerability, sin and finitude were not properly mapped. Our vulnerability before God was emphasised, whilst the intrinsic vulnerabilities of material creaturely life were almost ignored.

At this point it almost felt like the map was being held upside down. We were told to cede control and become vulnerable to heavenly attack whilst implicitly encouraged to shore up our defences to earthly vulnerabilities, only stepping forth into situations of calculated and controlled risk. We were told to be vulnerable before God so we might be empowered for a prophetic resistance (a resistance that seems invulnerable to others). Surely, we would be better to speak of our invulnerability before the divine who keeps us and holds us and so allows us to face death without fear, and venture forth in love into the world, despite our frailty and all the attendant risks of material, creaturely life.

3.2 Sexual and Gendered Symbolics

We come to the next set of cliffs through which Coakley seeks to navigate. These involve a whole range of sexual and gendered symbols. For, if it is true that the work of contemplation is inextricably entangled with desire, *eros,* sexuality, and power then we cannot avoid such symbols. Coakley speaks of the need to 'endure a form of naked dispossession before God'. [140] She talks of the Holy Spirit 'cracking open'[141] the crooked human heart and of divine *ekstasis* catching us up into ecstasy.[142] She suggests a 'possible confusion between loss of control to [the] Spirit and loss of sexual control'.[143] To *not* use this kind of language would – as I read Coakley – be dishonest about the entanglements of desire. Sexual and gendered symbolics are needed if we are to do justice to the erotic work of contemplation.

Once again though, this is a dangerous road. The "danger" is perhaps exacerbated by Coakley's own commitment to work within the tradition which so often assumes a patriarchal and heterosexual milieu. Such commitment comes partly from her ecclesial context as a priest in the Church of England. Yet it also comes from the substance of her argument: it is the tradition itself which shows us that we cannot think about desire for God without also attending to sexual desire and gender. Aware of the ways in which sexual and gendered symbolics have been used to repress desire and oppress women, she thus moves into this disputed erotic realm. We are again navigating another set of cliff edges.

How does she guide us through, highlighting the entanglements of the erotic with contemplation, paying heed to the tradition, whilst not succumbing to a hetero-patriarchal narrative which leads to both repression and oppression? And, however she may try to do this, does she manage it? Does she pay enough attention to our material finitude to make her route navigable? These are the questions before us as we walk through these cliffs.

As we attend to the questions that come directly from Coakley's corpus, we will once again, also find ourselves inexorably drawn into thinking about the connections between materiality and contemplation, and the attendant themes of competition, teleology, and the impact of sin.

---

[140] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 19.
[141] *Ibid,* p. 24
[142] Coakley, *The New Asceticism,* p. 97.
[143] Coakley, 'Living into the Mystery', p. 228

<u>Symbolic De-stabilizations</u>

To guide us through this terrain, Coakley puts down three way-markers. First, she approaches the tradition with a thoroughgoing hermeneutic of suspicion. She suggests that much of *God, Sexuality, and the Self* is about how so many who have professed the Nicene spirit have unintentionally written hierarchy into the godhead and then read 'that same distorted power message into the human realm' (p. 321). Or more simply, she suggests that orthodoxy is 'very rarely what it seems' (p. 326). Similarly, she argues that the relegation of the Spirit (and of a prayer-based Trinitarianism) in the early church was due to issues of 'spiritual power and gender' (p. 101). Again, she is not shy about the 'historic capacity of the church to gender inner-trinitarian relations, while emphatically denying that it is doing so' (p.248), as revealed in iconography. Here then is a hermeneutic of suspicion through and through, and it builds her genealogical case for the messy entanglements of contemplation and the erotic.

Second, she argues that all gendered and sexual symbolics are rendered "labile" in our ascent to God. As such they resist conforming to a hetero-patriarchal narrative. Gender 'destabilizations', she writes, are '*endemic* to the life of transformation'[144] as we present and re-present ourselves in the dynamic and erotic ascent to God.

She roots this thinking in a charitable reading of Gregory of Nyssa whose Trinitarian theology is full of gendered subtext and (some) sexual allusion. Gregory believed that our reflection on the Trinity cannot be separated from the life of prayer and so also the entanglements of gender and desire. Coakley thinks that 'questions of eroticism and "gender" […] fall squarely within the reach of what the Trinitarian exegete of Gregory must attend to'. [145] In Gregory then, Coakley finds a patristic writer who maps our ascent to God through constantly shifting 'gender fluidities and reversals'.[146] Thus, whilst he may speak of the arrow of the Spirit which 'penetrates the soul with the fount of love' and of the bridegroom who 'penetrates' and 'takes possession of the bride' (through which we see a hetero-patriarchal narrative writ large), he can *also* speak of the bride becoming an 'extension or replication of the Son's arrow.'[147] For Gregory – so Coakley argues – the

---

[144] Coakley, *The New Asceticism,* p. 77.
[145] Coakley, 'Introduction: Gender, Trinitarian Analogies and the Pedagogy of *the Song*', p. 2.
[146] *Ibid,* p. 9.
[147] *Ibid,* p. 10. See also, Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* pp. 285-286.

gendered and sexual symbolics of contemplation are constantly being made labile as God and creature continuously swap gender and position.

Analogies are never fixed but are always dynamic, always drawing us 'beyond complacency'.[148] Coakley argues for an excess of imagery which never allows us to settle, but instead is caught up in endless 'circular movement'.[149] She suggests that it is through the proliferation and abundance of allegorical allusion and shifting symbolics than we maintain a contemplative "lability".

Third, and most importantly, such lability has its root in the interruption of the Spirit, whereby the triadic inner relations of God overcome all 'stuck, fixed, repressive twoness' (p. 57). In Trinitarian language, the Spirit breaks open the 'patriarchal dyad' (p.327). Hence, to avoid the hetero-patriarchal symbolic milieu, whilst continuing to argue for the entanglement of contemplation with the erotic, means making that 'problematic "third" in God the "first" in human encounter' (p.334). For 'it is finally only the clarification of the place of the Spirit in the Trinity which can resist the (ever-seductive) lure back into patriarchal hierarchy' (p. 333).

In making the Spirit primary, Coakley hopes to guard against the patriarchal symbolic that is so easily written into Trinitarian processions. In the Spirit, origin and end, source and goal, are themselves made labile as we are caught up in divine *ekstasis.* It is therefore, Coakley argues, only through the work of the Spirit (in purgative contemplation) that we might ever be able to call God Father without subconsciously thinking patriarchy.

This is her "map" for navigating us through the cliffs: a hermeneutic of suspicion, a destabilization of gendered symbols, and the primacy of the Spirit in the work of contemplation. Is it enough though to stop us falling over the edge though? Given that we must walk this way – because the entanglements of desire necessitate it – we are left with the question of whether her way-markers manage to keep us clear of hetero-patriarchal symbolics and the concordant repression and oppression.

A Different Symbolics?

---

[148] Sarah Coakley, '"Persons" in the "Social" Doctrine of the Trinity: Current Analytic Discussion and "Cappadocian" Theology', in *Powers and Submissions,* pp. 109-129 (p. 129).
[149] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 253. Further references to this book, for the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.

It is amongst these cliffs that Linn Marie Tonstad seems to be most critical of Coakley's guidance to the pilgrim. In Tonstad's view, suggesting that sexual and gendered symbolics are made labile, does nothing to undo the 'primary heterosexism that such imagery encodes'.[150] No amount of dynamic destabilisation gets us away from the primary theological symbolic which configures 'the God-creation relationship in hierarchically and heterosexually gendered terms'.[151] As long as 'penetrated and penetrating bodies'[152] remain the foundational structural image we cannot escape from the hetero-patriarchal milieu. If we remain within this symbolic – so Tonstad argues – Coakley's call to a contemplative stance of power-in-vulnerability before the dazzling darkness is *nothing other* than a mirroring of the kind of hetero-patriarchal violence that feminism has sought to fight.

This is a debate about the power of the symbolic. Janet Soskice, who is generally sympathetic to Coakley's project, suggests that she and Coakley are both involved in trying to turn the symbols such that we might speak Father rightly, without patriarchal idolatries lurking in our minds.[153] Yet, if the symbols used still encode in their structure heterosexual and patriarchal assumptions, and if the material or cultural framework encodes such assumptions as well, then no amount of symbolic "lability" will have the desired effect.

In other words, in Tonstad's view, it does not matter how many caveats are put in place and how many times Coakley says that our contemplative stance before God is *unlike* any other form of worldly submission; it does not matter whether the hetero-patriachal symbolics are made labile, the point is that we are still left within the same hetero-patriarchal world. Hence, in the end, Tonstad argues that Coakley retains rather than overcomes the gendered heterosexist hierarchies of the God-world relation; she 'strengthens rather than weakens the symbolic-theological order of gender that trinitarian theology helps hold in place'.[154]

Two decades earlier, when Coakley first published '*Kenōsis* and Subversion', Daphne Hampson made similar charges to those of Tonstad, claiming that the sexual undertones of that essay 'confirms, rather than undermines, these [heterosexist and hierarchical] sexual

---

[150] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 105.
[151] *Ibid,* p. 106
[152] *Ibid.*
[153] See Janet Martin Soskice, 'Turning the Symbols', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?*, pp. 17-32.
[154] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 104.

metaphors […]. It sounds as though one is such an enclosed self that to be so open to God is an ordeal.'[155] Tonstad could have written the same.

In response to both authors, Coakley fails to contend with the way in which metaphors and the implicit directional force of the symbolic might be more powerful than the caveats and complexities and labilities used to hedge around them.[156] Lallene Rector (a psychotherapist) speaks of subtle forms of domination in many Christian households where "she" does not recognise her own subjectivity and privileges the desires of others ("he"), to the loss of self.[157] Disrupting the symbolic ordering of this patriarchy, or making it labile, still means this patriarchal milieu is the referent point. The foundational imagery remains unchanged, and with dangerous bodily affects.

To put it differently, the way-markers Coakley sets up to guide us through this terrain are simply *not enough*. A hermeneutic of suspicion is not enough, lability is not enough, starting with the Spirit is not enough. None of these things change the hetero-patriarchal symbolic order that the tradition sets up and in which we will (by conditioned default) fall prey to. The 'purgative kneeling before the blankness of the darkness'[158] cannot on its own slay the demons of patriarchy. Symbolic tinkering will do nothing if the symbolic framework and the material conditions that reinforce that framework have not changed.

To argue such is to simply take our material finitude as basic. Coakley does not emphasis enough the fundamental way in which we grow and learn and are habituated into ways of thinking through our cultural and material context. This is basic to our finitude; it is not something that we can simply be purged of by work on our knees.

The basic problem here (as elsewhere) is clarifying or distinguishing what we ascribe to sin and what we ascribe to our finitude. The point is that, even if we (somehow) manage to ween ourselves off idols in our own interior castle, the moment we step outside of it once more we are liable to have our thinking changed by the patriarchal cultural perversions of

---

[155] Daphne Hampson, 'Response', in *Swallowing a Fishbone,* pp. 112- 124 (p. 123).

[156] See Linn Marie Tonstad, 'Reply: Response to Sarah Coakley', in *Symposium: God and Difference* (The Syndicate Network, 5 June 2017) <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/god-and-difference/> [accessed 8th June 2020]. See also Coakley 'Afterword', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?,* pp. 168-170 (p. 170).

[157] See Lallene J. Rector, 'Are we making love yet? Theological and Psychological Perspectives on the Role of Gender Identity in the Experience of Domination', in *Good News,* pp. 74-95.

[158] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 325.

the day. This is not simply because we have failed to do the proper work on our knees, but because of our nature as finite creatures who learn over time and from others.

We cannot expect to have our intellectual and affective apparatus transformed by linguistic caveats and by work on our knees when the cultural habits of our time have not fundamentally changed. The purgative work within needs to be matched by something without as well. Changing the former without the latter will do nothing. Coakley appears to suggest that the root of public and structural sin is always a matter of the heart. Her solution to systemic issues retreats to the private sphere.

Tonstad is less convinced by this approach and thus feels the need to offer her own guidance. She does not dispute the need to turn to gendered and sexual symbols to speak about the Trinity and our incorporation into the divine life, but rather than working with the tradition and making it labile, she turns to new imagery. The tradition, she says, 'has found symbolic wombs, breasts, phalluses, and birth canals everywhere in God, Christ, and Mary, yet it has seldom if ever found a symbolic clitoris'.[159] So she sets about to develop a Trinitarian theology – and a corresponding anthropology – that is structured around 'clitoral rather than phallic pleasure […] surface touch or copresence rather than penetration'.[160]

The second major move Tonstad makes is to dispense of the language of origin and procession to speak of the immanent Trinity. She argues that such language writes subordination into the heart of God and so envisages difference as inherently antagonistic. Trinitarian theologies that assert equality *and* origination can only exist by continuously repeating an '"even though"' (p.204). In the end – so Tonstad argues – whatever clever moves are made only cement and re-affirm the connection between origination and heteropatriarchal symbolics; the "even though" does not undermine the default associations. This is about how symbols function and operate, in contrast to what someone might be *trying* to say.

Constructively then Tonstad proposes we focus on the "for us" nature of God's self and God's revelation, emphasising the circularity in God's own communion and imagining the Trinity in terms of light (source of light, the light itself, and the light by which we see).[161] In

---

[159] Tonstad, 'Reply: Response to Sarah Coakley'.
[160] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 106. Further references to this book, for the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.
[161] *Ibid.* pp. 226-228.

brief, she simply proposes 'relation without procession' (p. 136). This leaves the Nicene Creed behind, but Tonstad remains within the bounds of what trinitarian theology seeks to do – maintaining that 'God is as God shows Godself to be' (p. 226). Tonstad raises the question (but refuses to answer it conclusively) of whether the language of procession *necessarily* entails a phallic, hetero-patriarchal symbolic. If so, it does not matter how much hedging, and complexifying, and making things labile one does, the problems run deeper.

We thus need a proliferation of new symbols that conceive of our relationship to the divine, and of the divine life, in ways that actively resist and push back against the hetero-patriarchal symbolic, even whilst recognising that both gendered and sexual imagery are inevitable. Tonstad maps a different way through these cliffs. Her sexual and gendered symbolic looks far more enriching for the pilgrim's contemplative journey of transformation, and correspondingly has far more significant social and political repercussions, than Coakley's vision of Spirt led lability could ever have.

<u>Summary</u>

We cannot simply try to "turn" the symbols and hope the world turns too. The material conditions of our lives will set the lens through which we read (even labile) symbols. If we really want to turn ourselves and so turn the world, then we need *more* than Coakley suggests. A hermeneutic of suspicion, language made labile, and spirit-led encounter with the divine (that supposedly enables us to slay demons on our knees) is not enough. This is because we are finite creatures who learn over time and cannot but imbibe cultural mores which themselves are perverted by the sinful structures of our time.

We need new symbols, we need to consider if we can retain processional language, and we need (to return to previous sections) a contemplative vision that seeks personal and political transformation *in relation* to others in the midst of the messy material world – not just in the interior castle. Only then might we navigate through these cliffs and so learn something of what it is to contemplate the divine, rather than just gaze upon idols.

3.3 Competition, Contemplation and Spatialization

The third and final – and most significant - set of cliffs to navigate are the cliffs of competition. Here we approach, head on, the primary and overarching theme of this thesis. Through thinking about competition, we will find ourselves inevitably also considering those questions around sin and finitude, and teleology as well.

Throughout Coakley's corpus we come across ways of describing contemplation that imply some kind of competition between the human and the divine. We make space for God, we cede control; we are invited to a naked dispossession, and to practices of self-effacement. In terms of both space and agency, Coakley consistently uses oppositional metaphors to describe contemplation. We move out of the way so that God can move in. We give up our agency so that God can work through us. This is the competitive logic of these metaphors, which all have their source in Coakley's understanding of *kenosis.*

Tonstad therefore attacks Coakley for construing 'the God-world relation in dangerously competitive ways' (p. 99). There is, so it seems, no way for us to find our place within the life of the Trinity without a kind of evacuation of ourselves (p. 106). This problematic 'spatialization' (p. 99) (as Tonstad refers to it) is deeply embedded in all of Coakley's work.

Yet, such "spatialization" comes despite the fact that Coakley is herself (as Tonstad well knows) committed to a classical understanding of divine transcendence which specifically guards against any possibility of actual competition (whether in terms of space or agency) between the human and the divine. As we have already seen, Coakley is deeply critical of modern kenotic theories which make the presumption that it is 'a necessity to bring "divine" and "human" characteristics into the *same plane* and make them into a "coherent" package'.[162] More generally, she criticises incompatibilist versions of freedom (with their attendant masculine gender assumptions) in which God has to get out of the way for us to be free, and instead advocates for the idea that God is the one 'nurturing and sustaining us *into freedom*.'[163]

At least in her debates with the analytical philosophers of religion her antennae seem well tuned: there cannot be competition between the divine and the human. Divine transcendence means such competition is impossible. Yet, as she changes register and seeks to become more of a pilgrim guide for the contemplative, we find competitive metaphors at every turn.

The crunch then is this: Coakley uses such metaphor *despite* knowing full well that there is in fact no such competition. Why? Either she herself has just misplaced the map, as it were, and has relapsed into using such language, or more charitably and more probably, such

---

[162] Coakley, 'Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?', p. 248n.
[163] Sarah Coakley, 'Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis,* ed. by John Polkinghorne (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 192-210 (p. 206).

metaphorical language should be seen as essential for the contemplative journey. The simple fact that God does not compete with us for space or agency *does not say enough.* Coakley recognises that we must say more and so uses a range of competitive metaphors despite the dangers of being misconstrued. In other words, here are another set of cliffs that Coakley thinks we cannot bypass and that we must navigate through. This – as I will explicate – is both because we are material finite beings, and because we are sinful.

First then, competitive language is necessary if we are to make sense of our experience of contemplation as creatures who live in space and walk through time. I cannot contemplate the ineffable mystery of the divine whilst also helping my son put on his coat, whilst also thinking about the work I must do as soon as he is at school. In contrast to any generic notion of dependence, the *activity* of contemplation means not doing something else.

We come up against the limits of space and time. I spend time in contemplation instead of being engaged in political action or with a friend in need, or with family simply having fun. As such it makes perfect sense to speak of "making space" for God. For Coakley, contemplation of the divine is not some generic name for an attitude that we might inculcate through all we say and do; it is an actual repeated bodily practice that takes energy, effort, and time. Competitive metaphors of space thus clearly have a place precisely because they take our creaturely, material and finite nature as basic.

Equally, whilst we do not actually compete for *agency* with God – for here is the power that empowers – metaphors that imply a sense of competition between divine and human agency make sense of our experience. I come to wait, to be still, and to be (what can best be described as) *passive,* waiting on the gracious *active* work of the Spirit. Of course, such passivity and activity are not absolute: our passivity is itself dependent upon the activity of God. And the work of God in us, bearing fruit in us, is dependent upon our activity of patient waiting. We cannot – as material creatures – entirely get away from these metaphors of passivity and activity.

Competitive metaphors are thus necessary to make sense of our experience of contemplation. They are not theoretical so much as lived and embodied. We cannot give voice to the kind of work that contemplation does without recourse to such language, and that – I think – is part of Coakley's point (even as she never spells this out). Indeed, it is probably arguable (although beyond the scope of this work) that we cannot think at all without recourse to some forms of spatialization. As material creatures we think in terms of

space and time. Coakley never explicates this, but she does seem to presume it. In theory we do not compete with God. In practice, we cannot but rely on competitive metaphor to think and speak of the practice of contemplation (and possibly to think at all).

Second, competitive metaphor makes particular sense when we come to face the reality of sin. We need to let God cleanse and re-order our desires, break down and transform our thinking, that the idols of our hearts might be destroyed. We make space for God to push aside our little idols. We sit still and allow God's purgative work within us to change our desires.

Using some of her preferred language, we could say that we need to go on a journey of dispossession. We let go of the idols we seek to possess and the selves we seek to own. We go on a journey of self-effacement whereby we let go of our egotistical desire for life to be orientated around ourselves, and instead begin to attend to others as subjects who are beyond us. The journey of contemplation involves a purgation, or even an 'erasure'[164] of the sinful self, in order that we might be remade in the likeness of the Son. This purgative work is competitive, it is about replacing one thing with another.

Hence, despite Coakley's deeply classical understanding of immanence and transcendence she rightly discerns that we must navigate these cliffs of spatialization. We have no choice but to use the language of competition if we are to speak well of the practice of contemplation. Coakley does not exactly make this explicit, but it is certainly the logic of her position.

Missing Parts of the Map

Once again though, there are questions as to how well Coakley manages to guide us through these cliffs. We begin with the smallest of three concerns. If it is true that we do not compete with God in terms of space or agency, and if it is also true that the practice of contemplation forces recourse to competitive metaphor, then might we need to re-think the place and importance of the *practice of contemplation* in the life of one who seeks to

---

[164] In Tonstad's view, 'The self-erasing human being [...] comes to stand at the center of [Coakley's] theological project'. *God and Difference,* p. 99. The question is whether the erasure sought is of a sinful ego, or of the human creature themselves. As Tonstad points out, Coakley does not properly answer this question.
I am going beyond what Coakley explicitly says in assuming here that the referent of such language is sin. More on this below.

contemplate the divine? In other words, if we are forced to use language that inherently distorts the fundamental picture of that which we are contemplating then it seems at least possible that something has gone amiss.

At the very least we might (once again) do better to return to the language of dependency, even as Coakley does rightly point out some of the dangers of this kind of language.[165] We could fall back on Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependency as something that pervades our living and therefore is not demarcated by concerns over space, or time, or passivity. We could think too of the contemplative task of seeking to be a person of gratitude and joy in all things.[166] Or, we might turn to Brother Lawrence's suggestion that we practise the presence of God; we pray in and through the baking of the bread and the washing of the dishes. Or, a little differently, and returning to the thinking of Nicholas Lash, we might find we are already contemplating the divine in our human interactions of compassion and kindness.

This is not to say that we can circumvent these cliffs, but rather we might find our way through them more easily if we were able to see the rest of the map, as it were. Creating time and space to be "passive" before the divine may indeed be necessary, but only as part of a wider project which has no need for competitive metaphors at all. This discrete work – the *practice* of contemplation – needs to be balanced with an emphasis on the empowering power of God, who gives us all the time and space we need to love our neighbour, through which activity we find ourselves already (and somewhat accidentally) contemplating the divine.[167]

The second issue also stems out of the concern that Coakley has not so much misguided us as not provided us with enough of the map. Nowhere does she give an adequate description of the actual practice of contemplation. Coakley tells us on numerous occasions that repeated and embodied practices of contemplation are necessary.[168] Yet she rarely

---

[165] The language of dependence has had 'fatal cultural admixtures for women'; '*right* dependence is an elusive goal'. Sarah Coakley, 'Creaturehood Before God: Make and Female' in *Powers and Submissions,* pp. 55-68 (p.55, p. 68).

[166] See Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 133.

[167] See Ben Quash, *Abiding* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) for more on this theme.

[168] See, for example, Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 19; Sarah Coakley, 'Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology', in *Practicing Theology: Belief and Practices in Christian Life,* ed. by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Cambridge, 2002), pp. 78-93; Coakley, 'Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation', p. 311; Coakley, 'Is there a future?', p. 6.

explicates what such practices might involve; only one essay details something of what this might entail.[169]

Whilst she is understandably keen not to limit what contemplation might include, the reticence to flesh out what contemplation looks like does not help the pilgrim. Even if guidance fell outside of her remit of writing "systematic" theology she could have pointed to other's work so that we might have the navigation tools needed for this journey. Given her leanings, this would surely include pointing us towards the practice of silent prayer, as engaged with by authors such as Martin Laird, John Main, and Anthony de Mellow. [170]

But even if she had done that, simply advocating for silence is not on its own enough. Proper attention needs to be given to the plethora of different ways in which silence can function and the different forms of silence we might engage with. For silence itself is a deeply ambivalent experience. It can point towards 'either nihilistic despair or divine plenitude'.[171] It can take us towards nothingness, or the fullness of God. Ensuring it takes us away from nihilism towards plenitude is crucial, for as Duns Scotus said, 'you cannot love a mere postponement'.[172]

Context thus becomes crucial, to give silence shape and fill it with meaning. What surrounds the silence will dictate whether it is oppressive or liberating, indifferent or energised, an attempt at evasion or radical attention, nihilistic or filled with depth.[173]

For those who wish to travel the way of contemplative silence there are many maps that outline the contours of the terrain. Sara Maitland speaks of two types of silence we might pursue. The silence of 'self-emptying' in which boundaries become porous and we find ourselves in that silence which is 'a silence that is positive, alive, actual and of its 'nature' *unbreakable'.[174]* A silence which is God's very self. This silence Maitland finds and associates

---

[169] Sarah Coakley, 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Dom John Chapman OSB (1865 – 1933), on the meaning of "Contemplation"', in *Powers and Submissions,* pp. 40-54.

[170] Coakley wants to ensure her vision of the practice of contemplation is expansive (including for example, *glossolalia*). Coakley, 'Response to my critics', p. 25. Yet clearly the practice of silent prayer is primary in her thinking. See for example, Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 84.

[171] Graham Ward, 'In the Daylight forever?: Language and Silence', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 159-184 (p. 160).

[172] Quoted in Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', in *ibid,* pp. 11-34 (p. 34).

[173] See Oliver Davies, 'Sounds: towards a theological poetics of silence', in *ibid,* pp. 201-222. See also Dairmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), especially p. 234-235.

[174] Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence: A Journey in Search of the Pleasures and Powers of Silence* (London: Granta Books, 2008), p. 221.

with the desert of Sinai. It is the silence of the hermits, and bears most similarities to the kind of silence Coakley advocates. There is also – in Maitland's scheme - the silence that seeks 'to shore up and strengthen the boundaries of the self'.[175] This is the silence that seeks to provide a stronger and more vivid narrative of the self. It is the silence of the romantics and one Maitland discovered walking in the hills.

Others have naturally mapped the terrain in different ways. Cynthia Bourgeault, for example, draws (overly) hard distinctions between 'concentrative methods, awareness methods, and surrender methods' of silent prayer.[176] She personally advocates the last of these, drawing heavily on *kenotic* language to explore it. Others pay more attention to the liturgical or communal context than makes sense of contemplative silence.[177]

If Coakley was to carefully guide us through this terrain of silence, then it might well be that the accusations of spatialization would recede. The competitive metaphors – which are drawn upon by almost all authors writing in the contemplative tradition – can be fleshed out, corresponding to particular bodily practices and particular bodily affects. For example, Maitland details eight key experiences from her time of silence on Skye.[178] Maitland is especially helpful here, using kenotic language in *specific* reference to the emptying out of the *ego*, in order that we might find our true self, and then contrasting this kenotic 'desert silence' with the silence of creativity and the Romantic tradition.[179] In other words, the detailed experiential work of Maitland makes it clear how she is using spatialized rhetoric, in contrast with the ambiguity that remains in Coakley's corpus.

Competitive metaphors are surely crucial rhetoric to explore the practice of contemplation. Yet, Coakley does not consider how they might they sit alongside non-competitive metaphors in which contemplation of the divine is what happens as we attend to neighbour; nor does she properly attend the silent practices that rely on spatialized and competitive

---

[175] *Ibid,* p. 251.

[176] Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Plymouth: Cowley, 2004), p. 20.

[177] Myles Werntz suggests that Coakley's vision 'remains insufficiently attentive to the communal context' needed for the work of contemplation. Myles Werntz, 'The Body and the Body of the Church: Coakley, Yoder, and the Imitation of Christ', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future,* pp. 99-114 (p. 100). Equally Mary Hilkert asks about the scant attention given to the liturgical in Coakley's writing. Mary Catherine Hilkert, 'Desire, Gender and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley's Feminist Contemplative Theology', *Modern Theology,* 30 (2014), 575-581 (p. 579). As Hilkert accepts, this may well come in volume 4 of Coakley's systematics. The lack of emphasis in Coakley's writing to the communal and liturgical contrasts with Coakley's lived practice as a priest in the Church of England who has often been embedded in parish or cathedral ministry.

[178] Maitland, *A Book of Silence,* pp. 48-77.

[179] See *ibid,* p. 193.

language. The implication in her work that we cannot do without competitive metaphor is surely right; we must walk through these cliffs. Yet, the broader terrain, and the specific contours of competitive metaphor are left explored, and thus we may find ourselves wondering quite where Coakley wants to take us.

<u>Purgation or Eschatological vocation?</u>

So far then the suggestion is not so much that Coakley has misguided us but rather that she has not quite given us enough information to get us through these cliffs. But we need to probe a little deeper and question the particular competitive metaphors she chooses to use to build up a picture of what contemplation is and what it does. This is the third concern.

Two particular terms stand out for critique, namely, "dispossession" and "self-effacement". Both are used frequently in Coakley's work. The problem with these terms is *not* that they carry an inherently competitive logic – for, as discussed above, we cannot entirely escape such competitive metaphors – but rather that they push a competitive logic to the point that "I" seem to disappear from view entirely. I am dispossessed until I have nothing left of my own. I am self-effacing until I am erased. This kind of language seems to me to be in an entirely different semantic field from the language of "making space" which retains a competitive logic but without any suggestion of erasure.

Coakley clearly does *not* want to imply any sense of erasure of the self. Her project is explicitly aimed at the transformation of self and not the obliteration of self. She believes such transformation is aided by this language of effacement and a corresponding 'form of noetic slippage'.[180] She is explicit that the ultimate *telos* for us is the intensification of desire not its eradication.[181] She states that our end is the fulfilment of self in the 'infinite delight' of divine life.[182] She repeatedly stipulates that this contemplative work of effacement and dispossession is not about diminishment or erasure. And yet, despite all this, it is far from clear whether her stipulations can throw off the inevitable connotations of these terms.

This disconnect between what Coakley says she is doing and what she ends up doing is one of the central critiques made by Linn Marie Tonstad. In her eyes Coakley puts the 'self-erasing human being […] at the very center of her theological project'.[183] "'Dispossessing" a

---

[180] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 23.
[181] See Coakley, *The New Asceticism, p.* 52; and Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 26.
[182] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 11.
[183] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 99.

possessive self' becomes our primary vocation.[184] Coakley contends that Tonstad's 'exegesis goes badly awry' here.[185] Yet, Tonstad's point is not that '[Coakley's] intentions are bad (as, for example, in the expansive, transformed and empowered self that she argues results from willed vulnerability to God) but that her theology doesn't finally support her intentions.'[186] Clearly Coakley is not being accused of *intentionally* wanting to lead us down a path towards the erasure and evacuation of the self, but – so Tonstad argues – this is what she ends up doing.

It is hard (if not impossible) to adjudicate this stand-off. At the very least we can say that Coakley's work goes awry by not being prepared to countenance the possibility that her rhetoric *might* display some problematic tensions, pulling the reader in multiple directions at once. As a pilgrim guide, navigating us through the cliffs, she does not pay enough attention to the wrong turns we *might* make as we follow her guidance.

Or, to put it slightly differently, it is far from clear what exactly is gained by using these terms. We could say that Coakley takes us far nearer the cliff edge than is necessary. Taking our material creaturehood as basic *does* necessitate some forms of competitive metaphor, but does not talk of dispossession and self-effacement throw us over the edge?

One way of parsing the problem is by suggesting (again) that Coakley does not properly delineate between sin and finitude, or between what is proper to creaturely embodiment and what is necessary for the purgation of our sinful selves. This is a pivotal claim in Tonstad's argument.[187] Is dispossession and self-effacement something that is befitting of our creaturely lives, and so central to our vocation even into the eschaton? Or, are we seeking to dispossess ourselves of idols, erase our sinful egos, that our distorted desires might be transformed to reflect divine desire?

If it was clear in Coakley's corpus that dispossession and self-effacement were necessary *purgative* tasks, perhaps in contrast to the work of union, then we might feel like we were on more solid ground. [188] Any kind of "self-erasure" would be clearly delineated as the

---

[184] *Ibid,* p. 121.

[185] Sarah Coakley, 'Voices in "God and Difference"', in *Symposium: God and Difference* (The Syndicate Network, 5 June 2017) <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/god-and-difference/> [accessed 8th June 2020]

[186] Tonstad, 'Reply: Response to Sarah Coakley'.

[187] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 99.

[188] Coakley distinguishes between practices purgative, illuminative and unitive in 'Deepening Practices', p. 79. See also, Coakley, *The New Asceticism,* pp. 112-121. She never explicitly connects purgative practices with dispossession or self-effacement though.

erasure of sin, such that we might find our true selves in divine delight. However, as it is, there is ambiguity.

On the one hand Christ is described as self-effacing and so we might assume that self-effacement is the hallmark of redeemed humanity. [189] On the other hand, Coakley's contemplative practice is entirely focused on the progressive purging of 'the fallen and flawed capacity for idolatry, the tragic misdirecting of desire.'[190]

In my view, it makes most sense of Coakley's wider corpus to assume that dispossession and self-effacement are necessary because of sin. The question we then have to ask is whether it might be possible to read her Christology in line with this. Coakley argues that Christ's *kenosis* concerns his refusal to grasp at what could be his; he withstands Satan's temptations and the external struggles this fallen world pits against Him. Christ's *kenosis* – the human self-effacement – thus refers to his willingness to be dispossessed (literally disposed of on a waste heap outside the city walls) by a sinful humanity that would rather kill God than worship God. We could thus read Christ's self-effacement as taking human sin as its referent point. His dispossession is a result of coming into a fallen world. Our imitation of Christ's self-effacement takes a different form because our struggle against sin includes the distorted desires *within*.

This might be one way of clarifying the problems here. But in doing so I am going far beyond what Coakley explicates. The lack of delineation between sin and finitude, and specifically to what self-effacement or dispossession refers, remains ambiguous throughout her corpus. The language of self-effacement and dispossession may be rendered less problematic if it was clear that the focus was purgation – the erasure of a sinful ego and the dispossession of a possessive self.

Another way of parsing the problem is by suggesting that any sense of end, or *telos,* is occluded in Coakley's project. It is difficult to see anything in her work beyond an endless transformation of self into the likeness of the Son. Eschatology appears infinitely deferred as we continue our pilgrimage of purgation. We are left with an infinite deferral through endless self-effacement; anything beyond the transformation of the self gets lost, any final

---

[189] Coakley, *'Kenōsis* and Subversion', p. 36.
[190] Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 20. Further references to this book, in the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.

telos disappears round the corner. Surely though, there must be something beyond erasure and endless cycles of "dispossession".

If we are given any glimpses of the end at all it is in apophatic terms. She speaks of the 'infinite delight' (p. 11) of life with God, and of being caught up in 'divine desire' (p. 310), or 'of 'divine ecstasy' (p. 317). These vague and apophatic terms may well have their place, but alongside them we need visions of the good life that are grounded in space and time.

A way through – which may help avoid the confusion around sin and finitude as well as build an eschatology that can help us think about life together on earth – would be to work from the other direction. Rather than thinking principally about the purgation of distorted desire we could instead begin with the end, thinking about ways to describe redeemed creaturehood, and then thinking through the transformation of distorted desire in those same terms.

One option then might be to think rather simply about "facing" as opposed to "self-effacing". Whilst the latter speaks of the erasure of the self, the former is simply orientated towards the other. Such "facing" could speak of the purgative work needed now (as we turn our faces outwards) and the life of the kingdom in which everyone's attention is focused on others' faces.

Drawing on the work of Levinas, Jüngel, and Ricoeur, David Ford advocates for an understanding of the self that is formed as we face God, face others, and are faced by others. He argues that it is in this facing that we find ourselves.[191] There is no reason that Coakley could not speak of our attentive facing toward God, rather than our effacement. It is difficult to see what could be lost by replacing the dangerously competitive and self-obsessed language of self-effacement with the simpler and more adaptable language of facing. It can do the purgative and teleological work needed. The language avoids competitive metaphor and avoids a fixation on the self.

Another possible image, that portrays something of an eschatological hope that is rooted in space and time, and that could then also be used to think about our purgative journey, is dancing.

---

[191] David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Barbara Ehenreich eloquently tells the story of how ecstasy, dance and festivities, which once were the hallmark of religious ritual, were slowly eroded in modern Europe, as well as in the centres of missionary presence. With the rise of Calvinism, ascetic practise, labour, and personal discipline became the path of righteousness.[192] Dance, and all expressions of communal joy were suppressed. Today, living in the shadow of this legacy, Ehrenreich suggests that 'Pentheus and his allies seem to have finally prevailed over Dionysius' (p. 248).

Ehenreich grieves the loss of such collective joy. This is partly because of its *extrinsic* results: collective joy has traditionally fostered solidarity and inclusivity, over 'hierarchy [and] exclusion' (p. 253) and been intimately tied up in protest for a better world. Yet it is also because of its *intrinsic* good. Ehenreich's ultimate hope for the return of the 'ecstatic possibility' (p. 258) – through 'music, color, feasting, and dance' (p. 260) – is not so much about achieving goals as about simply reclaiming our creaturely heritage. In her view, we were quite simply made to dance.

Dancing has, of course, been used in recent times as a metaphor for the life of the Trinity. Much has been penned about *perichoresis* – that "divine dance". But, whilst it is clearly a deeply evocative and poetic image, one wonders whether the metaphor of dancing might be better applied elsewhere. For dancing is not only constrained by space and time, it finds its very beauty in that movement through space and time. Bodies that are very much bounded and distinct, that cannot be in the same space at the same time, can learn to move in step with one another, to work together to create something together.

And, to parrot Coakley's own use of Luce Irigaray, we might say that in any good dance, as two learn to move together, we find an irreducible third, "'that ecstasy of ourself in us'".[193] In that movement together, God is found.

Here then is an image – not so much for the divine life itself but for the possibilities of creaturely life together. It is a rich metaphor for the kingdom of God. And if it is one way of imaging the end for which we aim, it is also then inevitably by extension a way of imagining the journey of purgation. We are aiming for a dance in which people move together in harmony. Right now though, we're in the practice room, working on our steps, trying to learn to dance in step with one another.

---

[192] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 101. Further references to this book, in the following paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.
[193] As quoted in Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self,* p. 318.

One of the helpful aspects of the rich imagery around dancing is that it begins to blur, but not eradicate, hard and sharp boundaries between people. Echoing Tonstad, it can appear in Coakley's project as if isolated and bounded individuals need to be continually brought out of their shell through painful acts of dispossession. But in a dance two people – or indeed many more – move together such that it is not always clear where one person ends, and another begins, even as the physical boundaries remain.

This brings us to our third and final possible image – feasting. And it is one that Linn Marie Tonstad takes up for us. Tonstad uses imagery of banqueting and feasting precisely to emphasise a 'less vigorous personhood'.[194] She moves us from thinking about bounded and isolated persons and onto relations; from personal transformation to transformed communion. In her words, 'God comes close in love to transform human difference from its seemingly inevitable, sinful tendency to turn into competition necessitating self-sacrifice into the possibility of table fellowship in friendship with each other and Jesus' (p. 238).

The interactions, the movements, flowing between porous personalities becomes central. Our lives become orientated towards the establishment of such a 'banquet without borders' (p. 239). This is the end to which we aim; our journey or purgation is always towards such a feast.

Yet, the way that Tonstad understands this particular banquet is not without its problems. Rather than simply and rightly wanting to blur the boundaries between self and other, Tonstad seems to attempt to make those boundaries disappear entirely.

Where Coakley's rhetoric appears to write competition into the heart of the relationship between God and creatures, Tonstad appears to fall into the opposite problem by failing to attend to the necessary competitive elements between creatures. With the language of dispossession and self-effacement Coakley makes the divine-human relationship appear competitive in deeply problematic ways. Yet Tonstad goes too far in the other direction by making creaturely relationship non-competitive in ways that belie our material finitude. Too much competition in the wrong place, is replaced by too little competition also in the wrong place.

---

[194] Tonstad, *God and Difference,* p. 227. Further references to this book, in the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotations in the text.

The positions of Coakley and Tonstad turn out to parody each other. We cannot just replace a competitive paradigm with a non-competitive one. The non-competitive creaturely relation to God is based upon the God's eternal and non-material essence. But to do justice to that unique non-competitive reality requires proper attention to the unavoidably competitive patterns of creaturely life. Indeed, the non-competitive relationship to God can only ever be acknowledged, contemplated, and abided in, through the competitive strictures of creaturely life in time and space.

If Coakley goes off the cliff one way, Tonstad veers off the other way. Hence, she writes that, in this heavenly banquet without borders, 'we do become able to be in the same place at the same time' (p. 237). In the heavenly feast, so she argues, the transformation of materiality works with the body's limits in such a way that 'spatial location becomes coinhabitable […] One need not move aside to make room for the other, for there is enough space for all' (p. 239). This enables a kind of 'relational intensification' (p. 239) where we can enjoy one another without any of those "fundamentally competitive limitations of space and time". We can, so it would appear in this heavenly banquet, all eat the same piece of cake, over and over again.

Here is an eschatological vision that overcomes the strictures of space and time. It is impossible to understand, as creatures of earth, quite what it might mean to require no space of our own. Such unintelligibility is not a problem in and of itself – we can rest with such eschatological apophaticism – but it is an issue if we want our eschatology to have any purchase at all upon this life. If we want our visions of the end to give us hope and dreams for what we might build here on earth (and it would seem Tonstad would want to give us such hopes and dreams) then we must not let go of our embodied nature, temporally and spatially bound. Our bodies carry a very clear physical (and literal) sense of "me" and "not me". We cannot be in the same space at the same time. Any teleological vision that might captivate us to strive to work together for a common good must properly attend to these fundamental limits.

Much of Tonstad's vision of a banquet without borders coheres with such finitude. In this banquet, she says, there is no 'jockeying for position' (p. 244). In this banquet, self-sacrifice no longer occupies 'the highest space of loving existence' (p. 244). A refusal of sacrificial logic is clearly crucial: to assert the "fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space" is *not* to write sacrifice into the heart of our life together.

As Tonstad writes:

> The Son's road to the cross cannot be straight: it cannot be reduced to (self-) sacrifice or expiation. He has too many tasks to do on the way: friends to make, disciples to call, wine to drink, people to heal, demons to drive out. The resurrection symbolizes the outcome of his entire ministry; the final transformation of human persons through their rematerialization. Their bodies relate without logics of penetrative shattering either consensual or not (the womb – wound). Their reunion takes place around a banquet table covered with fish piled high and freely flowing wine (p. 244).

But to refuse the logic of sacrifice is not the same as refusing the logic of fundamental competition. Indeed, distinguishing between these two things is absolutely crucial in this thesis: where sacrifice is always connected to sin, fundamentally competitive limitations are connected to finitude. Tonstad though appears to confuse the two. She elides bodies that 'crowd each other out, make room for each other, or penetrate each other' (p. 239). The point is that these are not synonymous ideas. Taking up space, standing side by side, is not the same as either shoving others aside or making the self disappear.

As Sallie McFague highlights, space is fundamental to bodily life.[195] Yet Tonstad reads Christ's resurrection as doing away with basic spatial limits. She interprets Jesus' penchant for appearing behind locked doors as an ability to 'walk through walls' (p. 243) suggesting that this shows us 'His body no longer competes with other bodies for the same space' (p. 243). Jesus, she says, 'can walk through walls because his body has become most real: body without limit as threat, body as presence and particularity' (p. 243).

Spatial boundaries, spatial limits seem to have disappeared in her reading of Jesus' resurrection appearances. But her reading is questionable. Thomas touches Jesus' hands and side; they touch, they do not coinhabit the same space. Jesus eats fish, showing that he is not a ghost; the fish is genuinely consumed. Space, limits, material scarcity are part of the resurrection appearances even as Christ's materiality is undoubtedly transformed into something at best partially recognisable.

Tonstad claims she is presenting a vision for transforming, 'without abolishing, human finitude' (p. 256), but in claiming that we do not need to make room for one another, she

---

[195] McFague, *The Body of God,* p. 99.

does indeed abolish it. In her vision, 'threatening or rapacious finitude' (p. 256) is not replaced with transformed finitude, but rather leaves material finitude behind altogether. Once again, she confuses a sacrificial economy – which comes as a result of sin – with the fundamental limitations of time and space – which come as a result of our material finitude.

Can we not then imagine a banquet that properly contends with our God-given spatial and temporal finitude? And in so doing create a vision that judges the present and presents hopes of what might be. We might imagine a feast where there is enough for all, but not super-abundance and excess. In this banquet joy is found in the sharing. We might imagine a feast where more and more guests turn up and we have to budge up to "make room" round the table (because we do take up space), but it is more fun knocking elbows, and there is always enough for all.

Here is an alternative vision of life without destructive competition, without bodies shattering, breaking or penetrating one another, that at the same time continues to affirm bodily limits. It is another image that gives us a positive vision of the end for which we are aiming.

As with previous images, our journey of purgation could then be thought of in similar terms. We could describe the banquet as it is now: a feast of distorted desire; a place where patriarchal privilege sets the seating plan; a banquet where some are stuffed whilst others hunger; a party in which the guests have forgotten the host. In such terms, our task – through personal and political transformation – is to turn such a "threatening and rapacious" banquet into the heavenly banquet.

Three images that begin with the end, that give us visions of the Kingdom of God on this earth. Three images of what it might mean to journey with others in such a way that we find we are also journeying into the divine life. We can think of facing others, and in the face of others finding the face of Christ. We can think of dancing with others and finding that irreducible third in our midst. We can imagine feasting with others and finding God in the eucharistic sharing.

All three images affirm and indeed celebrate our fundamental material limitations. They make clear the necessarily competitive limitations of our creaturely life whilst steering clear of destructive or sacrificial forms of competition. At the same time, these three images all affirm the fundamentally non-competitive relation to the divine. God is not found in the

blankness of self-erasure; we do not have to get out of the way in order to contemplate God. Instead, divine transcendence is found in and through the faces of others, the dance, the banquet.

Strangely enough then, it seems that our non-competitive relationship to the divine is brought into focus as we attend to the competitive limitations of creaturely life. It is in facing the other who cannot be absorbed into ourselves; in dancing with another body that can move with us, resist us, and bump into us; in sharing a plentiful (but not infinite) feast together, we find God already there, not as an-other with whom we might compete, but there in the life of the kingdom. To return to the semiotic work of Susannah Ticiatti, 'God is there where creaturely wisdom, goodness and love are to be found'.[196] That non-competitive relation to God is found in and through the fundamentally competitive work of creaturely love.

Conclusion

It has been a long road, attempting to navigate these cliffs of competition, so it is worth summarising our journey through this final set of cliffs as we bring this chapter to a close. First then, Coakley helps us contend with the basic and fundamental reality that some forms of competitive language are unavoidable if we are going to try and give voice to contemplative practice. This is true both because of our spatial and temporal finitude, and because of our postlapsarian existence. We carve out time in our diaries, we make space in our hearts, we push away egotistical desires.

Yet Coakley – despite relying on a host of competitive metaphors – does not explain their necessity. Some of Tonstad's critiques would surely lose their sting had Coakley given such an explanation. Coakley's case for a necessarily competitive logic may also have been strengthened had she mapped the wider terrain more fully: by thinking through how the *practice* of contemplation might fit within a wider contemplative project and by bringing her competitive rhetoric to bear upon more detailed accounts of the actual practice of contemplation.

The second half of this section then turned to challenge Coakley's purgative vision of dispossession. Whilst competitive metaphors are inevitable if we wish to speak of the work of contemplation not all images are equal, and some might be simply inappropriate, like the

---

[196] Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism,* p. 242.

dangerously competitive and self-absorbed language of "self-effacement" and "dispossession". If such language does have a place, it should only be in reference to sin. It can only be about our journey of purgation.

Yet, even if we read her call to self-effacement in this way we are still left without any positive teleology. Constantly on the road of purgation we have little sense of where the road ends. I thus suggested that we might do better to start by thinking about the end, and the imagery that we could use to describe it, and then use the same imagery to think about the journey of purgation as well.

I suggested the images of facing, dancing and feasting. Such images give us positive ways to imagine the kind of world we are seeking. They take our temporal and spatial limits as basic. Yet at the same time they do not present sacrifice as essential for material life. Instead, they offer pictures of flourishing together. They give us images of people in relation, as opposed to people in bounded isolation, or conversely disembodied spirits floating free from time and space. Such images enable us to think about God as that which lies between us, rather than just an-other who competes for our time and attention.

These images, naturally, will have their limitations, and many other images could be appealed to as well that might do the same kind of work. But if we are going to pass through the cliffs of competition, we must have some sense of where we are trying to go, of what redeemed creaturehood that embraces the strictures of time and space looks like.

The crux of all this is about giving proper attention to *both* the basic non-competitive divine-human relations *and* the fundamentally competitive creaturely relations. To do justice to that non-competitive relation paradoxically requires us to attend to the ways in which our contemplative practice is caught up in the fundamentally competitive limitations of materiality. To put it as strongly as possible: that non-competitive relation is found through fundamentally competitive creaturely relations. In bumping into other bodies, we find that irreducible third already in our midst.

Coakley's rhetoric and purgative vision implies a withdrawal from creaturely limits. The self is erased in the contemplative journey towards the divine. A competitive logic surreptitiously finds its way in to the divine-human relation. Tonstad's eschatological vision of creaturely life without borders suffers an opposite problem. The fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space are erased. Creaturely boundaries disappear, and

with it any purchase on this life. Tonstad's answer to Coakley's competitive construal is a purely non-competitive one. But in erasing the basic and necessary competitive limits of creaturely relations, the uniqueness of that non-competitive divine-human relation becomes hidden from view.

A way between these cliff edges does seem possible though. One that asserts both the transcendence of God and the fundamental necessity of creaturely limits. Oddly enough, these two things hang together. It turns out that properly attending to the fundamentally competitive limits of creaturely life for the work of contemplation goes hand in hand with attending to our fundamentally non-competitive relation to divine.

To seek to walk this narrow way we have sketched three possible eschatological visions. They avoid asserting a competitive relationship between God and creature, whereby contemplation is premised on some form of self-erasure. They also avoid asserting a non-competitive relationship between creatures, whereby creaturely boundedness is overcome. Instead, the images suggest how the non-competitive relation is found in and through the fundamentally competitive constraints of creaturely life.

In particular, these images highlight how contemplation of the divine is extrinsically entangled with relating to others. And, so hence, from here we need to turn our focus towards our relationships with other people. What impact might it have upon our understanding of human relations if we properly attend to our fundamental spatial and temporal finitude? How might we imagine good and godly human relationships in ways that remain committed to and indeed celebrate the intrinsic limits of material life? To this we now turn.

Chapter 2: Relating

1. Foundations

1.1 Introduction

What impact might it have upon our understanding of our relationship to one another, if we properly attend to our fundamental spatial and temporal finitude? This is the overarching question for this chapter and forms the second part of the tripartite question that this thesis seeks to explore.

Our interlocutor for this chapter is Rowan Williams. His work is – at its broadest – concerned with thinking through what kind of universe this is.[197] He sees it as our job as human beings to '*imagine ourselves*'[198] in the hope that our images may have 'resonance and harmony with the rhythms of how things most deeply are in the universe'.[199] And so, in all his work, he sets about representing or imagining what it might be to live *With the Grain of the Universe,*[200] on the premise that there is 'ground for being a bit concerned'[201] about our current models of human life and wellbeing.

To put it another way, his work presents a sustained attempt to think through the human vocation. Indeed, in reviewing *On Christian Theology,* Robert Jenson sees it as a significant problem that Williams seems to make the essential questions, 'questions about us'.[202] Yet such a focus is not hubris or egotistical. It is not anthropology taking over from theology. Rather, such an orientation seeks only ever to look at the view *from here*.

As such, his corpus seeks to properly attending to our finitude. If we want to live in harmony with how things really are then that means living in the light of the strictures of space and time. And so, his works, inevitably also circles around the themes of this thesis, around competition, sin and finitude, and *telos*.

---

[197] See Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Continuum, 2014), p. ix.
[198] Rowan Williams, 'Knowing our Limits' in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice,* ed. by Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 19-34 (p. 22).
[199] *Ibid.*
[200] This is the title of Stanley Hauerwas' Gifford Lectures, which Williams responds to both appreciatively and critically in his own Gifford Lectures.
[201] See Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds and Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), p. vii. Note the classic irenic understatement. In a similar vein he writes that there is a 'loss of sense of what life is'. Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response', in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 196-207 (p. 196).
[202] Robert Jenson, 'Review: *On Christian Theology',* in *Pro Ecclesia,* 11 (2002), 367-369 (p. 368).

Specifically, much of Williams' work is focused on what it means to live well *together*. Hence, his work provides a good basis for this chapter which is focused on our relationships with one another. What difference might it make to our conception of flourishing human relationships if we genuinely accept that we are creatures of the earth? This is the question before us that Williams will help us edge towards.

I will suggest that Williams gives us a four-part answer. First, and most basically, Williams makes the point that this universe is one in which relationship is absolutely fundamental and intrinsic. This is the foundation upon which everything else is built. I would not wish to quibble with this foundation.

From this foundation comes parts two and three of his answer. Namely, that as creatures in space and time, our lives cannot but be beset by certain forms of both difficulty and risk (or uncertainty). Some experiences of difficulty and risk are intractable characteristics of material creaturely life. It is in thinking through these two essential aspects of our creatureliness that we begin to build more of a picture of the competitive constraints of creaturely, material life. This is a world in which not all good can be realised, in which desires are mutually incompatible even without necessarily being sinful, in which goods must be *negotiated*. It is a world which is therefore inherently beset with forms of difficulty. This is a world in which we must "stake" ourselves, take one path and not another. We follow a road, not knowing where it will end; we step out into uncertainty and close the door on thousands of possible futures.

We confront the constraints of temporal and spatial existence by thinking about the centrality of difficulty and risk for human relations. Through an exploration of these themes we will also find ourselves circling around the other two threads of this thesis, asking questions around sin and finitude, and teleology.

Such questions tie in to concerns that others have previously raised. Williams has been accused of emphasising "becoming" over "being" and advocating for a ceaseless

restlessness.[203] His eschatology has been described as lacking and as 'unorthodox'.[204] He is seen as being inclined to ontologise the tragic and so misconceive the very life of God.[205]

Central to these concerns is that there is no clear distinction between what aspects of our material creaturely life we should attribute to sin, and what aspects we should attribute to our God-given finitude. Finding clarity here is not just an abstract and formal distinction; it matters. It matters as we seek to make sense of the past, navigate the present, and dream of the future.

Williams wants to emphasise difficulty without inevitable pain, risk without "ontologising" tragedy, contingency with hope. He does so precisely because he wants to pay close attention to what it means to live as material creatures, and so become accepting of both 'limit and death'.[206] But as Giles Waller asks, in reviewing *The Tragic Imagination,* 'is there, in this account, a meaningful distinction between difficulty and brokenness?'[207] Trying to distinguish between these, both in Williams' work, and in my own account of living with limits, will become crucial.

In the fourth and final part of this chapter I will critique Williams' parsing of the human vocation in terms of dispossession. Human flourishing within material limits demands – in Williams' schema – certain forms of dispossession that imitate the kenosis of Christ. He – like Coakley - makes kenotic motifs central to the human vocation, and in the final part of this chapter I will be particularly critical of this move. Indeed, I will suggest that the rhetoric of dispossession that pervades Williams' corpus reveals a strand of thinking that sits uneasily with much else he is trying to say.

---

[203] See, for one of a number of examples, Rhys Bezzant, 'The Ecclesiology of Rowan Williams', in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays,* ed. by Matheson Russell (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), pp. 1-24 (p. 18). Also in his much more appreciative commentary, Mike Higton suggests Williams' work is 'too unrelentingly *agonized* – too aware of the possibilities of self-deceit… ever to relax in the Sabbath rest of God's love'. Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2004), p. 36.

[204] Matheson Russell, 'Introduction', in *On Rowan Williams,* pp. xiii-xxiii (p. xix). See also, Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum, 2021), p. 56.

[205] Boram Cha, 'Suffering, Tragedy, Vulnerability: A Triangulated Examination of the Divine-Human Relationship in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rowan Williams, and Sarah Coakley' (Doctoral thesis: University of Durham, 2019, pp. 1-205) <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/13372/1/PhD_thesis_(final).pdf?DDD32> [Accessed 28th June 2021] (p. 128).

[206] Rowan Williams, 'On Being Creatures', in *On Christian Theology,* by Rowan Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 63-79 (p. 77).

[207] Giles Waller, 'Felix Culpa? On Rowan Williams' *The Tragic Imagination',* in *Modern Theology* 34 (2018), 243-251 (p. 249).

I will argue that the rhetoric of dispossession and its kenotic corollaries work against the main thrust of his work. Specifically – and in parallel to some of the arguments made in chapter one – the problem is that the rhetoric of dispossession is used as a way of describing the essential human (and indeed divine) vocation, rather than as way of describing what is demanded as a response to sin.

In the critique of "dispossession" we see the three themes of this thesis come together. In the language of dispossession the competitive constraints of creaturely life are parsed as being inherently sacrificial, our response to sin is confused with our essential finitude, a positive eschatology disappears.

To make the claim that this rhetoric of dispossession sits uneasily with much else Williams wants to say, the reader will see in what is to come that I purposefully avoid the rhetoric when parsing Williams' thinking on relationality, difficult, and risk. I do this to show that what Williams appears to wants to say about human flourishing may be achieved – and indeed may benefit – without appeal to this problematic language of dispossession.

Before we come to that though, we begin by charting what we could (a little pompously) call "the metaphysics of relationality" – the pivot of Williams' work. To be human at all, is to need one another. There is, in more abstract terminology, no being without otherness. Relationships, for Williams, stand at the very heart of "things". Only when we have expounded such a view of 'how it is with things'[208] can we go on to consider some of the intractable characteristics of this essential relationality (namely, difficulty and risk), before then critiquing Williams' rhetoric of dispossession.

A final word by way of introduction. As is fitting for someone who sees relationship as central to ontology, there is no easy way "in" to Williams' work. Every aspect is related to every other aspect; there is a certain inevitable circularity to any engagement with his work, with themes repeating with different inflections, and with one theme shedding a slightly different light on a theme already covered. I make no apology therefore for certain themes appearing repeatedly; we cannot simply consider Williams' work on language, or time, or control, for example, and move on. They are re-cognized only as they re-appear in relation to new themes at each turn.

---

[208] Rowan Williams, '"Religious realism": on not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 228-254 (p. 248).

1.2 Relational Foundations: Christology

In Williams' work there appear two distinct starting points that lead to the basic claim that relationship is central to reality. The first is Christology, the second is language. The former makes claims "from above", expounding what the revelation of God in Christ means for how we think about the Trinity, the relationship between Creator and creature, and our relationships to other creatures. The latter makes claims "from below", forging a new kind of natural theology by thinking through how we use language. Both point to the essential communicative and relational nature of the world we inhabit and the frame of reference in which it is held.

<u>Christ and Being-in-Otherness</u>

Christ reveals the essential communicative and relational structure of reality, or in other words, of the Trinity. In Christ we glimpse something of the eternal relations within the Godhead before all time: we see God relating to God. Specifically, we see divine action in a derived and responsive mode relating to the fundamental giving of the divine source. Jesus is *'unconditioned divine agency in its filial exercise'.*[209] For Williams, if we see this responsive, other-orientated and self-giving life in Jesus it is because it reflects something of the life of the immanent Trinity.[210]

Williams fills out this vision of the immanent Trinity in his virtuosic piece 'The Deflections of Desire'.[211] In a similar vein to Sarah Coakley,[212] Williams imagines that in the life of prayer we inhabit the place of the Son and so come to dwell in 'the relation that eternally subsists between the Logos and the divine Source' (p. 115). Hence, it is the life of prayer, as shaped by and in Christ, that will 'prompt and shape and confirm Christian speech about God as trinity' (p. 117). From these contemplative Christological underpinnings then, Williams goes on to speculatively consider a negative theology in trinitarian – as supposed to unitarian – form. He seeks to force us away from the inevitable tendency to think of God as a (blank,

---

[209] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), p. 80.

[210] Bonhoeffer – who Williams so clearly esteems – is critiqued for failing to draw just this connection between Christ *pro nobis* and the life of the Trinity. See Bonhoeffer, *Christology,* trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966). Bonhoeffer never draws out what 'being for others means in connection with being for the Father'. Williams, *Heart of Creation,* p. 197.

[211] Rowan Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure' in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies & Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 115-135. All references to this article, for the proceeding paragraphs, are given after quotes in the text.

[212] Whilst Coakley speaks of 'Sonship', Williams prefers speaking of our 'filial' existence.

unfathomable) unity behind the three and so instead to consider the essence of the Godhead as 'being identified with the formal pattern of indwelling itself – not with a "nature" beyond or behind the three, but with the movement of one into another in desire' (p. 118).

God, he argues, cannot and should not be thought of as static Being but rather as the mutual flow of love from Source to Response, the overflow of which is called Spirit. More than this, in Williams' schema (drawn in this piece from St John of the Cross), the love of the Son does not "settle" on the Father, but rather desires the desire of the Father, "beyond" what is directed to the Son. 'Thus we, incorporated into this relation to the Father, share the "deflection" of the Son's desire towards the Father's excess of love: we are taken into the movement of the Spirit' (p. 119). As he writes elsewhere, in the Trinity we see 'identity in otherness' as timelessly actual.[213]

God is thus defined in terms of relationship rather than Being. As a corollary to that (and this is what Williams explores in the rest of the paper), to be caught up in the life of God is to be caught up in endless movement without end; for without such ongoing 'deflections' we would be left at some terminal object, some static Unity behind the dynamic Trinity where all desire is finally satisfied and the very movement which characterises life itself ceases.

All of this is a long way from Nicea, but in light of Williams' understanding of contemplation (and indeed language, to which we will turn in the next section), and clearly drawing on Hegel,[214] this speculative metaphysics draws out and develops some of the possible implications of the Nicean claim concerning ontology: there is no being-as-such but only being-in-relation, and by extension only ever being-in-movement.[215]

---

[213] Rowan Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 53-76 (p. 73).

[214] See Nicholas Adams' helpful introduction to Hegel for theologians, which explores Hegel's triadic logic in which any "thing" is what it is only because of its relation to other things. Nicholas Adams, *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 9.

[215] These bold, and undoubtedly speculative claims could well be labelled as projection. Williams clearly wants to advocate a sociality of self-giving and mutual responsiveness, and so "finds" this at the heart of reality itself, in the life of the immanent Trinity. See Karen Kilby, 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology,* by Karen Kilby (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 5-16 (p. 14). Kilby herself does not implicate Williams directly in her critique of projectionism. No doubt he is partly shielded from her criticism because he is not seeking to "use" the doctrine of the Trinity to advocate a particular ecclesial or political model; rather he speaks in the most general of terms. Yet there is clearly a fundamental disagreement about the function of the doctrine between these two authors. For Kilby, it is simply a 'grammatical… second order proposition'. *Ibid,* p. 15. For Williams, it really does 'provide a picture of the divine, a deep understanding of the way God really is' and so also the way reality is. *Ibid,* p. 15.

This is how it is with things. In the life of God this being-in-otherness is necessarily non-competitive. God does not get out of the way for God. There are only "deflections of desire"; no negotiations between desires, no differing goods to be navigated, only the ceaseless giving in and through of the three in one.

The relationality that we see in the life of the Trinity is reflected in creation – there is only being in otherness, being in movement – *but* this metaphysic must be refracted through material finitude. The fundamental metaphysics remains – there is no 'naked individual prior to relationship… a free, triumphant, endlessly resourceful, sovereign willing self'.[216] There is only being-in-otherness. Yet – as we will see – for material and finite creatures this relationality brings with it competitive constraints. For us, this relationality necessarily includes the negotiation of desires, incompatible goods, competing pathways. It is a relationality of difficulty and risk. This is to get ahead of ourselves though, for now the basic point is that life of God as Trinity reveals to us the relational structure of reality.

Christ and *non-aliud* Being

Returning more directly to Christology, and specifically the legacy of Chalcedon, we turn next to consider what the revelation of God in Christ implies about the nature of the Creator-creature relationship. Central to this is the now commonplace insistence of its non-competitive nature, that we also saw Coakley seek to emphasise. For Williams, this non-competition between creature and Creator is what Chalcedon and the work of clarification in Byzantine Theology and in St. Thomas makes clear.

All that this human being says and does is completely and entirely human speech and action, but the subject of this agency is the very Word of God.[217] As such there is and can be no collision between divine and human action in Christ. It is not as if the human Jesus need get out of the way for divinity to act, or (as the modern kenotic Christology that stemmed from Gottfried Thomasius assumes) that divinity need get out of the way – hide, retract, or be emptied out – in order for Christ's humanity to be genuine. Rather in Christ we see 'the

---

[216] Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 148-166 (p. 154).
[217] See Williams, *Heart of Creation,* p. 26. All references to this book, for the proceeding section, are given after quotes in the text.

wholesale pervading of created reality by the divine without any loss of its integrity' (p. 170).[218]

In Christ then we see what is more generally true of the relation between God and Creation: that there is no rivalry or competition; we are simply not competing for the same space. To put it in the terms favoured by Williams, God is '*non-aliud*' (p. xiv), not an other within the universe.[219] In Williams' reading of history, the first five centuries of reflection on Christ were all about figuring out a way of speaking of him that 'did not diminish the true and active presence of either [the human or divine] and did not see them as related "side by side", one of them influencing the other from outside' (p. xii). In Williams' view a wrong turn was taken with the work of Duns Scotus who saw divine and human agency 'as variants of a single intelligible reality called being' (p. 136) and it was up to Calvin (and certainly not Luther who risked following Scotus) to steer Christological thinking back towards the Thomist and Cyrilline approach.

All this makes the basic fact and nature of our own essential relatedness clear. We stand – as created beings - always already in relation to that non-competitive non-aliud. We depend on this divine agency for our own agency. Our freedom comes not from God's retraction but by God's non-rivalrous presence, for God's power is never over us but only ever 'power as resource'.[220]

<u>Christ and Being-for-Others</u>

This non-rivalrous, non-competitive relationship between Creator and creature is basic and unassailable. Christ reveals the basic truth of this relation, but he does more than that as well. Christ 'makes new levels of integration or reconciliation' (p. 121) possible, enabling creation to live in the very life of God.

We can then distinguish between a basic factual non-rivalrous dependency of creature upon Creator and a "filial" vocation, the mode of existence of the Son. For Christ does not just show us the basic "factual" relation between Creator and creature. Instead, Christ is the 'realization in humanity of a divine mode or style of existing' (p. 108). And this mode of

---

[218] It is worth noting the difference here with Coakley's Christology. Her 'Antiochene' leaning is in stark contrast to Williams' (more mainstream) Cyrilline approach which emphasises the unity of the single acting subject – the Word.

[219] The phrase originates with Nicholas of Cusa. Brett Gray draws out the significance of this to Williams' thinking in, Brett Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[220] Williams, 'On Being Creatures', p. 73.

living is open to all of us – in Christ 'human agents are enabled to act as they are meant to' (p. 107), in this filial mode. This is the essence of the human vocation.

Above all this filial vocation is a *responsive* life, responding to God who call us children. For we are most fully ourselves when living in 'fully responsive and radically liberating dependence' (p. 222), finding our identity in relation to God; and answering the question 'who am I?' in reference to our dependence upon the divine.[221]

Such dependence is not life-denying but life-giving and empowering. It is the grounding of our ability to be ourselves before and for others. In a rare note of unhindered joy, Williams tells of meeting Desmund Tutu who came across as someone who loved himself in such a way so as to 'make it possible for everybody else to be in love with themselves' too and to be at home in their own skin.[222] Such dependence upon the divine also entails becoming dependable people, echoing, in filial (or responsive) form, the faithfulness of God towards creation which enables us to live and move and have our being.[223]

Williams also speaks of the way in which Christology disrupts the 'impermeable border between one self-contained individual and another, telling us that our connections with other humans beings run deeper than we imagined' (p. 121). We are connected to one another – and all creation – in virtue of our shared "filial" place in the life of God.

Further, our filial vocation means our relations with one another stretch beyond the dyadic subject-object that is immediately visible. Each of us has a dimension that 'faces away'[224] from the other, as we are all also faced by God. No relation is simply dyadic, terminating in an other. We are thus never called to be a terminus for another's desire, but a being-in-relation, who is not so much a fixed quantity and object, but rather a subject turned outward, such that what is 'lovable in me is my lovingness'.[225]

If our filial location means that we are not fixed impermeable objects, then neither are we castles to defend. Rooted in the non-aliud who is beyond all rivalry and competition, we can

---

[221] See Rowan Williams, 'The suspicion of suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 186-202 (p. 192). See also, Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2016), p. 29.
[222] *Ibid,* p. 51.
[223] *Ibid,* p. 25.
[224] Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 104.
[225] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire'*,* p. 131.

– in two of Williams' favourite turns of phrase – live without defence[226] and without anxiety.[227] We do not need to protect ourselves from 'the consequences of our finitude' (p. 238); namely, our mistakes and misrecognitions, our engagement with others and the "messiness" of actual relationships, our mortality, and our dependence upon the natural world. And that means – following Christ – our lives can be focused on 'being-for [others], being-in-solidarity' with others (p. 209).

In sum then, Williams' Christological schema reveals three basic tenets about the structure of reality. First, there is only being-in-otherness. Second, creation is held by a dependable *non-aliud*. And third, our creaturely vocation can only be found in being for others – in a filial vocation that responds to the gift of our life in God.

Before moving on though, I want to note one thing about Williams' description of this account that I will come back to in due course, and that concerns some of the language he uses to describe this filial vocation. Unfortunately (as I see it), Williams speaks of this filial vocation as echoing the 'kenotic' (p. 108), 'self-emptying' (p. 109), 'self-displacing' (p. 197), 'self-abandoning' (p. 107), and 'self-dispossessing (p. 166) love of God as seen in Christ. Such agonistic terms are, for Williams, central ways of describing the very life of God, the responsive life of Christ, and so also our filial lives.

The problem is not that such an agonistic register exists – indeed it surely must, given the broken world in which we live – but that such a dislocating rhetoric is written into the heart of reality itself. "Dispossession" comes to stand as the very centre of the divine life and human vocation, as supposed to being a response to human sin.

I will argue (in part four) that this rhetoric of dispossession is simply unnecessary and indeed unhelpful for the primary points Williams wants to make about human vocation and human flourishing. The key point is that 'creation […] is itself when most fully and consciously aligned with the divine act of self-giving' (p. 223). The human vocation is about being-for-others, about 'reception and response' (p. 220). Whether such responsive living is joyful or agonistic is secondary to this and depends on context. In using kenotic language to describe this vocation Williams creates substantial confusions around sin and finitude. For now

---

[226] For example, Williams, *Being Disciples,* p. 39, p. 49. Williams, *Tragic Imagination,* p. 70. Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), 232.
[227] For example, Williams *Being Disciples,* p. 32; p. 40. Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 139. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Continuum, 2014), p. 88.

though, we simply note the three basic tenets about how it is with things, and leave the critique for later.

1.3 Relational Foundations: Language

The same three tenets become clear as Williams thinks about the nature of language and thought. Here we see a new kind of natural theology, certainly not divorced from the above, but finding its locus in a different place. Language, in Williams' view, tells us about the kind of universe we are in.[228]

Language and Being-in-Otherness

Williams thinks about thinking and about language, quite appropriately, with and through others, most notably Hegel and one interpreter of him, Gillian Rose. In seeking to overcome Kant's logic of opposition between the subject and object, the noumenal and phenomenal, Hegel began to develop a logic of relation. On this logic, a "thing" is what it is because of its relation to other things, and because of how it is considered in the world, rather than how it might be considered in abstract.[229] In Rose's work (who forges a recovery of Hegel's thought) we see an 'attention to relationality, to the way in which supposed opposites constitute, and are constituted by, one another'.[230]

Thus, in drawing heavily on Hegel - as interpreted through Rose - Williams argues there are 'no discrete and simple objects for thought to rest in. No perceived reality is stable and self-contained for thinking'.[231] Things live in (the absence of) other things. 'To think about thinking is to think about, or rather to think *within,* an infinite relatedness, a comprehensive intelligibility'.[232] Thinking itself then – and so language as well – requires community, it requires otherness. Our freedom to think, to speak, to grow, to learn, is all dependent upon the 'otherness of what is given'[233] to me from outside myself. The enlightenment project is thus regarded as somewhat misconceived because it attempts to think about thinking by stripping everything away apart from the ego. But if there is only "me" left, there is no thought and no language; there is no ability to think, speak, or mean anything by those

---

228 Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. xii.
229 See Adams, *Eclipse of Grace,* p. 1-10.
230 Kate Schick, *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 7.
231 Rowan Williams, 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 35-53 (p. 37).
232 *Ibid.* p. 38.
233 *Ibid.* p. 43.

fanciful words, "*cogito ergo sum*". Thought itself reflects what Christ reveals about the divine life: identity does not consist of 'self-enclosed and self-sufficient units'.[234]

From thought to language: to use language at all means responding to what has already been given to us, and then using that to continue to explore, to question and to share. Language thus always pushes us beyond simple description, as if the point of language were only ever to get a more accurate description of the world "as it is". Rather, 'language claims to *represent*'.[235] Words 'embody, translate, make present or re-form what is perceived' (p. 22). Following Wittgenstein, Williams asserts that 'understanding, explaining, interpreting are not efforts of an individual to penetrate a surface: they are *social* proposals for a common reading'.[236]

If I speak of "the table in the kitchen" (as in Heidegger's famous illustration) I am not simply describing a fixed object, I am drawing it into relation with the table in the lounge or on the patio. I am also invoking various associations with the table: perhaps it is slightly more rustic, or heavily used than others, the meals had on it more informal, the conversations around it both mundane and deeply personal. The words do not simply describe but rather suggest a whole host of associations and relations.

The words represent; the table itself also represents – the object itself brings to mind a whole host of associations and relations. It and the words we use about it, are caught up in active communication – they do not simply describe an abstract and unrelated object. They are instead bound in relation, presenting to us a whole world which is then negotiated and explored with others.

Representation, Williams thus suggests, is 'pervasive not deviant' (p. 24) for our use of language. Grounded once again on Hegel's work, Williams states that we live with the assumption that 'what confronts us offers the possibility of some kind of ordered speech, some kind of representation' (p. 31). 'Whatever we encounter is something that triggers capacities of recognition and representation in our minds' (p. 32). As 'language saturated and language bound' (p. xii) creatures we thus see 'that active communicative and relation are the fundamental agency of things' (p. xii).

---

[234] Rowan Williams, 'Author's Introduction', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. xiii-xx (p. xiii).
[235] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. x. All references to this book, for the proceeding section, are given after quotes in the text.
[236] Rowan Williams, 'The suspicion of suspicion'*,* p. 190.

If we are always in relation, drawing connections and making new connections; if there are always new ways of representing, news ways that one thing can come to be in another thing, then this also means that there can be no last word. There is always more to say. Any utterance can 'always be answered' (p. ix).[237]

Just as Williams' speculative work on the immanent Trinity refused terminus or ending, so Williams, in his work on language, suggests that the very nature of language refuses endings and terminals and instead continues in endless movement and without closure. To go on speaking – as we do – assumes that there is no 'point of descriptive closure, [no] expression of formulation that is definitively adequate to what is in view' (p. 9). We could never reach the end of a conversation about the inside of a ping pong ball – even if we might get bored of it.

In other words, there is no unadorned absolute that we are striving for; no descriptive reality which says it "as it is", but rather only endless presentations and re-presentations. There is no 'total perspective'[238] to be found. There is no 'unspeakable otherness'[239] or 'otherness as such'[240] but only otherness in relation, that is – as Hegel first intuited – otherness that can go on being recognized and represented.

It is in this light that Williams talks of 'Christ against the Truth'[241] in his book, *Dostoevsky*. The "truth" in this instance is either the notion of a reductive and descriptive 'states of affairs' (p. 46) (as given voice to by the Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*), or the 'premature embrace of harmony' (p. 50), as seen in the changeless and detached Myshkin of *The Idiot*. The diabolic, in Williams reading of Dostoevsky, is closely aligned to either this elevation of the descriptive or the false embrace of harmonic closure. In all Dostoevsky's novels diabolic narration 'simply records the supposedly bare phenomena' (p. 74), whilst the diabolic character or action shuts things down in 'premature closure' (p. 79) and 'deathlike harmony' (p. 79), refusing to countenance that there might be more to say or do.

Language and *non-aliud* Being

---

[237] See also Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 131.
[238] Rowan Williams, 'Theological Integrity', in *On Christian Theology, pp. 3-15 (p. 5).
[239] Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 77-85 (p. 77).
[240] Rowan Williams, 'Simone Weil and the necessary non-existence of God', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 203-207 (p. 222). Williams is critical of Simone Weil for losing an emphasis on the particular and concrete and becoming concerned with otherness *as such*.
[241] 'Christ Against the Truth?' is the title of the first chapter. Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 15. Further references to this book, in this paragraph, are given after quotes in the text.

All of this, for Williams, raises the question of what might provide both the context and support for a language saturated universe; a world which is a network of intelligible communication and of endless re-presentations. Such a frame cannot just be another agent in the universe, but rather must be *non-aliud;* some sort of dependable context which cannot be spoken of through our normal practices, and because of which the ongoing use of language to build a common world makes sense. This is the apologetic at the heart of Williams' natural theology of language. Only such a context – 'the Other, who does not compete, with whom I don't have and can't bargain'[242] – creates the foundations for *trust* upon which language and any common life depends. Or to change the idiom, given that our speech consistently opens out onto the horizon of further questioning we must imagine something like generosity at the heart of things; an 'intelligent and beneficent bestowal'[243] that makes possible a world of endless communication.

<u>Language and Being-for-Others</u>

Finally, the nature of thought and language also show us something of the human vocation. If thinking itself requires relatedness, a being-in-otherness, then thinking is radical loving. It requires a certain 'being-outside-ourselves'.[244] It is a movement of ecstasy away from stasis and away from a defended imaginary autonomous self. Such loving, such communication between a subject and their environment, is – so Williams writes – 'fundamentally and irreducibly nourishing'.[245] For the environment is not there as a fixed object, to compete with, or work round, but rather as a 'tantalizing set of invitations; material offered for reworking and enlarging'.[246]

Such joyful accounts of our vocation – the sense of what living well might mean given what language shows us about the kind of universe this is – are, of course, only part of the picture Williams paints. Elsewhere, he talks of 'thinking itself as conflict and negotiation' and the importance of 'thinking in dispossession'.[247] In relation to thought and language – and based on Hegel and Rose – Williams' parsing of the human vocation moves through the same range of registers as we saw above – from the joyful to the agonistic.

---

242 Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 228.
243 Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 32.
244 Williams, 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel', p. 42.
245 Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 33.
246 *Ibid,* p. 60.
247 Williams, 'Between politics and metaphysics', p. 68; p. 73.

Both Christology and Language lay the same foundations for us. Williams' does not "start" from one or the other and extrapolate. Rather, if we're thinking about the kind of universe this is, reflection on God in Christ and reflection on the nature of thought and language should cohere, and we might indeed expect them to sharpen one another. Approached from either road we come to the same basic premises: the relational structure of reality; the dependence of creation on a non-competitive, generative, and faithful *non-aliud;* and the fundamental relational (responsive) nature of the human calling that finds itself only in being-for-others.

Such vague propositions that add up to a metaphysics of relationality can only be the beginning. They still do not tell us very much about the actual contours of human vocation and indeed "how it is with things" more generally.

Hence, we turn to two major strands of Williams' work: difficulty and risk. All of Williams' writing – not least his Christology and work on thought and language – emphasise the basic *difficulty* and *risks* of our material creaturely living. It is through these two wide ranging themes that we will be able to begin to see how and where Williams grapples with the intrinsically competitive aspects of material life, distinguishes (or indeed confuses) sin and finitude, and thinks through eschatology.

2. Difficulty

2.1 Introduction

Difficulty lies at the very heart of Williams view of finite, material and contingent existence, and more specifically at the heart of our human vocation of learning, growing and living with others. Rebekah Howes speaks of the 'truth of difficulty […] and the difficulty of truth'[248] that characterises Williams' work. Liberation from difficulty is what we should be worried about, both personally (as it is a sinful rejection of our contingent creaturely existence) and politically (as it is a refusal to engage in the labour of working with difference). [249]

In part this emphasis on difficulty comes, once again, through Hegel and Rose. For Hegel, 'The holy, the graceful, is not interruption, the timeless overthrowing of process and purpose, but is inseparable from the labour of making'.[250] The holy is found in the ongoing difficulty of such a task – a commitment to historical life and social practice in which exchange itself is holy. But with exchange, with relationships, comes difficulty.[251]

Rose argues that we must resist the pull of the universal. We must resist both tragic resignation or utopian hope and instead 'do the difficult work of the middle, persisting in a never-ending struggle for wisdom'.[252] She speaks negatively of things being '"edgeless" and of dissolving the difficulty of living, of love'.[253] As Andrew Shanks puts it, her philosophic ambition was to 'make everything more difficult…to uncover the proper difficulty of faith, not only in theory, but also in practice'.[254]

Following her, Williams eschews the post-modern construal of (absolute) difference precisely because it sidesteps difficulty.[255] For Williams, any attempt to think truthfully refuses both static descriptions and false harmonies. It accepts difficulty, negotiation, and competing representations. Williams speaks of how 'learning to become human is hard'[256] as we grow over time and find our identity not as some fixed object, but only through

---

[248] Rebekah Howes, 'In the Shadow of Gillian Rose: Truth as Education in the Hegelian Philosophy of Rowan Williams', in *Political Theology,* 19 (2018), 20-34 (p. 32).
[249] *Ibid,* p. 28.
[250] Rowan Williams, 'Hegel and the gods of postmodernity', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 25-34 (p. 30).
[251] Williams, 'Hegel and the gods', p. 33.
[252] Schick, *Gillian Rose,* p. 10.
[253] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), p. 97.
[254] Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 167.
[255] See, Williams, 'Between politics and metaphysics', p. 55.
[256] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 139.

encounter, letting ourselves be provoked and questioned. In the same vein, natural theology is nothing other than 'an exercise in locating and mapping difficulty'[257] in which revelation does not somehow alleviate difficulty but rather offers a 'perspective in which difficulty is what makes sense and what we must become accustomed to'.[258]

Difficulty, for Williams, is not something that is to be avoided wherever possible; it is not something that is connected to the sinful perversions of our relationships, but rather integral to our creaturely lives. It is integral to God's good creation. As Richard Sennett suggests (who is appreciatively appealed to by Williams) the difficulty of learning to cooperate with others is positive; 'we prize what we have struggled to achieve'.[259]

To explore all of this we begin by thinking in more depth about language and what the difficulties embedded in our use of language might tell us about the place of difficulty in life more generally. We then turn to think about the difficulties of being creatures in time, who have to learn and labour over time, before considering the difficulties of being creatures in space who have to learn to negotiate otherness. The last of these will bring Mikhail Bakhtin and Leo Vygotsky in as conversations partners for Williams, as their differing thoughts on dialogue and learning help deepen what Williams has to say about difference, dialogue and development. Through all this we will draw out the role of difficulty within Williams' work as well as point to some of its more problematic aspects along the way.

2.2 Difficult Language

Our use of language does not only imply a relational ontology; it also implies an ontology of difficulty. Paying attention to the ways we speak and use language show us something about the nature of our essential relationality – namely, that it always involves aspects of resistance, or in the terms of this thesis, difficulty.

This is not necessarily an intuitive claim. For many people, speaking is all too easy. Yet, as Williams characteristically does with whatever theme he is exploring, he looks at speech

---

[257] *Ibid,* p. 181
[258] *Ibid,* p. 180.
[259] Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Co-operation* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 13.

and language 'so intently that it becomes remote and unfamiliar'.[260] He pays attention to the ways we speak and use language until they are 'made strange' and 'become difficult'.[261]

Think, for a moment about describing a yellow flower you might have seen on a walk, the name of which you do not know. Instinctively this feels like it should be an easy task, yet we may well know from experience that it is not (and so just take a photo of it instead). There is no bare description of such a flower. There is only your linguistic representation which may entirely fail to conjure up the plant you are thinking of in your interlocutor's imagination.

Once the notion of bare description disappears, we can begin to see that language quickly leads to difficulties. All we have are imaginative presentations and representations which connect more or less well with others. Precisely because I am trying to describe this yellow flower *to someone else* and so do something more than simply describe what is in my head, difficulty is likely to feature. In asking about this yellow flower, I am not concerned so much with turning thought into language as building a common world of mutual understanding and comprehension.

It is this focus on building a common world together that made Williams critical of Richard Rorty. In as much as Rorty is dispelling the myth of bare description or correspondence he is to be commended. Williams and Rorty would agree - there is no such thing as simple or literal description; there is only representation, a conversation to be joined.

But – in Williams' view – Rorty goes awry with a 'mythological divide between material fact and mental interpretation' (p. 41).[262] Such a divide enables Rorty to give a deterministic account of physical causality, alongside 'the radically undetermined possibilities of meaning' (p. 37). And, in creating a total divide between material and meaning, what we mean when we speak has no anchoring in or bearing upon the material world. The difference between "'telling a story" and "reflecting the world"' (p. 41) simply disappears. Truth becomes unconnected to the material world and becomes instead simply and only a social

---

[260] Myers, *Christ the Stranger,* p. 1.
[261] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 3. Further references to this book in this section are given in brackets after quotes in the text.
[262] Williams is commenting on Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

construction. Truth becomes 'what our peers will […] let us get away with saying'[263] with no constraints imposed by the world "out there" as it confronts us.

In Williams' words then, Rorty forgets 'the element of struggle involved in working on language so that it is purged of idleness, self-indulgence and self-referentiality… and becomes an increasingly sustainable tool for common reflection and common labour' (p. 42). If what we say is in any sense to be part of an ongoing conversation *with* others about the world it must be both 'recognizable and defensible' (p. 42) and open to testing and probing. We are constrained by others and by the world we meet; we cannot say what we like. We are instead repeatedly trying to 'chart the territory of what is perceived from one angle after another, with no final statement possible' (p. 55). We are back to that yellow flower. We can but deal with 'frustration and bafflement' (p. 59) as we seek to (re)present ourselves and the world to one another.

Paradoxically, such difficulty and constraint go hand in hand, for Williams, with the freedom of our speech. On one hand we cannot say what we like as we are constrained by the world we meet and the need to build something in common; on the other hand, precisely because we are talking about (re)presentations here, and not simply a 'nexus of stimulus and response' (p. 59), we are free to represent in new and fresh ways.

Crucially, it is the sense of difficulty that most clearly highlights what it means to be free as speaking subjects: we are able to 'struggle, to test and reject and revise' (p. 59) what we say as we negotiate with the world we meet and others with whom we speak. The world comes to us not as a fixed object, but as a 'tantalizing set of invitations, material offered for reworking and enlarging' (p. 60). To use language is to be free: free to engage in bafflement and negotiation, revision and re-presentation, all of which is not without difficulty.

We see all this most clearly when we put 'pressure on language' (p. 129) through metaphor, paradox, stories, poetry and so on. We have freedom to experiment and represent in new and arresting ways, and we use this freedom to consciously make things more difficult, so as to best represent the world in which we find ourselves. We seek to learn something more about ourselves and the world by making it strange, or perhaps even shocking.

In an essay written in the wake of the financial crash Williams turns to consider the implications of our economic language and suggests that without 'fresh metaphors [and] new

---

[263] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* p. 176.

puzzles'[264] we will just slip in the easy world of cliché with attendant corruptions in our economic life as a simple market mentality rides roughshod over questions of value and purpose. For Williams, any attempt to live truthfully and see the world more truthfully requires language under pressure, language consciously made arresting, strange, and difficult.

Representation that might be regarded as truthful also requires silence, not as the opposite of speech but as its own form of communication that has something to do with 'admitting the most formidable level of difficulty' (p. 162). For silence refers what has been said, and what will be said, to some 'hinterland of significance' (p. 167) in which all representations are admitted as partial and the possibility of mastery or completion is disallowed and the struggle for control or reduction is forestalled.

Difficulty then, is not marginal, but central to our use of language. It is grounded in the fact that there is no final word, but only ever representations which are incomplete and lead to ever more questions and more speech (including the speech of silence). Such difficulty is central to human living and flourishing, and Williams is deeply suspicious of any account of humanity and human language which seeks to excise it. To get rid of difficulty from language is to lose the ability for 'growth, risk and love' (p. 183) in relation to the world as it has been given to us.

The Difficult Language of Doctrine

If language – in its general use – suggests something about the importance of difficulty for human flourishing, then it makes sense that the purpose of doctrine and the language of faith would be to increase or emphasise such difficulty. This seems to be the basic tenet of Williams' understanding of the role and work of theology. It is there to assist us 'in *being mortal*',[265] in understanding ourselves as being subjects-in-relation, open to question and revision, and ultimately – in one of Williams' favourite notions – open to judgement.[266]

The basis of dogma, for Williams, is not the incarnation as a brute fact. Nor is it a form of (self) assertion that shores up the defences of faith and makes it invulnerable from attack. Rather, the basis of dogma is 'judgement and conversion worked out through the encounter

---

[264] Williams, 'Knowing our Limits', p. 27.
[265] Williams, 'The suspicion of suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer', p. 186.
[266] This is the title of an early collection of sermons. See Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994).

with the telling of Jesus' story'.[267] Doctrine is there, not to make it easier to talk about God, by providing some shorthand, but rather to make it harder.[268] Theology seeks to make language about God more difficult, so as to stop us becoming comfortable with ourselves and our idols. That, at least, is how it is meant to work. Williams is clearly not blind to the ways it so often in fact sures up idols but, in his view, this is always a perversion of its primary purpose.

Again and again, especially in his collection *On Christian Theology,* we are met with variations on this theme. The language of faith is about being questioned, rather than finding answers. 'Classical dogmatic tradition has served to keep the essential questions alive',[269] he writes. Jesus is a 'universally crucial question' he states.[270] Or again, revelation is not about imposing heteronomy; instead, it is 'essentially to do with what is *generative*'[271] in questioning our thinking and speaking and acting. Revelation opens up rather than shuts down. It leads – in another of William's favourite notions – to ceaseless provisionality.[272]

To be engaged in prayer, liturgy and the language of doctrine, is not to find some settled ground (even if we continue to use Cranmer's words or recite the Nicene Creed). Instead, it is to be caught up in a never-ending hermeneutical spiral, in debate and conflict within the community of faith. So, for example, we may ask whether baptism is a practise focused on inclusivity, adoption and incorporation into the family of the church – as indicated by the practise of infant baptism, or if it is about personal commitment and choice – as indicated by the practise of adult baptism. There is no simple solution here, but a question and provisionality left by the generative life of Christ and his revelation.[273]

Similarly, for Williams, the underlying problem of heresies is not that they assert the wrong answer but that they are structured in such a way as to close down questions. Arius, as the archetypal heretic, was – in Williams' assessment – a theological conservative, one who sought to preserve the integrity of the Christian God, but in such a way as to shut down the generativity of the revelation of Christ.[274]

---

[267] Rowan Williams, 'Beginning with the Incarnation', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 79-92 (p. 83).
[268] *Ibid,* p. 84.
[269] *Ibid,* p. 92.
[270] Rowan Williams, 'The Finality of Christ', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 93-106 (p. 94).
[271] Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 131-147 (p. 134).
[272] See Williams, 'The Finality of Christ', p. 101.
[273] See Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', p. 143.
[274] Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Pres, 2001).

All of this is best summed up with the language of judgement. Christ stands in judgement over the church, not to be claimed by the church or absorbed into its systems. For Williams this idea is represented in the image of the empty tomb. Like the empty space between the cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant, the image of the risen Lord is an empty space that can never become an idol.[275] The empty tomb means Jesus can never become our possession. Instead, Christ stands over and above the work and life of the church.

At its best the language of doctrine is there to hold us open to such judgement. And it is because of this that Williams worries about Cupitt's religious realism and Wiles' doctrinal criticism. For Cupitt, God becomes a function of the will, another object who cannot be that *non-aliud* on whom we depend and from whom all is gift.[276] In Wiles, there is a focus on *kritik* (biblical criticism) without a corresponding emphasis on *krisis* (judgement), which diminishes the ability for our speech about Christ to keep us under question.[277]

All this means the language of faith should be difficult, or perhaps put better, lead us into difficulty, pushing us to sit under the question of the Gospel, to sit on trial with Christ and to be open to the transformative work of the Spirit. The various "set" language habits of the church are there to help us avoid dogmatism – however much they underwrite it in practise – and help us to live as provisional and pilgrim people who never reach the end of what might be said about God.

Post-modernism often views faith as a flight from difficulty,[278] but in Williams' hands faith is a flight towards it. For him, it is only in putting ourselves under judgement, allowing ourselves to be open to the kinds of difficulty that language, and especially the language of faith throws up, that we learn to become as we are made to be.

In sum then. First, to use language is to be confronted with all sorts of difficulties as we seek to (re)present, and this highlights the role of difficulty in human flourishing. Second, doctrine and the language of faith exists to lead us into difficulty, to bring us under question and judgement before an ever-faithful *non-aliud*. All this suggests that to confront difficulty is

---

[275] See Rowan Williams 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne', in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 183-196 (p. 187).
[276] See Rowan Williams, '"Religious Realism"', p. 244.
[277] See Rowan Williams, 'Maurice Wiles and doctrinal criticism', in *Wrestling with Angels*, pp. 275-299 (p. 295).
[278] See Shanks, *Against Innocence*, p. 6.

crucial for human flourishing. It is part and parcel of what it means to be finite and material creatures.

The Difficulty with Difficulty

Rightly though – in a scheme which refuses closure – questions remain, specifically about the kinds of difficulty that Williams might be giving an accolade to and the kinds of difficulty which we should seek to excise. Greater clarity around different kinds of difficulty would be helpful.

First, the kinds of difficulty we experience simply because we are finite, material creatures, could be distinguished from the kinds of difficulty we experience because of human sin. By way of example, Williams' love of poetry, and more generally for putting language under pressure, comes out of a desire to expose ourselves to difficulty. Such exposure is part of how we learn to become human; it is part of our God-given vocation. It is also how we *relearn* our way.[279] As he writes, the difficulty of language under pressure forces us 'out of complacency and dispossess or displace the lazy or domineering or over-ambitious ego.'[280] Such difficult language then has two discreet functions. One function is illuminative, as we learn and grow over time. The other is purgative, as we are gradually restored in the image of God.

Another distinction can be found *within* the different kinds of difficulty our sinful milieu throws up. There is a distinction to be found between forms of difficulty that might purge us and forms of difficulty that are more likely to distort us. To state the obvious: not all 'difficulty is good for us'.[281] We might think of the difficulty of finding clean water, or paying the bills, or living with oppressive relationships. Such acute stress or significant suffering is clearly not the kind of difficulty Williams has in view when he praises it.

We might also think of the way in which the same kind of difficulty will be experienced very differently by different people. For some, an emphasis on the gospel as judgement, on 'asking ourselves the difficult questions about our consistency and honesty',[282] will provide the challenging call needed to bring fullness of life. For others, it may be heard as another

---

[279] Williams, *Edge of Words,* pp. 139, 144.
[280] *Ibid,* p. 153.
[281] Williams, *Being Human,* p. 64.
[282] Williams, *Being Disciples,* p. x.

burden to shoulder, another voice saying, "never enough". It may be heard as voice, not of loving judgement that is putting us under question, but simply of condemnation.

What is missing here is a developed hamartiology that can make such distinctions. As Medi Volpe notes, Williams never gives 'much space to discussion of human sinfulness'.[283] Yet we cannot properly contend with the importance of difficulty without such a discussion, and particularly the way in which sin perverts the forms of difficulty we are confronted with. Purgation may well necessitate difficulty, but not all difficulty is purgative. Whether it is or not depends on both the external form of that difficulty and the subjective experience of it.

Difficulty is clearly embedded in our creaturely lives; it is also clearly crucial for the work of transformation. Yet, because of the brokenness of our world, it can also be deeply destructive. Distinguishing between the difficulty that is innate to creaturely life and the difficult that comes about due to sin, as well as the way in which difficulty may be either transformative or destructive would thus surely help Williams' case for the importance of difficulty in learning to be human.

Doing so would also help defend against the charge made against Williams the he 'ends up coming close to an ontologization of the tragic'.[284] This charge is made by Boram Cha, who in his recent PhD thesis, connects Williams' insistence that we grow through difficulty to an overall tragic sensibility in Williams' work.[285] The focus on difficulty is understandably read by Cha as being tantamount to putting tragedy at the heart of reality. Williams may be less open to Cha's critique if he made more of a distinction between the kind of difficult learning that is simply necessary due to our finitude, the purgative kind of re-learning and un-learning needed because of sin, and the forms of difficulty that are destructive and only exacerbate our brokenness.

In several ways then Williams could helpfully clarify the importance of difficulty for human flourishing. Yet even still, Williams' reflections on language helpfully highlight the way in which living with difficulty is crucial for us, part of the way we learn and re-learn our human vocation.

---

[283] Medi Volpe, 'Taking Time and Making Sense: Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination', in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology,* 15 (2013), 345-360 (p. 355).
[284] Cha, 'Suffering, Tragedy, Vulnerability', p. 72
[285] Cha, 'Suffering, Tragedy, Vulnerability', p. 78.

2.3 Difficulty and Time

We move from a consideration of language to Williams' work on time. Fundamental to the created order is the relentless march of time. *Dr Who, Back to the Future,* and the like, may reveal our common desire for time to be something other than a one-way passage, but if we accept creation as good then time is the God given context through which we live; it the backdrop to material existence. Simply put, time is a gift.

<u>Taking Time</u>

In Williams' work time acts like the gift of a picture frame. It provides the context for us to be able to grow, to learn, and so become ever more fully a reflection of the humanity seen in Jesus of Nazareth. As much as we may wish to learn like Neo learns kung fu in *The Matrix,* our growth in intelligence, wisdom and knowledge always comes about through 'the exchange, confrontation and encounter of bodies' and therefore has to 'with the taking of time'.[286] Williams draws on the work of Richard Sennett to emphasise this, and especially on his book *The Craftsman,* which highlights the necessity of repeated bodily actions to become a skilled crafter. [287] The learning of such habits – whether we are talking about willow weaving, playing the cello, or attentive listening – takes time.

Our identity too is formed not a-historically but over time and in conversation with and collaboration with others. Williams rejects the attempt by those "Masters of Suspicion" (Marx, Freud, Nietzsche) to find a 'determinate hidden content to consciousness',[288] a hidden essential self below the surface, and 'some ultimate unifying discourse'.[289] Instead, we are free to *take time* to ponder and probe our inner life and the lives of others, not as if we are all puzzles to be decoded, but rather as partners on a journey.[290]

If taking time is fundamental to human flourishing, then by corollary the attempt to short cut such time taking is a dangerous and sinful attempt to escape our creatureliness. Williams' thinking here appears once again to owe something to Gillian Rose, who was so critical of

---

[286] Williams, *Being Human,* p. 64.
[287] Richard Sennet, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). Williams draws explicitly on him in *Being Human,* p. 53 and 'Knowing our Limits', p. 30.
[288] Williams, 'The suspicion of suspicion', p. 190.
[289] *Ibid,* p. 195.
[290] *Ibid,* p. 199.

much left-wing thought that shirked the hard and difficult work of 'coming to know'[291] over time, through failure, negotiation, and a broken history.

Rose was deeply critical of anything she perceived as 'edgeless'[292] which tried to evade the difficulties of living, of being bodies bumping into one another through time. She was fiercely critical of those who sought to do away with the 'anxiety of beginning'[293] and so refuse the work of comprehension or mediation, in an attempt to skip ahead to the end – to some finished and complete holy community. Following Kierkegaard, Rose saw Luther as explicitly abolishing this anxiety of beginning through his intolerance of dissent where there 'comes an all too immediately peaceable piety, leaving nothing to be negotiated, no real way in for the Holy Spirit'.[294] Similarly, she was concerned that the work of Arendt, Levinas, Milbank and Baumann all sought some pure heavenly state that refused the 'patient work of mediation'.[295]

Across a range of topics Williams shows the same concern with anything that refuses to take time. He writes of an 'erosion of certain ways of imagining *time*'[296] which go hand in hand with the erosion of selfhood. He writes about the loss of childhood and argues for the need to safeguard spaces for children 'where identities can be learned and tested',[297] where children can be irresponsible speakers, as it were. He notes that 'sexual activity separated from promise and acceptance, from ordinary prosaic fidelity becomes one more expression of the plight of the self, unable to imagine what is involved in developing an integrity over the passage of time'.[298] He writes of the need for slow news (my term) in a world of instantaneous information; only such time taking might enable 'conversation and debate between the real communities of learning that make up society'.[299]

A similar concern for taking time is found in Williams' work on Dostoevsky. The "beautiful soul" Myshkin (from *The Idiot*), is regarded as diabolic precisely because he is changeless and timeless.[300] Myshkin's 'timeless virtue has no resources of memory and critical self-

---

[291] Schick, *Gillian Rose,* p. 1.

[292] Rose, *Love's Work,* p. 97.

[293] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 286.

[294] Shanks, *Against Innocence,* p. 99.

[295] *Ibid,* p. 165.

[296] Williams, *Lost Icons,* p. 9.

[297] *Ibid,* p. 31.

[298] *Ibid,* p. 209.

[299] Rowan Williams, 'The Media: Public Interest and Common Good: lecture delivered at Lambeth Palace' (15 June 2005) <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1534/archbishop-delivers-major-address-the-media-public-interest-and-common-good.html> [accessed 11th Sept 2023].

[300] *Williams, Dostoevsky,* p. 49. All further references to this book, for this paragraph, are given after quotes in the text.

awareness to make it effective in the world of human relations' (p. 50). Dostoevsky gives us in Myshkin a character who has never 'learned how to learn' (p. 55), who has lost those crucial *human* traits of 'growth, memory, the capacity to listen and *change'* (p. 53). The character of Myshkin thus gives a thought experiment into what a perfectly beautiful character would look like 'without the history of difficult choice'.[301] Significantly, Dostoevsky also chooses to make Myshkin an epileptic. Before each seizure there appears that timeless moment of ecstasy, and it is this which is both 'overwhelmingly attractive' (p. 49) and which must be avoided for all who might seek to become fully human. That embrace of harmony, that closure without history and without future, is the antithesis of that labour over time that is necessary for human restoration and transformation.

Again, in a special edition of *New Blackfriars,* given over to responses to Milbank's *On Theology and Social Theory,* Williams articulates a 'focal area of unease'[302] around the apparent bypassing of the need to take time in the construction of the community of the church. The historical narratives that Milbank plots are in danger of being 'flattened out into a bald statement of timeless ideal differences'[303] such that we are 'left with little account of how [the Christian imagination] is learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forwarded, discerned and risked'.[304]

For Williams, the peace of the church is always something under construction, rather than something achieved or that is dropped down from above. It relies on the grace of God to bring life from the ashes, continually and repeatedly, over the long haul.

Growing in self-knowledge, learning of others; the slow formation of our own identity, the arduous work of building community - all this requires patience. It requires us to learn to live *with* time rather than seeing it as a scarce resource. It requires 'the labour of finding one's way around'.[305] And none of this, of course, is without difficulty.

In a world of contingency, where the future is open and unknowable, human flourishing requires 'patience with the unplanned and undetermined decisions of agents'.[306] There is

---

[301] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* 68.
[302] Rowan Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision', in *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992), 319-326 (p. 319). This was published three months after *The Broken Middle,* and Williams' reflections here may well be influenced by Rose's work on Milbank.
[303] *Ibid,* p. 320.
[304] *Ibid,* p. 321.
[305] Williams, *Being Human,* p. 64.
[306] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 58.

simply no alternative to the difficulty of starting in the middle, learning to live with others (who will always remain part mystery) and with a future that is uncertain. Our creatureliness demands such time taking.

<u>Losing Time</u>

The corollary of taking time is losing it. For if it is taken for one thing, it is inevitably no longer "there" for something else. In more general terms, and in Williams' words, 'important moral choices entail the loss of certain specific goods for certain specific persons'.[307] Each of us make choices about how we spend our time. One good is chosen above another: time is spent with this friend not that friend, on this good cause and not on that one, and so on. And for each choice there are of course consequences which we cannot entirely control. In other words, we live in a contingent world.

As Williams goes on (still responding to Milbank) 'an authentically contingent world is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That's what it is to be created' (p. 322). In making this point, Williams is pushing back at Milbank's insistence on the created possibility of the 'compatibility of all goods'.[308]

Milbank does not want to deny the reality of roads not taken; he is clear that time used for one thing is not available for something else.[309] Yet, he ardently wants to avoid making sacrificial logic a necessity within the created order. This is surely to be commended, but it does mean Milbank is cautious about speaking of the inevitable losses (the goods not fulfilled) that contingency entails.

In contrast to Milbank, Williams draws a helpful distinction between the basic created reality that 'not all goods for all persons are contingently compatible' (p. 322) and the fallen reality that turns such non-compossibility into something destructive. It is only when 'contingency becomes meshed with rational beings' self-subverting choices of unreality over truth [that] the connectedness of human community becomes life-threatening as well as life-nurturing' (p. 322).

Here then, and perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, we see in Williams' work the 'inherent difficulties of living in creation [being] uneasily separated from a particular

---

[307] Williams, 'Saving Time', p. 322. All further references to this article, in this section, are given after quotes in the text.

[308] John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?', in *New Blackfriars,* 73 (1992), 341-352 (p. 349).

[309] *Ibid,* p. 350.

historical condition of fallenness'.[310] Taking time in a contingent world inevitably means contestation, difficult choices, one good chosen above another. But it does not necessitate a sacrificial economy in which good only comes through life-denying loss. This is a crucial distinction between sin and finitude.

There is no shortcut to learning to live well with one another. As Rose also shows us, we cannot avoid mediation, labour, and hard work in contingent world. 'Patience, trust and the acceptance of a world of real limitation are all hard work'.[311] But such patience is exactly what a created world of contingency requires of us if we are to ensure that the inevitable conflicts of human life do not become life-denying and life destroying. Hence, Williams ends his response to Milbank with the question: 'how much space is systematically given for the patience that contingency enjoins' (p. 325). Human flourishing requires 'patience with the unplanned and undetermined decisions of agents',[312] an acceptance of limit and the passage of time,[313] and a patience with the ordinary contingencies of daily living.[314]

<u>End Time</u>

So, we are to be patient. But to what end? Where does all this time taking take us? Simply put, our end is participation in the life of God as Trinity. To describe such a *telos* Williams talks about 'an end without end'.[315] This is, at least to my mind, a rich and alluring turn of phrase which self-consciously avoids any notion of final and complete *stasis.* The end to which we are orientated, drawn, and will come to, is not a nirvana in which the self entirely disappears. Instead, our end – the end of all creation – is to be caught up in the endless "deflections" of desire, in the endless outpouring of loving plenitude that is the life of God in Trinity.

As Brett Gray comments, Williams' eschatology is about a 'reparative, and ultimately joyful, movement of all things towards God'.[316] Williams is deeply suspicious of any philosophical tendency towards *stasis.* As the first section of this chapter argued, to be at all is always a

---

[310] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 125.
[311] Rowan Williams, 'Ethics, Economics and Global Justice', in *Faith in the Public Square,* pp. 211-224 (p. 224).
[312] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 58.
[313] See Williams, *Being Human,* p. 43.
[314] See Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 237.
[315] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge,* rev. edn. (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1990), p. 49. Brett Gray follows suit, calling his final chapter of his book on Williams, 'An Endless End'. *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 145.
[316] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 145.

being-in-movement, a being-in-otherness. Williams speaks of human nature as 'self-transcending'.[317] Not *stasis,* but e*pektasis,*[318] or *ekstasis,*[319] is central to the human vocation and *telos*. In the life of the Trinity, we find our *telos* in movement, in self-transcending "deflections" which never end.

This lack of ending has radical implications for how Williams suggests we face up to the contingencies and indeed tragedies of life together here and now. For this restless incorporation into the divine life is *not* – for Williams – about life after death. Rather, it is about life here and now.[320] It is of course about the life of prayer, but it is also about life in community, and it is on this that we turn to focus.

Williams' eschatological outlook means that in our common life there is never any final word, never any final and total loss, nothing beyond redemption. And if there is no end, no final "stop" there is always the possibility for something more. There is always more time, more to be said, more resources upon which to draw; no tragedy is final, no failure total.

Hence, the crux of Williams' natural theology of language is that there is always more that can be said.[321] And similarly, central to Williams' Christology is an understanding of the resurrection which shows 'the bare fact of the impossibility of defeating and extinguishing the divine presence in Jesus'.[322]

The lack of an end, of a "stop", means that there is always hope. The world can become 'unstuck from a frozen return to its tragically exacerbated conflicts'.[323] There is always the possibility for the recreation and renewal of community. Such a hope is what calls us to patience, to the difficult work of living with others in a contingent world.

Williams' eschatological vision is deeply attractive, particularly in the terms of this thesis, because it does not take us beyond space and time. Instead, his ideas of an end without end, rooted in his Trinitarian ontology, keep us very much wedded to moving through time. Hope is found not in the erasure of time in an eternal beatific vision, but in the possibility of

---

[317] Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge,* p. 69. See also Williams, 'Lossky, the *via negativa* and the foundations of theology', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. 1-24 (p. 13).
[318] Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge,* p. 62.
[319] Williams, 'Lossky, the *via negativa*', p. 12.
[320] See Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', p. 119.
[321] Williams, *Edge of Words,* pp. 66-94. This third chapter is entitled, 'Speech and Time: The unfinishable Business of Language'.
[322] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 242.
[323] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 149.

ever more time being given to us, to change, grow, and learn. It is found in being caught up in the "deflections of desire" here and now.

Yet there is no doubt that such an eschatology raises some questions. Specifically, as Karen Kilby points out, whether "something more" is possible depends on who one is talking about and where they are standing.[324] There is no possibility for the person killed in a tragic accident to say something more, even if those who are left might somehow begin 'managing loss by narrating it'.[325]

To be able to confidently assert "something more" for each individual and not simply for an ill-defined "we", then an eschatology entirely focused on this world will not do. Certainly, Williams never explicitly restricts eschatology in this way, it is just that his primary focus is on participation in the endless end, here and now. He has been reluctant to speak about life after death, perhaps wary of providing some sort of false consolation for the injustices of today.

Notwithstanding such justifiable wariness then, it may be helpful if he was clearer about our incorporation into Trinitarian "deflections" in the life of the world to come – even if we remain staunchly apophatic about what such a life or world might mean.

Again, Kilby is helpful here. She criticises John Thiel for his attempt to imagine the last things in a fulsome way, worried that such imaginings seek to ascribe meaning onto other's suffering.[326] She also takes issue with both Rahner and Barth for saying too much by denying the possibility of individual existence post death.[327] In contrast to these very different, but equally confident eschatologies, Kilby argues for, on the one hand, an eschatological commitment that suffering will somehow 'be made meaningful, or be woven in something meaningful'[328] and, on the other hand, a restraint that acknowledges we have no way of imagining how or what might make 'meaningful, or understandable, or acceptable, the terrors that befall other people'.[329]

---

[324] See Karen Kilby, 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', in *Modern Theology, 36* (2020), 92-104 (p.98).

[325] Williams, *Tragic Imagination,* p. 15.

[326] Karen Kilby, 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology' in *Game Over?: Reconsidering Eschatology,* ed. by Christophe Chalamet and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 279-292 (p. 289).

[327] See Karen Kilby, 'Death: A Hesitation', at *The Annual Barth Conference* (Online video recording, Youtube, 25 June 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGfaJxrBzA4> [accessed 18th June 2023].

[328] Kilby, 'Eschatology', p. 290.

[329] Kilby, 'Eschatology', p. 291.

Kilby's eschatological vision does *not* provide us with hopes and dreams of what we might seek to build in this life; it is not meant to. In her view, the horrors of this world demand an eschatology that is unimaginable, beyond the possibilities of time and space. This is half the story, and it is the half that Williams seems to underplay or even forget. It is also the half that this thesis could easily overlook, concerned as it is to provide eschatological visions that might inform *this* life.

The point is that we need both. Alongside an unimaginable eschatology that does somehow make all things well, we also need teleological visions of what flourishing communities might look like in this world. Williams' vision of an end without end, of a community that can always say there is something more, provides something of this ilk.

Perhaps only if we have both forms of eschatology can we avoid a "pie in the sky" and a false reconciliation with suffering.[330] Perhaps too, living betwixt and between these two eschatological poles is the difficult work of living *with time:* not rushing to something beyond (and so bypassing the hard work of finding that something more can always be said), nor seeking premature harmony this side of death. Here, with difficulty, we learn to walk with patience in a contingent and broken world.

2.4 Difficulty and Space

We are creatures who live through time and in space. We have explored, at some length, the gift of time. We now turn to explore the gift of space. To be creatures who take up space means being confronted with subjects and objects that are "other" to us, that are different from us. Hence, this section, focusses on dealing with otherness and difference.

In thinking about otherness Williams seeks to walk a difficult path between two dangers. On one side is the danger of *collapsing space* such that the world is seen as nothing more than a homogenous unity. In popular thinking this presents itself in those kinds of statements that suggest we're all the same really, or that all religions are saying the same kind of thing, and so on. On the other side is the danger of *disintegrating space* such that otherness and difference are seen as total and unbridgeable. This presents itself in a rhetoric of "us" against "them" that refuses growth or change or dialogue.

No Space

---

[330] With thanks to Karen Kilby for naming these two tendencies in eschatology.

Walking between these two poles, Williams seeks to open up the difficult space for difference in dialogue.[331] He rejects both the search some kind of unified end point - some 'end of language'[332] – that is associated with certain readings of Hegel (thesis, antithesis, and *settled* synthesis), and the post-modern Derridean emphasis on 'unconditional difference, and unspeakable difference'.[333] Instead – as we have already begun to see through his work on language – Williams argues that our own identity is only formed and transformed in the world of exchange, through dialogue and through negotiating difference as it is concretely found in our daily encounters.[334] In other words, to be creatures living "in space" means being gifted all the space we need – that space in which we are pushed up against otherness and difference – to learn, to labour and to love.

To help us unpack Williams' take on the human vocation, that is to become more fully human through dialogue, we draw on the work of Leo Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin. These two Russian authors (from the early and middle part of the twentieth century) are worth drawing into conversation for several reasons. First, to draw them (or indeed any author of another discipline) into dialogue with Williams reflects his methodological style, which draws on a wide 'hinterland' of material from the social sciences.[335] Second, it does what Williams enjoins upon us, namely, to seek to learn through dialogue. Third, to draw specifically on Russian authors helps to immerse us in a world through which Williams has been shaped. Fourth, on these two specific authors: Vygostky's writings are focused on learning, the very thing with which Williams' is concerned; Bakhtin is a literary critic particularly focused on the work of Dostoevsky and the importance of dialogue, he is also (unlike Vygotsky) a key source for some of Williams' work. Finally, on bringing them together: they have been compared, contrasted and (by some) even integrated on many occasions before – comparison (dialogue), as we will see, is extremely fruitful.[336]

---

[331] He explains his attraction to the work of Balthasar precisely because Balthasar provides a theological language that goes 'beyond the sterile opposition of undifferentiated presence/identity on the one hand and unthinkable *différance* on the other'. Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference', p. 82.

[332] *Ibid,* p. 77.

[333] *Ibid,* p. 78.

[334] The suspicion of abstraction and attempt to stay with the concrete has its roots in the work of Donald MacKinnon. See Donald MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays,* ed. and intro. by George Roberts and Donovan Smucker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), p. 8.

[335] See Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. xii.

[336] See Allan Cheyne and Donato Tarulli, 'Dialogue, Difference and Voice in the Zone of Proximal Development' in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* ed. by Harry Daniels, 2nd edn, (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 122-141.

On the face of it, Williams' *schema* bears much similarity to Vygotsky's epoch-shifting work on child development. Written in the 1920s and 1930s in Russia, Vygotsky's writings found their way into the English-speaking world in the 1970s and still underpin much teacher training today. Much of Vygotsky's work takes aim at behaviourists.[337] He argues that our use of language reveals that our actions are not determined by environmental stimuli. Instead, speech is intimately connected to how we act. For example, use of speech enables children to complete tasks that are far more complicated than they would otherwise be able to do. Children were found to '*solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and hands*'.[338] More simply put, our 'thought is born through words'.[339] Our thinking and acting arise from our social and cultural interaction - from dialogue.

All this is quite obviously in line with much of Williams' own thought. As he says himself, 'human agency is distinct because speech makes a difference to it'.[340] The way we think is shaped by the language we inhabit; our mental functioning is mediated by cultural (linguistic) semiotics. Language is not about describing stuff in my head to a world out there but rather learning to represent a shared and common world to one another in such a way that we can continue to communicate and learn and grow together.

Yet, despite these similarities, the ways in which Williams' own thinking parts company from Vygotsky sheds light on the particular way Williams seeks to think through (and maintain) dialogue and difference, and the ways in which achieving this might be more difficult than Vygostky imagines.

For Vygotsky, learning is about inculturation. The purpose of education for a child is to induct them into the use of a full range of cultural tools that they might navigate that culture successfully. For this to happen, a learned other helps a child perform tasks that are just beyond their current independent capacity. Such learning 'creates the zone of proximal development'.[341] It is learning that awakens and makes possible new internal processes within the child. Here is a form of dialogue, but it is a form 'premised on the assumption

---

[337] See Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of High Psychological Processes,* ed. by Michael Cole and others (London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 58.

[338] *Ibid,* p. 26.

[339] L. S. Vygostky, *Thought and Language,* ed. and trans. by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1962), p. 153.

[340] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 113.

[341] See Vygotsky, *Mind in Society,* p. 90. It is worth noting that the Western cultural appropriation of Vygostky has led to a number of different "Vygotskies". This is clearest in the various interpretations of the Zone of Proximal Development. See, Harry Daniels, 'Introduction', in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* pp.1-31 (pp. 4-6).

that dialogue is basically a cooperative enterprise overcoming miscommunication and the fallibility of language and that it is aimed at ever greater agreement'.[342] Dialogue for Vygotsky, 'presupposes in the partners sufficient knowledge of the subject to permit abbreviated speech'.[343] Dialogue is premised on sharing as much of a common vision as possible, for this enables a move from hearing speech to understanding thought. Ultimately, though for Vygotsky, 'even that it not enough'; to understand another's speech, 'we must also know its motivation'.[344]

Here then is a vision clearly very different from Williams'. Their starting premises are similar: being is found in and with others; language is central to the formation of self and community. But the goal for which they aim is radically different. Vygotsky seeks to collapse difference; Williams seeks to maintain it. For Williams, our sense of identity is formed in and through an exchange which includes conflict; there is an 'adversarial moment in the construction of the self and its knowledge of itself'.[345] Yet at the same time (and to avoid moving back towards absolute difference) there must also be the recognition of 'the convergence of my interest and the other's'.[346] This does not mean (and here we avoid moving towards some false unity, some mended middle) finding some finished and settled integration, but rather an ongoing movement that denies that we might ever come to a final transparency of myself or the other. We do not merge.

Further, and somewhat ironically, there appears to be little space for a questioning or critical mindset within Vygotsky's paradigm. Thought, or inner speech is focussed on self-mastery – on using the cultural tools well.[347] It becomes hard to see what the role of the active individual is in learning; 'environment [becomes] fate'.[348] There is no way in this paradigm to be challenged from outside, to be arrested or shocked by something other.

Open Space

---

[342] Cheyne and Tarulli, 'Dialogue, Difference and Voice', p. 128.

[343] Vygotsky, *Thought and Language,* p. 144.

[344] Vygotsky, *Thought and Language,* p. 151*.*

[345] Rowan Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 239-264 (p. 242).

[346] *Ibid,* p. 243.

[347] See Vygostky, *Thought and Language,* pp. 144-148.

[348] James Wertsch and Peter Tulviste, 'L.S. Vygotsky and contemporary developmental psychology', in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* pp. 57-78 (p. 71).

In contrast to Vygotsky's understanding of dialogue – which seeks final and complete unity through a total shared understanding (even of motives) of the speakers – we turn to Bakhtin. In his view, to understand properly requires not a shared horizon, but rather 'outsideness […]. Meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another'.[349] There is an 'explicit rejection of the notion of a shared perceptive mass as either ground or goal of communication'.[350] This distance and difference is essential – for learning, for selfhood, for community.

In a similar fashion, for Williams, encounter with others includes paying attention to the unexpected gifts they might be giving to me. What, he asks, 'is Christ giving me through this person, this group?'[351] This kind of questions becomes even more significant when facing disagreement. So, when conversing with those who support Nuclear Armament, he spoke of staying engaged, 'in the hope that we may still be exchanging gifts – the gift of Christ – in some ways, for one another's healing'.[352] The presence of otherness, he writes, is not a threat but 'an offer and an invitation' to the formation of self in dialogue.[353]

Vygotsky and Bakhtin helpfully highlight two basic and distinct ways of thinking about dialogue. It can either be about abbreviation and convergence, or it can be about learning from difference.

Bakhtin's work takes us much further than this basic distinction though, and in doing so he helpfully unpacks more of Williams' own thinking on dialogue and difference. First, for Bakhtin identity is formed and made up of a collection of other and disparate voices within. Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky for creating the polyphonic novel.[354] There is not simply the single voice of the author, there are not even singularly voiced characters, portraying one position or another. Rather 'every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogical'.[355] Every character is itself full of other voices, other utterances of other people, to which it is responding, or parodying or copying. So too I cannot be thought or

[349] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* trans. by Vern W McGree, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 7.
[350] Cheyne and Tarulli 'Dialogue, Difference and Voice', p. 130.
[351] Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 8.
[352] Rowan Williams, 'Making Moral Decisions' in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics,* ed. by Robin Gill, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-15 (p. 14).
[353] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 208.
[354] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 3.
[355] *Ibid,* p. 32.

understood apart from the 'many voices that constitute me and with which I speak'.[356] There is no simple way to get to the bottom of ourselves or others. To paraphrase Williams: others are a mystery, with endless depth.[357] Or again, we remain baffled by ourselves.[358]

Second, Bakhtin suggests that truth itself is dialogical. There is much about the world that we cannot know and cannot speak of in a single voice. In the polyphonic novel we see 'fewer and fewer hard elements ("rock bottom truths") remain that are not drawn into dialogue'.[359] Hence then, it is no surprise to Bakhtin that the 'flowering of the novel is always connected with a disintegration of a stable verbal-ideological system'[360] – which, given his background, is seen by him as an entirely good thing. Dostoevsky writes in such a way that an idea, or truth, cannot 'in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness'.[361]Again, such sentiments are echoed by Williams. As explored earlier, Williams seeks to refute any notion of truth that is reduced to something pretending to simply reflect what is in some unadorned and uninterpreted way.

Third, the characters of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels are filled with internal struggle as multiple voices collide. Indeed, Michael Holquist suggests there is an 'almost Manichean sense of opposition at the heart of existence'[362] in Bakhtin's work. There is collision and quarrelling, not so much between character but within, 'between two divided voices'.[363] Indeed, 'what Dostoevsky's character's say constitutes an arena of never-ending struggle with other's words'.[364] In contrast, Vygtosky seems to forget the aspect of struggle, or conflict, or difficulty in his understanding of dialogue and learning.

For Williams', this aspect of struggle with other voices – both internal and external – is crucial to living and learning and loving. There is, he writes, no 'environment without friction'.[365] The self is formed only through such friction and resistance to the ego. The

---

[356] Wayne Booth, 'Introduction', in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* by Mikhail Bakhtin, pp. xiii-xxvii (p. xxv).
[357] See Williams, 'Lossky, the *via negativa',* p. 13.
[358] See Williams, *The Tragic Imagination,* p. 13.
[359] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist, ed. by Michael Holoquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 300.
[360] *Ibid,* p. 371.
[361] Bakhtin, *Problems,* p. 81.
[362] Michael Holquist, 'Introduction', in *The Dialogic Imagination,* by Mikhail Bakhtin, pp. xv-xxxiii (p. xviii).
[363] Bakhtin, *Poetics,* p. 256.
[364] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* p. 349.
[365] Williams, *Lost Icons,* p. 181.

other must 'precisely *be* other – not the fulfilment of what I think I want'.[366] We find our identity 'in freely creating time and space for the other and voicing their perspective and interest'.[367] We let their voice come alive in us, and this does not diminish who we are, but rather is part of our own identity as we are made from and carry with us the polyglot voices of others.[368] As such, finding our identity in this world of exchange and conversation is the same as – or at least goes hand in hand with – paying attention to and making space for other voices. We can find ourselves only as we give ourselves away, only as we properly attend to others. But this is also something 'difficult… something painfully learned'.[369] As Rebekah Howes rightly points out the space for dialogue and dealing with difference is the difficulty of the broken middle. To make difference absolute or to absolutize the other would be an evasion of that engagement, and so an evasion of difficulty. Instead, the human vocation is found – human flourishing is found – precisely in the difficulty of living and learning and conversing in the ambiguous middle of human relationships.[370]

Fourth, for Bakhtin, there is no end to dialogue, no final word that can be given. 'To be means to communicate dialogically'.[371] Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky as carrying dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as 'eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord'.[372] Truth remains 'unfinalized and inexhaustible'.[373]

This parallels explorations in the first section around being-in-movement, and earlier parts of this section, on endless time. What we can add here is that this inexhaustibility is paradoxically linked to living in space, inhabiting a location, and therefore having a perspective that *is* limited and finite. Williams is thus critical of Simone Weil, who sees the limited point of view as a corruption and so 'slips away into concern with otherness-as-such'.[374] It is precisely those limits that mean there is no final word to be had. No one makes this clearer than the philosopher David Ross in his book on inexhaustibility and locality. In his view inexhaustibility is not connected to infinity, but rather and paradoxically to

---

[366] *Ibid,* p. 188.
[367] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 175.
[368] David Ford suggests something similar when he asks, 'what faces do we have habitually in our hearts?' Those faces, he suggests, form our identity. Ford, *Self and Salvation,* p. 18.
[369] Williams*, Dostoevsky,* p. 181.
[370] See Howes, 'In the Shadow', pp. 27-28.
[371] Bakhtin, *Problems,* p. 252.
[372] *Ibid.*
[373] *Ibid,* p. 86.
[374] Williams, 'Simone Weil and the necessary non-existence of God', p. 222

'finiteness'.[375] It is in fact locality, being in space, which create the conditions for inexhaustibility (a point missed, he believes, by so much continental philosophy). Any finite being is inexhaustible, he argues, because it can always 'enter new and unexpected relationships'.[376] It is always open to query and question,[377] or in the language of Bakhtin and Williams, to another word.

Ross' thesis is written in a consciously and almost zealously anti-theistic mode. He misses the way in which this inexhaustibility of finitude, of being located, is grounded in and only makes sense because of something beyond. And it is this which brings us to the fifth and final aspect of Bakhtin's work that it is worth noting here. For Bakhtin, the ability to go on speaking, to struggle through the polyphony, is only possible on the assumption of a third *superaddressee,* whose 'absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed'.[378] Williams similarly writes of the need for a dependable resource, in order for us to begin to shape our own identity in dialogue with others. We need, 'another to whom we are unconditionally present, in terms of an unconditional permission to question and reimagine the self without any anxiety that the project would ultimately run out or terminally fail or undermine itself'.[379]

The unfinalized nature of our speech, our identity, and all our engagement with others, are only possible – contra Ross – because we stand in the presence of that non-competitive, non-anxious, *non-aliud.* It is in the context of the infinite, in God who is beyond space and time, that we are able to engage in the ongoing difficult labour of encountering difference, in such a way that that difference does not become totally other nor become subsumed into my agenda. Here is the difficult work of living as creatures in space, here is the joyful and delightful work of learning to love.

Summary

In this section we have considered the centrality of difficulty to Williams' project, thinking about difficulty in relation to language, time, and space. The overriding conclusion is that

---

[375] David Ross, *Inexhaustibility and Human Being: An Essay on Locality* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1989), p. vii.
[376] *Ibid,* p. 5.
[377] *Ibid,* p. 84.
[378] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres,* p. 126.
[379] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 88.

difficulty is essential for human flourishing; it is central to goodly relating; it is fundamental to our creaturely materiality.

What Williams has to say on difficulty helps us to continue to explore our three areas of contention, around sin and finitude, competition, and eschatology. First, it was suggested that Williams could better distinguish between different types of difficulty and their connection to sin and finitude. Difficulty is part and parcel of material existence, but the forms of difficult we encounter are perverted by sin and may be either purgative or distortive. The main form of difficulty Williams seems to want to celebrate is (what could be called) the difficulty of difference. It is in the resistance and friction that comes from letting other voices be properly other that we learn and grow as imitators of Christ. The point, that Williams never makes explicitly, but that is central to this thesis is that such resistance and struggle is fundamental to our finitude. Of course, sin changes and distorts that struggle with other voices, turning a life-giving way of growth into something much more fraught and ambivalent. But this does not alter the basic point that part of what it is to be human is to encounter and be shaped by difference and the negotiation that such difference entails.

Second, Williams helps us think through the difficult competitive logics of creaturely life. He helpfully distinguished between the fundamental necessity of incompatible goods for material creatures and a sacrificial economy. Whilst the former comes as a result of our finitude the latter is only a result of our sin. Competitive limits are central to creaturely life, but that does not mean that a gain for one can only come through a genuine loss to another person. There is a limit to the number of relationships I can maintain, but neither myself nor others (who I do not know) experience real loss because of that. Williams manages to distinguish between the fundamental incompatibility of goods and a capricious competitive logic.

Third, Williams' eschatology provides us with a vision that refuses some apophatic "pie in the sky" hope. Instead, it is rooted in our creaturely finitude, in our life here and now. It does not take us away from our material finitude, but instead hopefully proclaims that in the resurrection there is always something more to be said, or to be done, there is always a way on, a way through. Such an eschatology refuses a false consolation and gives us a vision of what it might mean to be people of hope within the limits of our creaturely lives.

3. Risk

3.1 Introduction

The second intractable characteristic of our finitude that we are going to explore, through Williams' work, is risk. As with difficulty, risk is built into the fabric of material and finite existence; it is the fact that we are creatures who are bound in space and time that makes risk a fundamental aspect of human living. We constantly step into the unknown; we do not know what is "round the corner"; we do not know "what tomorrow might bring". We are left then, always, with risk – with having to speak or act not knowing what the consequences will be or what might follow.

We use the language of risk partly because it is the language Williams uses, and partly because of its place in popular discourse.[380] Yet, its ubiquitous use in contemporary society disguises the differences between three distinct uses of the term. The term can, first, be used as a technical term linked to mathematical probabilities. Such usage has its roots in insurance. On this account, risk refers to a 'compound measure of the probability and magnitude of adverse effect'.[381] Second, as Mary Douglas explores, the language of risk can be used as a political term to refer to any danger a *polis* faces. Used in this way, the language of risk becomes a social construct which highlights 'particular kinds of danger'[382] (and hides other types), establishes norms of behaviour and apportions blame. Third, in its everyday colloquial use, it refers to a far more general sense of uncertainty where actions may have negative *or positive* consequences.[383] Williams uses the term almost exclusively in this third sense, and it is in this far more general sense of uncertainty to which I primarily refer.

We begin by thinking about risk then in connection to responsibility. To be people who take responsibility for ourselves and others means being prepared to take risks, unsure of how what we say or do might "land". This is true at the personal level (we do not know how someone might respond to what we say) and it is true at the more political or communal level (we must act despite not knowing quite what the consequences might be for our

---

[380] See Deborah Lupton, *Risk* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 10.
[381] William W. Lowrance, 'The Nature of Risk', in *Societal Risk Assessment: How safe is safe enough?* ed. by Richard C. Schwing and Walter A. Albers Jr. (Boston: Springer, 1980), pp. 5-17 (p. 6).
[382] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 8.
[383] See David Spiegelhalter, 'Quantifying uncertainty', in *Risk,* ed. by Layla Skinns, Michael Scott and Tony Cox (Cambridge: CUP, 2011). pp. 17-33 (p. 17).

community). Central to all this is learning to live without the need to be in control. We can, for Williams, only live freely – in that filial responsiveness – if we have given up grasping for control of others and the world around us.

Learning to live with uncertainty and without control inevitably also means learning to live with failure, so thinking about the place (and importance) of *failure* forms the second focus of our exploration. From here, we will consider tragedy and what we should say abouts its (intrinsic or otherwise) connection to contingency and uncertainty in a world of space and time. Finally, we turn to think about what might be lost or missed if we seek a world without risk. It is worth repeating at this point that a number of themes explored in the section on difficulty will arise again in this next section as key ideas are seen again through new lenses or from different angles.

3.2 Responsibility

To engage with others always involves risk. Williams makes this point most clearly in his work on Dostoevsky. On Williams' reading, several of Dostoevsky's characters centre around the hope of living beyond genuine encounter and engagement with others. He points to Stavrogin and Verkhovensky (Pyotr) – two central characters in *Devils* – as seeking to live beyond engagement with others, as selves closed off from everything outside. They are, 'seeking invisibility, seeking to be beyond the scope of any other's gaze'.[384] They do not want to be seen, to step out into a world of exchange, where others might influence them or make a difference to them, or – perhaps most significantly – reveal to them that their own identity is not entirely under their own control. Williams also points to Myshkin, from *The Idiot,* who – in a very different way – is on the 'same flight from visibility' (p. 124). He seems unable to present himself as someone engaged, genuinely encountering and encountered by others. Such characters manifest the diabolic by avoiding 'being identified, bound to a history or a project or set of relationships' (p. 122). Or, in other words, they refuse to take the 'risks of being seen' (p. 117). They each refuse to be *an other* for others to encounter and both shape and be shaped by. In refusing to take such a risk these characters lock themselves into demonic patterns without hope; there is no risk, no uncertainty, no possibility of restoration or renewal; only the inevitability of self-destruction.

---

[384] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 124. Further references to this text, in the proceeding paragraphs, are given in brackets after quotes.

In stark contrast, Williams points to the brothers in *Karamazov* who, over time, emerge into visibility: 'each puts at risk his own control over how he is seen and responded to' (p. 126). They become vulnerable to others, they open themselves up to being 'the material of the narratives told by others' (p. 130). They become open to receive themselves back from others in new and surprising ways, for their identity is not locked down in some diabolic self-enclosed circle but is formed and transformed in and through engagements that they cannot control or predetermine.

So, Williams argues, we are to continually bring ourselves 'out of the shadows where we hide from God and ourselves and each other'[385] and to take the risks of being seen. In the language of Gillian Rose, any engagement with others requires 'staking oneself'.[386] We stake a particular position, saying or doing "something" which is necessarily limited and incomplete, and in the knowledge that it might fail in the ways hoped. We step out "into the light" as it were and speak and act in the hope that what we say is 'both recognizable and defensible'[387] to others and so might form part of an ongoing conversation. As such, genuine engagement with others is 'an act not of self-assertion but of […] self-*gift*'.[388]

It is worth noting at this juncture that I have (as elsewhere) taken out Williams' own reference to "dispossession" in the above, in a heuristic attempt to deal specifically with this idiosyncratic language in the final section of this chapter. My contention is that the language of dispossession adds nothing to what Williams wants to say about genuine engagement with others, which always entails risk.

Positively then, to take the risk of being seen can be the place of surprise, and wonder and joy, as we find ourselves reflected in the voices or faces of others, and as we find themselves reflected in us. In that kind of real and risky exchange 'both speakers are given more room to be who they are, to learn or grow' in one another. Such engagement is a form of 'ecstasy', or *ek-stasis,*[389] and requires the dissolution of any sense of self as a static object, independent of relationship and connection.

Of course, to become visible, and properly engage with others carries with it the risk of things going wrong as well. In stepping out, we might find ourselves 'misrecognising the

---

[385] Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (London: Canterbury Press, 2007) p. 99.
[386] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle,* p. 151.
[387] Williams, *Edge of Words,* 44.
[388] Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', p. 64.
[389] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 174.

nature of the interest of others'.[390] We might, for example, expect that what we say or do will be read as helpful or kind, but instead find that it only re-asserts power imbalances and is received as patronising. We might too find that in saying or doing one thing and not another we inadvertently conceal something else.[391] Or again, we might find that what we say is misheard, such that there is a fundamental mis-recognition between ourselves and the person we are speaking to, or – worse still – that what we say or do is consciously distorted and manipulated in the hands of others.[392]

These then are the risks – or the uncertainties – attached to stepping out and "being seen". They are what come from taking responsibility for ourselves and those around us; what come from finding ourselves in and with and through others.

Beyond the interpersonal, Williams does also – although less commonly – speak about risk and responsibility in the context of the *polis*. We see this most clearly in his reflections on Bonhoeffer. Part of being-for-others (in Williams' parsing of Bonhoeffer's Christology) entails letting go of the desire to be right and of forming a defended and 'self-justifying identity'.[393] In its place we are empowered to act out of solidarity with Christ and with neighbour, but without any security in the knowledge that we are doing the right thing, or that the consequences of our actions will be as we had hoped.

The same theme is also and once again central to Rose's work. She was critical of left-wing thought which sought innocence and so refused *political* action (and abided in the far easier world of protest). Rose wanted to stay engaged in the difficult world of actual politics, in the hope that we might instantiate a 'good enough justice, which recognises the intrinsic and contingent limitations in its exercise'.[394] She held up the importance of a real and situated ethical community, and the 'actual inner struggles'[395] found in any common life. She is consistently critical of any 'suppression of actuality'.[396] She contrasts her own method to a vast array of philosophical attempts that sought to avoid the 'anxiety of beginning and the equivocation of the ethical'[397] and to find some pure moral ground upon which to stand.

---

[390] Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', p. 64.
[391] See Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 45.
[392] See *ibid,* p. 132.
[393] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 206.
[394] Rose, *Love's Work,* p. 116. See also Schick, *Gillian Rose,* p. 1.
[395] Shanks, *Against Innocence,* p. 99.
[396] Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), p. 229.
[397] Rose, *The Broken Middle,* p. 296.

To seek to build the common good means forgoing the desire for purity and instead engaging in concrete political life, seeking a good enough justice, in the knowledge that we can only ever stand in the broken middle. To seek the common good risks our own self-justified identity. It risks drawing out a 'violent no' from the world.[398] It risks upsetting the passive consensus which sits content with injustice.[399] To act in solidarity with others, to build the common good, means acting despite uncertainty – despite the risks – both "deontologically" and "teleologically".

3.3 Failure

If we are going to stress the importance of taking risks, then we must contend with what happens when these risks do not "pay off", and so contend with the place of failure. Failure is a theme that recurs again and again in Williams' work. Its connection – or not – to sin is crucial for this thesis, as we seek to bring some clarity around questions of sin and finitude.

Failure is obviously connected to, but not synonymous with sin. To sin is always in some sense to fail; it is to fail in our vocation to be fully human. But to fail is not always to sin, for some of our failures are simply to do with our inability to see around the corner. Sometimes we fail simply because we live in a contingent world.

Williams makes little of this distinction in practice, seemingly content with an ambiguity around what might be a product of sin and what might simply be a product of our finitude. But the formal distinction does matter. It matters for how we reflect on experiences of failure. It matters for how we might view failure in more conceptual terms. The proposition here is that failure, intrinsic to our finite creaturely lives, might – in certain circumstances at least – be good for us.

'Great art risks failure'.[400] Technical competence is rarely enough: something novel usually needs to be employed for an artistic endeavour to be pulled out for significant acclaim. Yet no artist can know when setting off on such a venture whether it will "work" or not, whether it will be understood or recognisable enough to resonate. So too in our own lives, if we going to seek genuine encounter with others, stepping forward into unknown territory, our "performances" simply cannot always be "successful" in the way we want

---

[398] Williams, *Tokens of Trust,* p. 85.
[399] See Williams, *The Truce of God: Peacemaking in troubled times,* rev. edn., (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2005), p. 71.
[400] John Adams, *Risk* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

them to be.[401] If our speaking – and indeed our acting – follow a Hegelian pattern of 'positing, critiquing and re-founding'[402] then failure is in fact a crucial part of all genuine engagement.

We will – at least sometimes – find that we have not quite said what we wanted to say or have been slightly misheard. Or else, after hearing a different perspective, realise we want to say something else. Our first words failed to "do" what we had hoped. In sharper language, Rose suggests that any recognition implies initial misrecognition; we re-cognise what we initially see, our 'immediate vision or experience is incomplete'.[403] Failure is intrinsic to our material, creaturely lives.

As noted already, Williams does not try to distinguish between this kind of failure and the kind of failure that requires repentance. Thus, eliding both together, he talks about the importance of the 'practice of penitent irony about the misapprehensions of the life and speech of faith'.[404] Some such misapprehensions may require penitence, but others may not – they may simply be the result of our finitude.

Williams may have good reason for underplaying the distinction between failure that comes because of sin, and failure that comes because of finitude. He wants to highlight – for both forms of failure – that our apprehension of the Christian God is found in part through misapprehension and unsuccessful performances. Through such things we find the love of God waiting for us, a love which is both undefended and un-anxious. And, in encountering such love we begin to learn to live lives that are free from anxiety and free from an obsession to defend our own credentials.[405] We can let go of the obsession for a 'perfectly satisfying performance'[406] and shed our 'enmity towards our failures'.[407]

Failure – in this context – is not meant to lead to agonistic or painful self-realisation but instead is meant to be held lightly. Williams wants to assert – again, for both forms of failure – the possibility of holding lighting, even jovially, to these failures of apprehension. Indeed, for Williams, a focus on a polished performance will always undercut itself because it is in

---

[401] See Rowan Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany', and 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics', in *On Christian Theology,* pp. 265-275.
[402] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 42.
[403] Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology,* p. 76.
[404] Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany', p. 258.
[405] See Williams, *Being Disciples,* pp. 40, 49.
[406] Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace', p. 269.
[407] *Ibid,* p. 274.

danger of 'terminating in itself, in the successful will, not in the life of the creator'.[408] In the place of such self-focus Williams calls us to manifest 'thanksgiving and delight' in the generosity of God that can turn our half-baked and mis-fired performances to good.

Be that as it may, Williams' case could be further strengthened if he made some kind of formal distinction between sinful failure and failure that comes about because of finitude. We may not always be able to distinguish them in practice. We may want to hold to both forms of failure lightly enough to refuse self-absorbed anxiety. Yet even still, drawing the distinction matters because a misapprehension that comes about because we did not know something of our interlocutor, or because we did not know something of the events coming tomorrow, is very different from a misapprehension that comes about because of an egotistical inability to listen properly. I may not be after a polished performance, but I still do want to grow in love. And as such, when thinking about failure, the distinction between sin and finitude does matter.

Despite this omission by Williams, he helpfully presents us with a vision that asserts the inevitability of failure for finite creatures. In letting go – in embracing the risk of being seen and engaging with others – the one certainty we are faced with is failure. As creatures in space and time, who learn though labour, who remain opaque to ourselves and to others, and who cannot know what lies around the corner, some of our performances will always fail. Yet, such failures, Williams argues are not only inevitable, they can – when recognized and accepted as such – mirror 'the divine gift as narrated in the history of Jesus'.[409] For Christ let go of control of his own performance and in genuine encounter with others embraced the "failure" of the cross.

3.4 Tragedy

As reference to the crucifixion highlights, delight in misapprehension dissipates when we turn from considering failures - some of which may have a comic element to them - to consider tragedy. In a world of uncertainty, where our desires and our knowledge are corrupted, some forms of failure will inevitably lead to tragedy. Penitent irony is replaced with the need to confront the dark and dangerous aspects of our humanity. We move from the joyful registers of Williams corpus to the more agonistic ones.

---

[408] Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany', p. 261.
[409] *Ibid,* p. 254.

Williams has – as already noted – justifiably been accused of implying that tragedy is essential to creaturely life. In 1992 he wrote of the 'tragic implications of contingency itself' (in a response to Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*).[410] Williams was not (on my reading) writing tragedy into the heart of creation – his point was that in a truly contingent world tragedy was always one possibility for God's good creation. Indeed, in 2018 he makes it clear: in appreciation of Waller's review of *The Tragic Imagination* Williams explicitly states that it is 'not the finite as such that is "tragic"'.[411] But his earlier rhetoric makes confusion more than likely.

There is then (on my reading) a consistent distinction in Williams' work between inevitable contestation between creatures – the inevitable non-compossibility of goods, and history's tragic nature. Brett Gray makes this point forcibly: the competitive limitations of creaturely life are not to be confused with our state of fallenness which turns incompatible goods into something rapacious or tragic.[412]

Even if I would argue that the distinction between these two things is consistent, Williams does seem to have become clearer on making this point over time – the possible confusions in his earlier writing having given way to a clarity of thought found in his response to Waller's review.

If there is a growing clarity over time, there appears also to be a shift in *emphasis* over time as well. It might not be that the formal relation between tragedy and sin has changed in his mind, but it does seem that the landscape is less pervaded by an all-encompassing tragic or agonistic sensibility.

In *The Wound of Knowledge* (originally published in 1979) Williams writes of how we come to know God in 'the enduring of suffering and temptation'[413] and 'only through the practices of self-crucifying service'.[414] In this work, Williams is clear: God is known in darkness, conflict, confusion and loss. It is not as though Williams walks away from such language – any sincere meditation on the cross is surely going to have to say something like this – but it

---

[410] Williams, 'Saving Time', p. 325.
[411] Rowan Williams, '"Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed": A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*', *Modern Theology, 34* (2018), 280-288, (p. 283).
[412] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 121.
[413] Williams, *Wound of Knowledge,* p. 52.
[414] *Ibid,* p. 53.

does seem tempered in later works. For example, the note of joy sounds much louder in his recent popular series, *Being Disciples, Being Christian,* and *Being Human.*

This shift over time, both in clarifying the relation of finitude, sin and tragedy, and in giving greater emphasis to joy, forestalls any claim that Williams writes tragedy into the heart of reality. At the same time, Williams is very clear: given the inevitability of tragedy *in this life*, we absolutely must – we have a moral duty to – confront it. Tragedy remains a key theological category. We cannot simply evade it or move beyond it with an a-historical attempt to provide a primordial narrative of peace.[415] Given the world we are in, marred as it is by sin, we must in fact learn to live with tragedy; the alternative is far worse.

Tragedy, for Williams, concerns what is 'utterly unresolved in human experience, what cannot be made sense of'.[416] Tragedy stops easy attempts to impose order or meaning on the world; it chastises all attempts to bring something "good" out of something horrendous and so make it intelligible or (worse) justifiable. Tragedy forces us to face up to a world of uncertainty (distorted by sin) which 'cannot be controlled' (p. 42).

Yet accepting the reality of tragedy in this life is not about saying that human life is 'doomed to "the tragic"' (p. 2). Rather, it is about learning to speak of failure and loss and pain without false consolation. Central then to confronting the tragic inevitabilities of this life is the *representation* of the tragic. In representing it – through drama yes, but also through journalism or indeed *any* telling of tragedy – we learn of how certain ways of living might make tragedy more, or less, inevitable, and we come to see that loss is not 'necessarily the end of meaning or of hope' (p. 156).

For Williams, the representation of tragedy is all about enabling us to see truthfully. Without various representations of suffering and atrocity 'there are things we have less chance of knowing about ourselves and our world'.[417] Such knowledge is what might then enable us to live in ways that can change destiny to avoid tragic fate.

Part of this knowledge concerns the inevitability of conflict in this postlapsarian life. Williams suggests that whilst the 'tragic collision of duties or imperatives' (p. 25) is one thing that can

---

[415] This obviously takes aim at John Milbank's project. It is also directed at Bentley Hart, who is accused of being entirely silent about the 'darkening of a world made by love'. Gerard Loughlin, 'Rhetoric and Rhapsody: A response to David Bentley Hart's "The Beauty of the Infinite"', *New Blackfriars,* 88 (2007), 600-609 (p. 608)
[416] Williams, *Tragic Imagination,* p. 1. Further references to this book in the proceeding section are given in brackets after quotes in the text.
[417] Williams, 'Not Cured', p. 281.

lead to damage, it is in fact the pretence that such conflict can be avoided that may well lead to far more tragic results. Williams writes of Agamemnon (from *The Oresteia)* who 'in his passion to be "good" without cost or shadow' (p. 12) guarantees that he cannot be good at all. An attempt to find an entirely safe course – without risk, without the possibility of things not turning out as one would have hoped – will always bring disaster. There is no obligation without conflict, no entirely safe course, no social order that is unbreakable.

Facing up to this uncertainty, or inherent riskiness in all social life, is part of what Attic (ancient Greek) tragedy is all about, for Williams. We are forced to face up to the actual collisions of duty and inherent dangers found in any social or political order. And as we face them, we are given tools to avoid even greater tragedies that come from refusing to recognise the inevitability of such conflicts.

His more overtly political work echoes these literary-come-theological themes. The law – again following Rose – is there to settle and enforce 'boundary disputes' between first level communities within a 'complex social environment' where goods will inevitably conflict and be contested between groups.[418]

On economics, Williams questions how the exchange of goods has been replaced by a 'virtualized economy of money transactions'[419] in which 'the actual business of time-taking and the limits involved in material labour and scarcity of goods are less involved'.[420] We may seem to have moved a long way from tragedy here, but this essay just quoted as written in the wake of the financial crisis. The implication is clear: the refusal to attend to the fragility and breakable nature of financial institutions; the refusal to contend with risk, as well as the flight from perceived risk, were part and parcel of what led to the financial crash and all the tragedies that ensured.

This more political or social strand of Williams' thought is often overlooked. David Bentley Hart, for example, accuses Williams of suggesting that conflicts can nearly always be seen as arising from misrecognition.[421] But this seems an unfair critique – Williams does work in structural terms, concerned with *institutions* and not just personal relations. At one point, he turns to Gillian Rose's work on Holocaust Piety, repeating her claims that the

---

[418] Rowan Williams, 'Law, Power and Peace', in *Faith in the Public Square,* pp. 49-61 (p. 50).
[419] Rowan Williams, 'Ethics, Economics and Global Justice', p. 214.
[420] *Ibid,* p. 216.
[421] See David Bentley Hart, 'The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan William's *The Tragic Imagination', Modern Theology,* 34 (2018), 220-234 (p. 227).

representation of Auschwitz should never simply lead to the question, could I have done this? Rather, it should raise the question 'of what has happened to *institutions* that permit or enable atrocity' (p. 26).

Of course, Williams is concerned with mutual (mis)recognition as well as the conflicts of the *polis.* And tragic representation helps us face this as well. It can alert us to 'the danger concealed in where and who we think we are' (p. 30) and the possible seeds of destruction we are incubating within ourselves. It can help us to see others as other – as those who cannot be absorbed into my project – and, at the same time, as those we have some responsibility for and are connected to in webs of interdependencies.

To put it another way, tragic representation can alert us to the inevitably tragic implications that comes with 'confusing life with art' (p. 57). We can misrecognise ourselves as unified and complete, as a fixed object outside of the complex web of relations. Dostoevsky's diabolic characters (such as Stavrogin, Pyotr, and Myshkin) mis-cognize themselves in this way, with dangerous and disastrous consequences. Tragic representation helps us see to see ourselves more clearly. It also helps us re-cognise others; to be able to meet other people's pain, not with total silence or paralysis, but with recognition and response (p. 44).

Tragic representation teaches us how certain ways of seeing ourselves and others, and certain ways of viewing institutions, make tragedy more or less likely. Refusing to accept the riskiness, uncertainty or fragility of both our social orders and our sense of selves paradoxically prove to be what leads to, and not away from, tragedy.

Confronting this means there is a kind of tragic sensibility within Williams' work; he sees it as a crucial category to narrate human experience. But this is not the same as giving it some kind of ontological priority within creation. In that sense tragedy is always a privation, a move away from what can and should be, a result of our sinful capacity to build broken institutions and foster distorted ways of seeing self and others.

The connection between tragedy and sin becomes clearer still when turn to Williams' eschatology once again. For tragedy is never final, never the end. For Williams, tragic representation – by its very existence – teaches us that loss is not the final word. Its very existence reveals that there is something more 'on the far side of catastrophe' (p. 16). Being able to speak, or represent, after calamity, is not about cancelling or compensating, or even making coherent meaning out of the tragic past. Rather it simply means there is the ability to

go on, there is a place to stand 'that is not wholly paralysed by the memory of atrocity' (p. 121). For Williams, this does not mean Christianity is anti-tragic, as John Milbank or David Bentley Hart might want to insist, nor does it mean that tragedy is '*the* unsurpassable category of human speech and experience' (p. 127). Instead tragic representation is the expression of the fact that tragedy is not the final word. Wounds are not ignored, 'belittled or cured', but they might be healed; loss can be transformed (p. 157).

Ultimately then Williams is less concerned with arguing for or against a tragic worldview (whatever that might mean) and instead is concerned about the central importance of tragic representation. Such representation categorically refuses a resolution that 'promises to cancel the tragic past' (p. 115). Yet at the same time tragic representation asserts the impossibility of tragedy being the final word. As Brett Gray puts it, agony is 'ultimately rendered as *non*-tragic against an eschatological horizon'.[422] 'Creation's tragedies are not healed by a finalized happy ending, but by creation having *no* ending… Tragedy does not triumph, because there is always more made possible'.[423] That is what tragic representation makes clear.

The possibility of representing the tragic then is a *sign* of the resurrection, a sign that something more is always possible, a sign of that endless end. The hope is not in the representation itself – certainly not for the one whose life in this world has been ended by tragedy – but it is a sign of that hope that tragedy is not, cannot be, the end.

In summary then, tragedy is a crucial category for thinking about human experience. Comic failures – that are an essential part of our creaturely finite existence – can turn into tragedy when they brush with our broken institutions and distorted images of ourselves and others. The inevitable incompatibility of goods turns tragic when it meets human sin.

Central to thinking about tragedy is representing the tragic – narrating it, giving voice to it. This is crucial for two reasons. First, in representing tragedy we seek to limit the scope of actual tragedy. We are faced with the fragility and uncertainty of institutions, the opacity of ourselves, and our misrecognition of others. And as we face such things truthfully, as we accept the risks and uncertainties or all social and political life, we hope to avoid the

---

[422] Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,* p. 127.
[423] *Ibid,* p. 158.

tragedies that can come from attempting to avoid such things. Ironically, it is only in refusing to seek security and safety that tragedy becomes anything other than inevitable.

Second, in representing tragedy we see that tragedy is not the end, it cannot triumph. It is a sign, a simple pointer towards, resurrection hope. The very representation of tragedy shows us that tragedy itself cannot be final, or ontological; it is an aberration.

Summary

To be material creatures means stepping out in uncertainty. It is an essential part of our lives, and specifically, our relational lives. To seek to be responsible for others entails uncertainty, the acceptance of risk; it means inevitable failure, and will – in this broken world – also sometimes lead to tragedy.

Conversely, to refuse to accept and indeed live with such uncertainty is itself fraught with danger, as Williams himself makes clear in his work on tragedy. To seek to avoid the risks of stepping out in engagement with others, and the world, is, paradoxically, a sure way towards not just "failure" but tragedy. In Williams' commentary on Dostoevsky's novels, we see that the diabolic is present precisely in those characters that seek to remove themselves from uncertainty, from stepping out into relational engagement. By contrast, for Dostoevsky (and Williams), finding oneself in and through the other – with all the attendant 'risks and uncertainties of such an adventure'[424] – is the human vocation. Uncertainty is not just intrinsic to our creaturely lives; it is crucial to our moral identities.

Yet, as with the language of difficulty, we cannot speak indiscriminately about uncertainty (or, in Williams' preferred rhetoric, risk). Quite clearly, there are many forms of uncertainty which we should seek to eradicate, most obviously those associated with basic necessities. There is nothing positive about being uncertain of where a next meal is coming from. Or again, being uncertain of how I might be understood, or responded to in engagement with others, is very different from being concerned about whether a spouse might return home from work tonight because of the dangers of their job.

The inevitable risks that come from being uncertain about the future, unable to control others, or the world around us, should not be conflated with the negligent courting of risk. A driver has a responsibility – to self and others – not to drive too fast around blind corners

---

[424] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 243.

on country roads. A mining company has a responsibility to its workers to ensure conditions are as safe as possible. A financial institution should ensure risks are properly hedged.

The inevitable risks of uncertainty should also be contrasted to risks that might be taken due to an over-confident certainty in a controllable world. As we will see in the final chapter of this thesis, in the run up to the financial crash of 2007/8, financial institutions knowingly took on "sub-prime" mortgages because they were oblivious to the inherent uncertainties and complexities within the financial system. Risky mortgages were deemed safe as they were packaged up into Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs), with no attention being paid to the inherent interdependencies and uncontrollable elements within the financial system. Somewhat ironically, institutions unwittingly took significant risks because they underestimated uncertainties, with devastating results.[425]

It is the creaturely inability to be certain, to secure an outcome, to exercise absolute control on others, or the world, that has been in focus throughout this section. It is this uncertainty, and the risks that follow, of which we speak. To be material creatures is to be uncertain of what is to come. It is to be unable to control the future, unable to force the world or others into images of our choosing, unable to say with absolute certainty what will be. We live with such uncertainty, it is central to any meaningful engagement with others, and in the making of our common world. To live with limits is to accept our lack of control, our uncertainty about what lies ahead, and the risks that come with stepping out in engagement with others.

---

[425] See John Kay and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-making for an unknowable future* (London: Bridge Street Press, 2020).

4. Dispossession

4.1 Introduction

This chapter began by positing a "metaphysics of relationality" based on Williams' work. Any notion of being-in-itself was replaced with ideas of being-in-otherness and being-in-movement. This relational logic finds its centre in the life of the Trinity. God in relation, God in movement, in ceaseless "deflections of desire". In God this relationality is entirely non-competitive. God does not get out of the way for God. There is no negotiation required, no conflicting desires to navigate.

The relational logic then moves outward, beyond the life of God, to the relationship of creature and creator. Creation stands already and always in relation, rooted in the non-aliud. Here too, this essential relationality remains entirely non-competitive. We see this revealed in Christ in whom there is no competition for space of agency. More God does not mean less human.

It is when we turn to consider how this essential relationality of all things unfolds in human relations that we move from a non-competitive to a competitive paradigm. Creaturely relations necessarily include competing desires, the use of goods that must be shared, the negotiation of different perspectives. Our relationality is fundamentally constrained by the competitive limitations of temporal and spatial finitude.

These competitive constraints manifest in difficulty and risk, as we negotiate goods with other people, as we take one path and let another fall away. As such, I argued that difficulty and risk are both essential to our material finitude. They are not the product of sin; they are gifts of creation. The difficult work of negotiating between incompatible goods is a fundamental aspect of material creaturely life. Such negotiation must however be distinguished from a sacrificial economy in which one person's good only comes at another person's loss. Williams helps distinguish those fundamentally competitive limits from their oft tragic repercussions in world of distorted desire.

Yet in emphasising difficulty Williams needs to clarify the kind of difficulty that is illuminative (and so connected to our finitude), from the kind that is purgative, or indeed even destructive. And in emphasising risk Williams needs to distinguish between failure which is intrinsic to our finitude from tragedy.

As those bounded and constrained, we are also always in relation. And as those who relate, we are always navigating difficulty and risk. These are the three basic proposals of this chapter, that come out of Williams' work, and which help us learn to live with limits.

In Williams' own work, all three of these basic proposals are tied up with the language of dispossession. Yet even the casual reader of this thesis will be aware that such language has hardly appeared at all in the above. As noted in the introduction, this has been entirely intentional, for I wanted to see if the claims Williams was making about relationality, difficulty, and risk, could be made without recourse to this semantic field. Although for Williams these three propositions are intrinsically linked to such rhetoric, I have purposefully divorced them, because – as will become clear – I am deeply uneasy about such language.

The hope is that those familiar with Williams' work will find in the above a reading of him that is both easily recognisable and coherent - even without the language of dispossession and its corollaries. If this is so, it suggests that such language is *not* essential to the key claims Williams is making about 'how it is with the universe' (or at least not essential to the way I have parsed him).

The language of dispossession (and its corollaries, which I will expound below) can be discarded without rupturing the major threads of Williams' work. This, at least, is my final proposition. The rest of this section will seek to make a case for dispensing with such rhetoric, arguing that doing so will in fact better support what Williams wants to say about relationality, difficulty, and risk (or uncertainty).

Before making such a case though, the semantic field I am trying to explore needs to be better mapped out. Dispossession (or self-dispossession) seems to be a favoured term of Williams for the last thirty or so years. The term does not seem to appear in his earliest writing, but certainly by the beginning of the 1990s it is fairly well established.[426] It is used alongside a range of other terms, which all appear to be doing the same kind of work, and all of which are rooted in the kenosis of Christ.[427]

For Williams, thinking through Christ's kenosis is not about trying to understand how God and humanity might fit together in Jesus (which would be to entirely misconceive the non-

---

[426] This may well have been influenced by his reading of Hegel. See 'Between Politics and Metaphysics' [1991].

[427] See, for example, Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', p. 161; Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 56.

competitive relation between the human and divine). Rather, for Williams, kenosis is about 'what the incarnate does for us'[428] and therefore more generally about the human vocation. In Christ's kenosis we see the 'realization in humanity of a divine mode or style of existing'.[429] Hence, to live well is to imitate this kenosis. Such a kenosis – for Williams – entails what has been expounded above: a metaphysics of relationality and an emphasis on difficulty and risk. Hence, the basis of the argument that we can drop the rhetoric of dispossession without losing the substance of Williams' thought.

The semantic field Williams draws upon grows from these kenotic roots. Apart from (self)dispossession, other favoured terms of Williams include self-emptying,[430] displacement,[431] and self-forgetfulness.[432] The broad semantic field is used relatively loosely by Williams to refer to a range of substantially different relations. He uses the terms in reference to God's own life, the act of God in Christ, the fulfilment of the human vocation, and the process of purgation. It is the use of the terms across these broad range of contexts that creates many of the issues. To such problems we now turn. As we explore them we will find ourselves inexorably drawn, once again, into questions around competition, sin and finitude, this time through the lens of teleology.

4.2 Dispossession in the Trinity

Criticisms of Williams' Trinitarian theology are not new. Matheson Russell suggests that several critiques coalesce around this theme, and Russell portrays Williams' writings in this area as 'methodologically incoherent and sociologically misapplied'![433] I would want to narrow the charge to apply simply to his use of the *lexicon* of dispossession, and in so doing rescue the substance of his trinitarian theology from such critique.

Williams consciously and deliberately writes the historical *kenosis* of Christ into the immanent relations of the persons of the Trinity. The argument is made succinctly in his essay in honour of Donald Mackinnon, 'Trinity and Ontology'. Kenosis, Williams argues is the 'common form of Jesus' earthly life… and the life of God'.[434] If this is how God is

---

[428] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 163.
[429] *Ibid,* p. 108.
[430] *Ibid,* p. 109.
[431] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', p. 129.
[432] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 51.
[433] Russell, 'Introduction', p. xv.
[434] Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', p. 161. Further references to this article in the proceeding paragraphs are given in brackets in the text.

historically in the person of Jesus – so the argument goes – we are forced to ask the question of what this means for how God simply *is*. We are forced to think of some kind of distance or kenosis in God which grounds and makes possible the life of Jesus. We have no other concrete language for the unity of God save the story of Jesus, a story of 'risk and consummation' (p. 159), in which the cry of dereliction is coupled with the resurrection and ascension. Thus, for Williams, 'the abiding importance of the language of self-emptying' (p. 161) is made clear not only for Christ's historical life, but for the very life of the eternal Trinity.

The argument does not stop there though, it moves (in Russell's words) from the "methodological" to the "sociological". Williams moves to connect kenosis in the Trinity with our understanding of tragedy. It is, he argues, only the idea of distance or kenosis in God's own life which stops our ideas of God collapsing into a totalising unity at the end of history (p. 162). If God were regarded as the unifying principle that brings all things together at the end, then there could be no tragedy because the contingencies of history would have to be swept up into the necessities of the end, closure, and completion of all things. There would be no space left for that which defies meaning and cannot be cured. It is only the ongoing distance in God that allows the tragedies of our contingent lives to remain as such – they may be healed, but not brought to some neat and tidy resolution where all is cured, and all is made sense of. For Williams then, it is only the internal kenosis of God's own life that enables an end without end, the possibility of healing without the utterly immoral evasion or erasure of tragedy.

Similar arguments are made elsewhere, and virtually all of them seamlessly connect this idea of divine dispossession with the human vocation. Williams writes of the theological image of Christ as wounded and restored and which imagines a 'mythic projection of loss into the divine'.[435] Such speculative thinking clarifies – for Williams' – God's own life as unconstrained giving, as 'self-dispossession',[436] as well as our own vocation as dispossession.

Or again, the deflections of desire within the Trinity are described as the 'self-displacing love of the Trinity'.[437] To come to know ourselves means being caught up in the same movement

---

[435] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination,* p. 158.
[436] *Ibid.*
[437] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', p. 129.

of displacement.[438] Or again, God is 'naturally self-dispossessing',[439] and we echo such dispossession through our own 'penitent irony about the misapprehensions of the life and speech'[440] which does not seek to hold on to our righteousness but can give ourselves for the sake of others without anxiety about our own successful performances. Or again, our vocation is to be caught up in the 'self-abandoning' love of the Son for the Father.[441] Or again, the 'eternal kenosis of the Word' […] opens the way for our finite and historical kenosis towards the Father'.[442]

The language is pervasive. Consistently Williams roots his trinitarian reflections in the life of Jesus, and then argues that the shape of the divine life is the model for the shape of our lives. He moves "up" from Christ to the life of God, and "down" from the life of God to a vision of the human good. There is indeed something awry here in both directions ('methodologically' and 'sociologically' to use the terms from Russel's essay). The problems with making the imitation of divine dispossession the human vocation will be explored in the next section. Here, we focus on the issues with writing Christ's kenosis into the heart of the Trinity.

Williams quite rightly wants to connect the life of Jesus to the life of the Trinity. Following Rahner's dictum (that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity), Williams argues that if kenosis is the form of Christ's life it *must* also be the ground of the life of God. But Rahner's dictum was never designed to ignore the difference of sin or of finitude. The life of God in Jesus is refracted through a finite life in a world of sin. Williams thus appears to draw too straight a line between the kenosis of Christ and the life of the immanent Trinity.

To put it another way, he seems to know too much about the inner workings of God. His trinitarianism can be contrasted to Karen Kilby's more radical apophasis which suggests that the technical language of trinitarian theology that has been developed over the centuries is 'no more than technical ways of articulating our inability to know'[443] anything at all *about* the immanent life of God. What matters is contemplation, or incorporation: our worship of the

---

[438] *Ibid.*
[439] Williams 'Interiority and Epiphany', p. 256.
[440] *Ibid,* p. 258.
[441] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 107.
[442] *Ibid,* p. 106.
[443] Karen Kilby, 'Is an apophatic trinitarianism possible?', in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology,* pp.31-44 (p. 33).

Father through the Spirit in the Son.[444] What it might *mean* that God is three in one is not the concern. Indeed, for Kilby, apophatic trinitarianism means we must resist embarking on such a (tempting) struggle for understanding. Such intellectual restraint is regarded by Kilby as a moral issue – it guards against idolatry and against hubris.[445]

Simply put, Williams says too much. It is one thing to speak in general terms of love or relationality within God's self. It is another to parse this in terms of dispossession or displacement or kenosis. Such terms are both unnecessary and concordantly meaningless.

First, they are unnecessary. What seems most crucial for Williams in his understanding of the immanent Trinity is the movement of love, from one to another, in ceaseless 'deflections of desire'. The essence of the Godhead is the 'pattern of indwelling'[446] and not some unified nature behind the three. The life of God is in this movement of one to another, not in the simple return of a closed dyad, but in the deflections of love. This is what we gesture towards when we speak of three in one. And it is this movement into which we are *incorporated*: we 'share the "deflection" of the Son's desire towards the Father's excess of love: we are taken into the movement of the Spirit'.[447]

So far so fair. Such an image is rooted in Christology; it affirms that God *is* love. We can speak of difference within the Godhead, and the relationality of God. But it is not at all clear what the language of displacement or dispossession adds to this movement of love within God's own life.

The same point can be made from his work on the Trinity and tragedy. Summarising his thoughts in the essay (referenced above) 'Trinity and Ontology', Williams speaks of the 'close link in this scheme between the evasion of the tragic and the denial of the relational character of God'.[448] Absolutely! He does not, noticeably, point to the close link between the evasion of the tragic and the kenosis of God. What matters in this schema - to ensure that the tragic realities of our fallen contingency are not swept up into the necessities of narratival neatness - is that there is no closure, no final ending or resting point at which all

---

[444] *Ibid,* p. 42.
[445] *Ibid,* p. 43.
[446] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', p. 118.
[447] *Ibid,* p. 119.
[448] Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', p. 162.

stories find their resolution. As Williams himself points out – it is the *relational* character of God, not the pattern of that relation as dispossession, that is crucial here.

If unnecessary, the terminology also appears meaningless. To dispossess means to deprive someone of something that is (rightfully) theirs. To displace means to move something from its (rightful) place. How could such language – or indeed notions of "emptying" – have meaningful content for the immanent Trinity? At best, these metaphors fail to do any palpable work in this context. At worst, they produce the kind of dangerous connotations that we saw Linn Tonstad attack so vociferously in the previous chapter.

Ultimately, they assert unwanted and unwarranted notions of competition into the heart of the divine life. The relational life of eternal love does not need to get out of the way to make space for difference. God is neither material nor finite, and so the language of dispossession implies an entirely inappropriate competitive logic. As already noted above (and Williams would want to affirm) there is no competition within the divine life, just as there is no competition between creature and creator.

4.3 Dispossession as Human Vocation

Making such language the cornerstone of the human vocation is more problematic still. To do so, Williams, naturally begins with the life of Christ, and argues for our kenosis in imitation of his. So, we begin this section by thinking a little more about what Williams means by the kenosis of Christ. For, of course, we cannot avoid ideas of self-emptying, kenosis, displacement or dispossession when speaking of the life of Christ. The apostle Paul pushes such language upon us. The kenosis in Paul's famous Christic hymn can be read in two ways: either as referring to a divine kenosis of the second person of the Trinity or as an ethical stance taken up by Jesus of Nazareth. Either way, we cannot – and indeed should not – seek to somehow "get around" the kenosis of Christ.

Following Kathryn Tanner, I would take the first route.[449] Williams (like Coakley) takes the second route, seeing Christ's kenosis as a description of his way of life. For him, kenosis describes Christ's action within the world, his way of self-giving and self-sacrificial love even unto death. Christ's kenosis, Williams writes, is not 'a collision between divine action and human action'.[450] Instead Christ's kenosis refers to 'a certain mode of finite life (self-sacrifice,

---

[449] See Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity,* 17-20

[450] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 56. Further references to this article in the proceeding paragraphs are given in brackets in the text.

other-directed love) [that] is so attuned to the eternal mode of divine action that it becomes the occasion and vehicle of that infinite agency within the finite world' (p. 56). For him Christ's kenosis is 'emphatically about spiritual and ethical issues rather than awkward metaphysical adjustments' (p. 156). It is a question of 'what the incarnate does for us, not about the mechanics of incarnation' (p. 163).

If that is what it refers to, what it *means* – in Williams' work – is an existence radically and exhaustively *for* the other, characterised by a consistent "availability" for the other without defence, 'reservation or restriction' (p. 11). In Christ, we see 'the consistent refusal of a place to defend' (p. 216). With no need to keep anything for himself, we see in Christ entirely other-directed love. He displays a radical 'self-dispossession' (p. 156) which mirrors the 'self-displacing' (p. 197) divine life that has no territory to defend. His life is one of 'self-abandonment' (p. 195) which never seeks to implement his will as rival to another's. Christ's life of kenosis entails living without defence, without rivalry, and without particular interest.

In short, for Williams, the kenosis of Christ is his undefended life given for others. If, as Williams asserts, Christ's kenosis is to do with his human life and not with the metaphysics of the incarnation, then the assumption obviously follows that this is also the kind of life to which we are called. As was explored in part one of this chapter, the filial life of Christ – now finally being parsed in the kenotic vocabulary Williams works with so much – is also the life into which we are called. 'Our alignment with his humanity by incorporation into his sacramental Body makes possible our own *kenosis* and *ekstasis,* our self-emptying and self-transcending in love' (p. 106).

As imitators of Christ then we are called to lives that are undefended, free 'from anxiety about identity and safety'.[451] We too are meant, not only to be engaged in the 'risky business'[452] of being attentive and present to others in their radical difference, not only to learn to live without controlling others or the world around us, but to live lives of utter 'defencelessness'[453] which imitate the kenosis of Christ.

Such an emptying – in Jesus and in us – is seen as 'an entirely intelligible translation into human narrative and finite action of the undefended act of God who cannot lose or lessen what is proper to divine life' (p. 11). Yet, as we saw in the previous section, it is not entirely

---

[451] Williams, *Being Disciples,* p. 40.
[452] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 87.
[453] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 232.

clear that Williams has properly contended with the difference that either sin or finitude might make to the undefended act of God. Can we think of the action of this human agent Jesus (no matter if the subject is the Word of God) as living beyond defence, rivalry and interest, within a finite and fallen creation? Can we imagine the human vocation simply in terms of availability or as an undefended life?

The narrative of Christ's life suggests not. Time and again we see Jesus withdraw from the crowds. He sought time to pray, time to rest, time to eat in good company. Whilst he was continually discovered even when trying to be alone, and always 'had compassion on the crowds', the Gospel accounts present Jesus as wanting to "defend" time and space from the relentless demands of his itinerant ministry. He was *not* always available. Just as importantly, in John's Gospel, Jesus "defends" himself from being made king by force, slipping off through the crowds. His absolute orientation towards others, his being-for-others, does not preclude the human necessity to "defend" space and time to rest and recoup. Such "self-care" (to acquiesce in such modern jargon) requires that some form of boundary is protected; this is a pre-requisite for being-for-the-other. For without it there may be no "being" to be for others at all.

Saying this is not to deny all that was said in part 1 of this chapter: that being is found in movement and in otherness. As Williams says (building on Bonhoeffer) Christ's very being is a 'being for, a being-in-solidarity'.[454] Yet however much the boundary between self and other is made porous it does not – within the constraints of finitude at least – entirely disappear. There is some "self" that exists and is other to others, and thus there is also some boundary to maintain.

What we see in Jesus' life is that the decision to live without defence does in fact lead to the annihilation of the self – to death. The "defencelessness" in the run up to the crucifixion should be seen as a purposeful shift in Jesus' ministry. He 'set his face to go to Jerusalem'[455] and turned to face his death without anxiety and without defence. His way of being for others shifts. No longer does he "defend" some space and time, to be there for others. Instead, his being for others entails giving up his being altogether.

In an even further departure from Williams' construal, Jesus' complete lack of defence in this final week goes hand in hand with presenting himself *as a rival* to the religious systems of

---

[454] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 209.
[455] Luke 9.51 (NRSV)

the pharisees, and *with a particular interest* that stands opposed to the religiosity of the day. He upturns the tables of the money changers in the Temple and speaks of re-building the Temple in three days. He appears *for* those being taken advantage of by those who control the temple coinage, and specifically *against* those who are turning God's house into a den of robbers. He presents himself, his own body, as a "rival" temple to the Temple system of the day. This new temple may indeed be a kingdom without rivalry and without interest, yet within the fallen and finite creation it appears in Jerusalem in the first century AD as a rival and a particular interest.

If there is reason to query the idea of Jesus living without defence, then we must also say that defencelessness is not desirable for any finite and bodily creature either. Whilst there is nothing in the Word of God that can be lost or lessened, nothing to be defended, displaced, or disposed of, the life of Jesus is vulnerable to the same kind of loss as any other human life. What is proper to humanity *can* be lost or lessened. This is surely what makes tragedy a possibility – the unintelligible loss of our humanity through pain, or trauma or unimaginable difficulty. Part of the work of tragic representation is to make us alert to these losses of our humanity and the ways in which we might *defend* against them.

The problem in Williams' schema then is not the call to imitate Christ, but rather not properly contending with the difference sin or finitude makes to the undefended act of God in the person of Jesus. We *can* properly speak of defence, rivalry and interest in the life of Jesus, and so also in our lives as well.

Our finitude means that we will always have a boundary to defend. It may be that we imagine the kingdom in such a way that such defences are never needed, but this does not preclude their existence nor equate to a call to do without them. We protect – in some way – the space and time we find ourselves in so that we might continue to be a being for others. That, at least, appears to be the reality of routine ethical life, the backdrop to the everyday acceptance of responsibility for and solidarity with others (again to draw on Bonhoeffer's terminology). Such routine responsibility and solidarity should be training in the *ultima ratio*, when the social order itself undermines the 'fabric of solidarity'[456] and being for others might well entail the giving up of being at all. In such circumstances there might indeed be a call or vocation to live entirely without defence, accepting the inevitability of

---

[456] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 211.

martyrdom. Such a shift from the routine to the *ultima* seems to parallel the shift in Jesus' own ministry as he turned to face Jerusalem without defence.

All of this goes to show just how fraught it is to think about human vocation in terms of the imitation of Christ's kenosis. It seems intuitive – as Williams does – to couple kenotic motifs with ideas of living without defence. For Williams the two seem to be synonymous. But if this is so then we would do better to think about Christ's kenosis specifically in relation to his passion, and not to his life. Such a demarcation is difficult as Christ's passion is the inexorable result of his ministry within the fallen world, yet some form of division is clear both in the movement of the Gospel narratives and in liturgical tradition; there is a shift in which Christ clearly allows the events of Holy Week to unfold – he lives without defence.

Such a rendering of Christ's kenosis makes it imitable only at that point of *ultima ratio*. We could – in such a context – speak about self-emptying or self-sacrifice; the costly giving of ourselves, possibly but not necessarily only unto death, for the sake of others. The acceptance of genuine loss, the acute and probably painful emptying of our selves would become one way in which we may be called to imitate Christ, but this kenotic imitation could not be regarded as the central characteristic of the human vocation.

To put it differently, the imitation of Christ could be described as self-gift, as other-directed love, as finding self in and through responsibility and solidarity for others, as being for others. Such loving usually takes place within the ordinary routines of creaturely life. But sometimes the circumstances mean that such being for others demands something that can only be described as kenotic.

What I am suggesting here is similar to what Karen Kilby's suggests as she attempts to disentangle the messy connection between love and suffering in Christian history. Kilby tentatively wonders whether we could read the story of the cross and all those who have died in the pursuit of social justice as a story about *indifference* towards death or suffering or loss. In such stories we see the circumstances of the time turn one's being-for-others into something kenotic. They simply act out of love, without regard to whether such action will lead to loss or gain. [457]

---

[457] Karen Kilby, 'Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the status of suffering in Christian theology' in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology,* pp. 121-138 (p. 136).

That would be one option that preserves some connection between Christ's kenosis and the human vocation. It renders Christ's kenosis and our (possible) kenosis in the ethical and spiritual terms Williams desires, without seeing kenotic motifs as in any sense central to Christ's being for others, or our call to imitate it.

Alternatively, we could "side" with Cyril and the main patristic strands and suggest that we would do better to think of Christ's kenosis as the act of incarnation, the gift of Christ which is inimitable by God's creatures. This is the route taken by Kilby and Tanner. Given the somewhat tortured account above we may well think this the wiser road. At the very least, the section has suggested that the human vocation to filial existence, to Christic imitation, cannot be parsed *tout court* as kenosis or dispossession.

As finite creatures we do have boundaries that must in some sense be kept in place, lest there is no self to be there for others. To let go of all such boundaries is to move from the ordinary to the *ultima.* And if we moving from the routine ethical to the *ultima* then we are moving from a consideration of our finitude to a consideration of sin. Our finitude means we have boundaries that need to be maintained; our broken world means we may have to dispense of them as we empty ourselves out for others, even to death.

4.4 Dispossession and Sin

The previous section has suggested that if we are to think of kenotic motifs as a way of thinking about ethics, and not just as a description of the one-time act of God in Christ, then we would do well to think about our kenosis as a *possibility* that love might demand in *extremis* rather than as the heart and substance of ethical living.

In doing so we began to consider the connection between dispossession and sin. This can be thought about in two ways. In the above section, in thinking about the possibility of *kenosis* in times of crisis, we are thinking about "fighting" injustice or oppression or acute suffering. We are thinking about the need to empty ourselves in the face of a broken world. We can also think about the connection between dispossession and sin within each one of us. Dispossession and its corollaries would then describe the ongoing task of purgation.

Some of Williams' own use of the semantic field point in this direction. We are called to the dispossession *of* something. We are to 'dispossess or displace the lazy or domineering or

over-ambitious ego'.[458] We are to employ a strategy of dispossession, to disrupt our 'accustomed ways of mastering our environment'.[459] We need to be 'dispossessed of control';[460] learning to see the world around us as a collaborative project and not as a fight to win in which my own ego becomes the centre of gravity for all that is around me.

There is a consistent thread throughout William's work which thus ties the task of dispossession to the purgative work of learning to inhabit the world without trying to control it. We dispossess – we let go of – our need for our ego to be at the centre. We let go of the need to control everything and everyone around us; the need to *possess* what is around us and bring into our orbit. We seek to give up our possession of people and things, our illusions and attempts to control what is around us, our desire for a perfect performance of complete self-mastery. We are on a purgative journey of dispossession.

But, if this is the case, then any parallel between Christ's dispossession and ours seems to disappear. Our dispossession is about the purgation of sin, which cannot therefore be an imitation of Christ's dispossession. Christ's dispossession is not about his giving up his desire to be a possessor or to control; it categorically cannot be about his giving up of an "ego".

On this account there could then be no direct parallel between Christ's kenosis and our self-emptying. Christ empties himself 'out of love for us',[461] and we 'in return, empty ourselves [pushing away] the selfish desires'.[462] The two types of emptying cannot be the same. Christ's kenosis might refer to undefended living (as Williams suggests), or the passion (as the ultimate response to a broken world), or the incarnation, but not sinful inner desires. Our kenosis is about our purgation and transformation into the likeness of Christ, who – in being God – has never sought to control, or possess, but rather whose very being is found in giving life away.

There is every reason to use the rhetoric of dispossession in reference to purgation. There is something innately competitive going on here as we seek to push aside egotistical desire and let love of neighbour take centre stage. But if the primary reference point for

---

[458] Williams, *Edge of Words,* p. 153.
[459] Williams, 'Theological Integrity', p. 11.
[460] Williams, 'Between politics and metaphysics', p. 57.
[461] Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 67.
[462] *Ibid.*

dispossession is our own sin it cannot be a good way of talking about the substance and goal of the ethical life, nor the life of Christ, nor the life of the immanent trinity.

4.5 Without Dispossession

Dispossession may intelligibly refer to letting go of sinful habits and ways of thinking. Dispossession may also refer to a distinct call to self-abandonment even unto death, in the face of this broken world. Dispossession may also refer to the incarnation. Such language cannot however intelligibly refer to God's being, or the human vocation understood as filial existence. Doing so muddles the distinctions between sin, finitude and the infinite life of God in deeply unhelpful ways.

To use the rhetoric of dispossession in relation to the divine life puts a competitive logic into the very heart of the trinity. The implication is that one person displaces, or pushes aside, another.

To use the rhetoric in reference to the life of Jesus of Nazareth falls into the opposite trap. It attempts to insert a non-competitive logic into the fundamentally competitive limitations of space and time. Jesus does not and cannot live entirely undefended through the course of his ministry: he protects time and space for friendship and for solitude. As finite creatures we have boundaries which cannot be got rid of without the erasure of the self. Within the strictures of finitude, to be entirely undefended (and so entirely unbounded) is to disappear.

The rhetoric is thus inappropriate as a way of thinking about the divine life or the human vocation. It implies competition within the infinite, and conversely the possibility of an entirely non-competitive paradigm within the finite.

Yet – as we found in conversation with Coakley – the language still holds significance in relation to sin. We might think of those times in which the routine ethical gives way to the *ultima;* where resistance to oppressions leads to self-emptying. In this way we imitate the passion of Christ. Or we might think of the internal work of purgation, in which we seek to be dispossessed of our sinful ego.

Dispossession cannot then be the catch-all term that Williams seeks to describe the life of God, the human vocation, and the fight against sin (both within and without). Using it this way creates confusions around sin and finitude, competition and non-competition, and as such it is deeply unhelpful.

Other semantic fields need to be turned to. And there are plenty of other options within Williams' own work, which can quite comfortably be used in reference to the life of God and the human vocation without creating confusions around the infinite, the finite and sin.

We might think of ecstasy or *ekstasis,*[463] reception and response,[464] or self-transcendence.[465] Taking a lead from Hegel he talks of the 'self's being-in-the-other',[466] and in conversation with Rose he speaks of finding our 'identity in otherness'.[467] Williams implies that such terms directly parallel the language of dispossession, displacement, kenosis and so on, but the connotations are vastly different, and these sets of terms need to form distinct semantic fields.

Williams' work offers a picture of the life of God and the human vocation – grounded both in Christology and the nature of language – in terms of relationality, difficulty, and risk. It has no need for the language of dispossession. Only when we turn to consider sin do we need to think in terms of kenosis.

Conclusion

To end this chapter, we return to the work of Richard Sennett, whose work has been significant for Williams' own thinking,[468] and who provides a helpful metaphor that expresses much of what Williams seems to want to say about the human vocation, without recourse to the problematic ideas of dispossession.

Writing on the politics of co-operation and drawing on his own background as an orchestral musician, Sennett suggests that orchestral rehearsal provides a metaphor for the kind of 'dialogic cooperation'[469] that is at the heart of human flourishing. The musicians turn outwards – not so the ego is eradicated – but rather so that the music of each player blends in with the whole. Attentive listening to those around is crucial. There is the constant 'deference and assertion'[470] of each player where differences are weaved together in beautiful harmonics.

---

[463] Williams, *Dostoevsky,* p. 174; Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 107.
[464] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation,* p. 220
[465] Williams, 'Lossky, the via negativa', p. 13.
[466] Williams, 'Logic and spirit in Hegel', p. 48.
[467] Williams, 'Between politics and metaphysics', p. 73.
[468] See, for example, Williams, *Being Human,* p. 53.
[469] Sennett, *Together,* p. 127.
[470] *Ibid,* p. 15.

In a recent sermon Williams ends with just this image: contrasting the idea of making music together, where none is a possessor or owner, with the constant desire to have and control.[471] Whilst speaking of dispossession moves us away from the distorted desires to own and control, it is the rich metaphor of making music that takes us into the positive realm of thinking through what it might mean to become human, together.

We embark on a journey of dispossession, learning to live without control, without seeking to possess and own and pull everything into our orbit. But dispossession only describes a movement away from sin. So, we move from here. We move away from understanding ourselves as 'self-enclosed and self-sufficient units' to becoming human in '"ecstatic" attentiveness'[472] and 'self-transcending relation'.[473] We learn to make music together. Doing so is difficult, it is risky. This is what it to be human; to be a finite and material creature.

This chapter began by asking what the impact upon our understanding of our relationships to one another might be if we were to properly attend to our spatial and temporal finitude. To do this we stepped back initially to consider the relationality that is written into the heart of existence itself. Such relationality is the essence of the divine life. It is the basis of creaturely life lived in the presence of the *non-aliud.* And it is foundation of our creaturely lives on earth.

But the logics of such relationality are transformed when pressed through the limits of our materiality and temporality. They move from being strictly non-competitive to being constrained by the competitive limitations of creaturely existence. These competitive logics manifest in difficulty and risk. We negotiate conflicting desires and opposing views; we walk down roads that end in failure and cut off alternative routes.

This is what it is to relate as material and finite creatures. We cannot do away with difficulty and risk. We might, however, aim for a world in which we do away with sacrificial logics, with dispossessions, with others' gain only coming through my loss. This must remain our teleological hope, our dream for life here as creatures of the dust.

From here we turn from thinking about relating to one another to thinking about relating to the world beneath our feet. Within the essentially competitive, but not sacrificial,

---

[471] Rowan Williams, 'Evensong Address', at Jesus College Chapel, (online video recording, Facebook, 3 October 2021) <https://fb.watch/8qn1rc_FaZ/> [accessed 4th October 2021].

[472] Mike Higton, 'Editor's Introduction', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. xxi-xxv (p. xxii).

[473] Williams, 'Author's Introduction', p. xiii.

constraints of material finitude, how should we consider our economic life, our home-making with the resources of this earth? It is time to think in economic terms of what it might mean to live with limits.

Chapter 3: Making

1. Foundations

1.1 Introduction

So far, this thesis has sought to attend to the impact of our spatial and temporal material finitude upon our contemplation of God and our relationship to others. Chapter one suggested that, as we are material finite creatures, contemplation (understood as both prayer and theology) was inevitably tied up in issues of power and vulnerability, competition and spatialization, and sexual and gendered symbolics. In navigating our way through these complexities, we circled again and again around the key themes of this thesis: competition, sin and finitude, and teleology. It was argued that our non-competitive relation to the divine becomes paradoxically clearer when the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space, for us creatures, are asserted.

In considering our relationship with others, chapter two argued that certain forms of difficulty and uncertainty are inevitable given the competitive limits of our material and finite existence, and as such should be considered as part of God's good creative order. The rhetoric of "dispossession" was then critiqued for creating confusions around all three of our key themes: notions of dispossession both underemphasise our bounded nature *and* put a sacrificial logic into the heart of the human vocation; the purgative journey is elided with our unitive journey into the divine life; and any sense of end becomes occluded by restless cycles of self-emptying.

This final chapter seeks to ask what impact our material, creaturely, limitations have upon our economic lives. What might it mean to make home together within material limits; what might it mean 'for us to live well within the limits of a finite planet'?[474] It will suggest that the theological focus we have been pursuing throughout this thesis necessitates some form of economic outlook that accepts and works with material limits. As such it will be critical of mainstream neoclassical economic theory, which sees no limits to growth, and align itself more closely with heterodox economic thinking and especially ecological economics.

In this chapter, the three key themes of the thesis coalesce. The limits of our creaturely existence will, once again, be emphasised. Our creaturely limits are not to be overcome, as

---

[474] King Charles III, 'Foreword to the first edition', in Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow,* 2nd edn., (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. xxiii.

if they were somehow sinful or an aberration, but are intrinsic to God's good creation. Such limits mean that a fundamentally competitive logic is written into our economic activity, *not* in the sense that one person's "win" can only ever be another's "loss", but in the more fundamental sense that finitude implies competition: two people cannot eat the same piece of cake. Given the competitive limitations of our homemaking we need a teleology that takes our finitude as basic, that can think of an end beyond ever more consumption. As has been becoming clear throughout this thesis, to think theologically about "living with limits" requires clarity on the fundamentally competitive logics of finitude, the kind of experiences we accept as part of that finitude, and the kind of teleological imagery that might help us live well within material limits.

This chapter is necessarily far more inter-disciplinary than the previous two, engaging with economic theory alongside economic theology. The foundations of this chapter will be dug out along two lines. I will begin with a brief consideration of Devin Singh's work, which seeks to heuristically chart the large and diverse interaction between Christian thought and (what he simply labels) "economy", as a catch-all for everything to do with the economy and the discipline of economics. Using his terms, I will outline the approach to be taken here. I will then attend to some of the broader discussions happening within the fields of both economics and theology that will help us build an economic theology grounded in the limits of the material world.

Having laid such foundations, we can turn to the two major sections of this chapter. The first is an in-depth engagement with the work of Kathryn Tanner. She is one of the few contemporary theologians who has sought to bring economics and economic policy into conversation with major theological concepts. As Singh notes, her 'work has helped to define the field in terms of recent theological reflection on economy'.[475] She has gone beyond asking the basic theological question of what our economic making is *for,* to turn her attention to finding points of 'intersection and intervention'[476] between theology and our modern economic system.

Her economic thinking is found primarily in *Economy of Grace* and in the write-up of her recent Gifford Lectures, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism.* These two books will form the focus of discussion. The former considers how economic policy might reflect the

---

[475] Devin Singh, *Economy and Modern Christian Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), p. 24.
[476] Tanner, *Economy of Grace,* p. 89.

grace of God given to us unconditionally, universally, and non-competitively. Unsurprisingly, she finds herself promoting a form of Keynesianism, but in doing so – I will argue – she pays too little attention to the real limits of the economy. I will be more critical of her later book which self-consciously eschews construction and launches an all-out attack on the current shape of the capitalist system. What I will seek to show in engagement with this text is that problems in her theological substructure – namely her construal of time – lead to problems in her economic outlook.

The more constructive – and in my opinion far more helpful – economic ideas in *Economy of Grace* provides a model for the second major section of this chapter. Here we will venture into the terrains of ecological economics with an in depth look at the 1970s report *Limits to Growth* and its successors. In this sub-field of ecological economics, we find the economic corollary to a theology that seeks to emphasise material limitation.

From here, we will turn to consider what impact the material limits of our home-making might have on what we choose to measure (and so value), and on our financial system. If we are to look to a world beyond growth in material production and consumption (as I will argue we must), then changing both our accounting and financial systems is crucial. In place of a fixation on GDP, we need to pay attention to a variety of measures of living standard and well-being. In place of a limitless economy of debt, in which money makes money, we need a financial system rooted in productive investment. The moves here parallel the theological moves, as they all seek to re-assert the foundational importance of our lives as finite, material, creatures.

In this third chapter we come full circle, for whilst it is where we are ending, it is also where we began. I am not seeking to simply apply a theology of limits to economics, rather – as the introduction made clear – the emphasis on limits that this thesis explores has been thrust upon us by the twin crises of biodiversity and climate. The ecological and economic landscape is forcing theology to reflect on its conception of creaturely flourishing. Whilst there is then a direction of travel in this chapter, from the theological to the economic, it must be remembered that the need for theological clarification around finitude has come about in no small part because of the concerns of the day around how we should make our home together on this earth.

1.2 Foundations: the approach

The inter-disciplinary nature of this chapter requires a short prelude that clarifies the approach taken. Devin Singh helpfully outlines five major approaches of Christian thought towards the economy. The scriptural approach mines the bible for 'insights on economic matters'.[477] The social-scientific approach uses a genealogical or anthropological lens to analyse the relations between religious thought and practice and economic ideas and structures.[478] This is clearly the approach Singh has most sympathy with, as he seeks to explore the 'ongoing mutual influence and impact of theology and economy'.[479] Adopting this approach, Singh has previously written about the way in which economic ideas have structured Christian thought.[480] Whilst this is clearly significant work (for example, he unveils the way in which the ransom theory of the atonement finds legitimacy from economic models of the Roman Empire) a purely genealogical account lacks the tools necessary for the judgement and evaluation of either the economic or theological systems that have impacted one another. The final three approaches: ethical, philosophical, and theological, all attempt to move beyond this to moments of judgement on economic orders based upon prior ethical, philosophical, or theological ideas.[481]

Within this schema, I take a theological approach, working with a particular theological anthropology that seeks to emphasise our material finitude and then thinking through the implications of this for our economic structures. Yet it is worth noting that Singh is very critical of this approach if done in a 'simple and unmediated' way. In his view, there is something deeply imperialistic if Christian thought is used simply to 'analyze, expound, critique, and influence the economy or economic principles'.[482] Even if the economics is shaped by the theological outlook, the economics itself should then pose questions back to the theological substructure.

---

[477] Singh, *Economy and Modern Christian Thought,* p. 10.
[478] *Ibid,* p. 12.
[479] *Ibid,* p. 29.
[480] See Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).
[481] Singh suggests that an ethical approach is characterised by an emphasis 'on establishing a consistent and coherent ethical system to undergird and justify economic interventions', the philosophical approach draws on philosophy and critical theory, and the theological approach connects points of doctrine to economic concerns. See Singh, *Economy and Modern Christian Thought,* pp. 16, 18, 20, respectively.
[482] *Ibid,* p. 28.

Taking Singh's critique of the theological method to heart then, the mutual influence of economy and theology will become visible throughout this chapter. The road is not just one way: ecological economics has a prophetic word to speak to theology about the basic reality of our material limitations, even if theology might have something to say about economics. Indeed, the whole thesis has some of its roots in ecological crises of the day; the conversation goes both ways.

We will thus find cause to question some of Tanner's theological conceptions precisely because of some of the insights of ecological economics. More generally, as the introduction to the thesis makes clear, the whole emphasis on material finitude in this work comes out of a concern to ensure that theology speaks constructively and positively into the current twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, aware that some theological motifs of abundance may in fact undermine our ability to so speak.

1.3 Foundations: Moving Beyond Utility

Beyond Utility: Theological Economics

In order to properly locate our more in-depth consideration of the economic theology of Tanner, and of the economic ideas mentioned above, we turn to attend to some of the broader discussions at the interface between theology and economics. In Singh's categorisation, my focus here is on ethical and theological approaches. What emerges as the touch point – and what is of most interest for us – is a common desire to move beyond a simple focus on utility.

The primary way economic theology has done this is by thinking about teleology (and in doing so it brings us back to one of the core themes of this thesis). Much economic theology asks what the goal of our economic activity is and seeks to ensure it serves something beyond individual maximum utility (i.e the satisfactions of wants). Take recent Social Catholic Teaching: Pope Francis enjoins us that we 'need an economy with goals beyond the narrow focus on growth, that puts human dignity, jobs, ecological regeneration at its core';[483] before him, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic – such a logic 'needs to

---

[483] Pope Francis, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Shuster, 2020), p. 111.

be *directed towards the pursuit of the common good*[484]. In the Anglican tradition, writing in the wake of the Global Financial Crash, Rowan Williams emphasises the need for economics to be focused on wider questions of well-being and purpose.[485] And the late John Hughes, in the aptly titled *The End of Work,* builds an anti-utilitarian thesis which advocates for an aesthetic vision and challenges the claim that 'the entire economic realm of production, exchange and consumption is a neutral realm of necessity independent of moral concerns'.[486] We cannot but ask questions of purpose and orientation. As Hughes makes clear, the theological focus on teleology arises as a challenge to the supposed neutrality of an emphasis on utility, found within neo-classical economics.

This supposed neutrality has also been attacked through historical construction. Kate Blanchard traces the shift from the Political Economics of Adam Smith – which she characterises with the figure of the '*homo sympatheticus*'[487] – to the economics of Frank Knight and the Chicago School which sought to establish economics as an independent discipline, separate from ethics or moral philosophy, a 'science of the form, rather than the content or the criticism, of human wants and want-satisfying behaviours'.[488] What Blanchard seeks to show is that (as Friedman admits) neoclassical 'economic theory is one *ethical* tradition'.[489] It cannot be divorced from ethics but rather has its own value system. In this neo-classical tradition, any evaluation between different desires is unethical, and morality is seen purely in terms of the satisfaction of individual wants (whatever they may be). In a similar vein to Blanchard's critique, Stephen Long argues that 'economics refuses its own historical setting'[490] when it assumes its own account of the rational maximization of utility is objective and value free.

Another way of undermining the false divide between value, purpose, and economics has been to unveil the importance of ethics as a foundation stone for any market to function properly. Philip Bond argues that 'a moral economy, rather than inhibiting the free market is

---

[484] Benedict XVI, *caritas in veritate,* <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html> [accessed 16/01/2023] (para. 36).

[485] Rowan Williams 'Foreword', in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice,* ed. by Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. x-xiii (p. xii).

[486] John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 229.

[487] Kathryn D. Blanchard, *The Protestant Ethic or the Spirit of Capitalism: Christians, Freedom, and Free Markets* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010)*,* p. xv.

[488] *Ibid,* p. xv.

[489] *Ibid,* p. xvi.

[490] D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 2.

actually its precondition'[491] Contracts rely on mutuality and trust. Similarly, in his three-part

magnum opus *Credit and Faith,* Philip Goodchild states simply that 'mutual trust is the

principal source of wealth'.[492] In his words, mutual obligations - specifically an 'ordering of

credit and trust by means of debt'[493] – is the basis of modern economic life. Indeed, it was

the total breakdown of trust which led to the financial crash of 2007/8.[494] The lack of trust

in the system meant there was no credit, no liquidity, and so the whole system dried up –

money simply stopped moving. The economy is based on trust, and so cannot just be

thought about in terms of maximisation of utility. It requires morals, values, ethics, and some

kind of purpose to hold it together.

In various ways then economic theology has sought to re-affirm a teleological orientation. It

has stepped back and asked the question, what is our economic activity *for*? It has gone on

the offensive, showing that an emphasis on utility is itself a value judgement, an ethical

tradition. It has shown that morals and markets cannot be divorced, that mutual trust borne

out of shared values is essential.

<u>Beyond Utility: Heterodox Economics</u>

Strikingly, the same themes can be seen in a growing corpus of work *within* the discipline of

economics. By way of example, Diane Coyle (who sits on the edge of mainstream

neoclassical economic thinking) argues for the need to re-discover Political Economy[495] and

for economists to think about the 'health of society';[496] about 'values and politics'.[497]

Similarly, Mark Carney has recently written of the need for value within markets to be

based upon the values of society.[498] One might also think of the (much older) capability

approach of Amartya Sen, which re-defined development in terms of 5 types of freedom;[499]

or (more recently), of the work of Kate Raworth, who asks what might happen 'if we

---

[491] Philip Blond, 'There is no wealth but life', in *Crisis and Recovery,* pp. 77-99 (p. 87).

[492] Philip Goodchild, *Economic Theology: Credit and Faith II* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020)*,* p. 2.

[493] *Ibid,* p. 6.

[494] *Ibid,* p. 31.

[495] Diane Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is, and What It Should Be* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 70.

[496] *Ibid,* p. 166.

[497] *Ibid,* p. 167.

[498] Mark Carney, *Value(s): Building a Better World for All* (London: William Collins, 2021).

[499] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

started economics not with its long-established theories, but with humanity's long term goals'.[500]

Such thinking has been born out in minor curriculum reform (certainly on this side of the Atlantic) which has re-emphasised the genealogy of economic thinking.[501] There has also been some renewed emphasis[502] on ethics in recent seminal works, both in terms of the ethical requirements for properly functioning markets,[503] and in terms of the way in which markets can erode values.[504]

Whilst the above shows these themes arising through a broad cross section of the discipline, it is in the so-called "heterodox" streams that we see the clearest attacks on that 'all-knowing agent attempting to maximise some utility function'.[505] The unrealistic figure of *homo economicus* still does dominate mainstream economic theory,[506] and so the more substantial attacks on utility have come from this "heterodox" tradition.[507] This is not surprising given that, as Marc Lavoie suggests, the one thing that unites the diverse heterodox field is an attempt to find a 'more realistic description of the world'[508] than the theoretical neo-classical framework provides.[509]

---

[500] Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 10.

[501] See Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 5.

[502] I say 'renewed' as the importance of an ethical foundation for markets was spoken of at the emergence of the modern discipline. See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of the Nations: The Economics Classic - A Selected edition for the Contemporary Reader,* intro. and ed. by Tom Butler-Bowdon (Chichester: Capstone, 2010), p. 363.

[503] See Carney, *Value(s),* pp. 190--3. See also Laura Nash, *Good Intentions Aside: A Manager's Guide to Resolving Ethical Problems* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1993) who seeks to 'consider the moral foundations on which socially legitimate forms of capitalism rest', p. v. See also, Porter, *On Competition.*.

[504] See Carney, *Value(s),* p. 143, who also appeals to Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Penguin, 2012). The popular *Freakonomics* entirely misses this connection when it claims a simple divide, in which 'morality represents the way we would like the world to work and economics represents how it actually does work'. Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2005), p. 11.

[505] Marc Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics: New Foundations,* 2nd edn. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), p. 15.

[506] See Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 6. Whilst she thinks some critiques of mainstream economics are outdated, she is clear that neo-classical economic theory continues to assume humans are cogs: 'self-interested individuals [...] interacting as independent, calculating agents in defined contexts'. (p. 6).

[507] This surprising language is widely used within the field. The Association of Heterodox Economics holds an annual conference. See <https://www.hetecon.net/ahe-conferences/> [accessed 26th Sept 2022]. The *Cambridge Journal of Economics* states that it was 'founded in the traditions of Marx, Keynes, Kalecki, Joan Robinson and Kaldor, and welcomes contributions from heterodox economics as well as other social science disciplines'. See <https://academic.oup.com/cje> [accessed 26th Sept 2022]. Many texts use the designation without irony. See, for example, *Contemporary Issues in Heterodox Economics: Implications for Theory and Policy Action,* ed. by Simon Mouatt and Arturo Hermann (London: Routledge, 2017).

[508] Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics,* p. xv.

[509] This framework theorises on the basis of rational self-interested choices, full information for market participants, fixed preferences, and the lack of externalities. See Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 123.

This is not to suggest that the simplified models of the neo-classical tradition have no place at all. The neo-classical tradition does *not* think the assumptions behind *homo economicus* describe the world as it really is, but that they enable helpful modelling. In Milton Friedman's famous "as if" essay, he argues that what matters is not whether assumptions are realistic but whether they provide 'sufficiently good approximations for the purpose in hand' and so 'yield[] sufficiently accurate predictions'.[510] In his view, 'Truly important and significant hypotheses will be found to have "assumptions" that are wildly inaccurate descriptive representations of reality'. The reason, he says, is simple: 'A hypothesis is important if it "explains" much by little, that is, if it abstracts the common and crucial elements from the mass of complex and detailed circumstances surrounding the phenomena to be explained and permits valid predictions on the basis of them alone.'[511]

Steve Keen critiques such a methodology, claiming a basic inability within the tradition to 'learn the difference between a simplifying assumption and a fantasy'.[512] Yet whilst this kind of distinction (first articulated in response to Milton by Alan Musgrave) may be helpful, discerning what kind of assumption is being spoken about is more difficult.[513] The incomplete or even fantastical nature of assumptions may still lead to useful insights about the real world.[514]

So, for an example from microeconomics, whilst Keen may rightly highlight the incredible assumptions that lie behind supply and demand curves, he is wrong to suggest that they are therefore useless.[515] Those famous intersecting lines of supply and demand combine the insights of the early classicists (who thought value was determined by the factors of production), with the opposing insights of the marginalists (who suggested value was based on utility), to give a powerful model of a general price mechanism that sheds light on the basics of competitive markets. In the late 19th Century, Alfred Marshall explained value by

---

[510] Milton Friedman, 'The Methodology of Positive Economics', in *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 3-43 (p. 15).
[511] Friedman, 'Methodology', p. 14.
[512] Steve Keen, *The New Economics: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), p. 125.
[513] See Alan Musgrave, '"Unreal Assumptions" in Economic Theory: The F-Twist untwisted', in *Kyklos,* 34 (1981), 377-387, who distinguished between negligibility assumptions, domain assumptions, and heuristic assumptions and argues Friedman confuses them.
[514] See Satoshi Kanazawa, 'In defence of unrealistic assumptions', in *Sociological Theory,* 16 (1997), 193-204.
[515] Keen, *The New Economics,* pp. 125-134. Keen criticises the standard upward sloping supply curve which assumes increased marginal costs, when most firms actually have constant or falling marginal costs. He therefore suggests that the theory of price is therefore simply wrong. Yet a downward sloping supply curve (or indeed any shape supply curve) does not undercut the basic idea of price being set by the interplay of consumer utility and production costs.

bringing these two sides together.[516] It is now simply seen as a truism that in a free market a price of a product is determined by the interplay of supply and demand.

Or again, turning to macroeconomics, we might think of the MONIAC – an analogue computer designed to model Paul Samuelson's idea of Circular Flow (which provides a simplistic illustration of how income flows around the economy). This is a 'handy picture, making visible many key macroeconomic ideas'.[517] It leaves invisible the resources the circuit depends on, and the society that enables it to flow. And yet despite such omissions, it models Keynes' still relevant understanding of how economies can spiral into recession and the necessity of demand stimulus to avoid it.

Notwithstanding such a caveat, the assumption of a mechanistic stable system built around a utility-maximising consumer, opens the neo-classical tradition up to the charge of leaving reality behind. Not for nothing has neo-classical economics been accused of 'physics envy',[518] longing after its 'neat equations and 'deterministic systems'.[519]

Perhaps the biggest issue in the development of the neo-classical tradition was the attempt to underpin macroeconomics with a microeconomic foundation. Pivotal to this approach were Kenneth Arrow and Gerard Debreu, who developed a model of general equilibrium,[520] which began the reign of so-called 'modern macro'.[521] This sought to bring the mechanistic assumptions of a stable system (that had some merit on the micro scale) into the macro world. Simplifying assumptions gave way to fantasy, as the interdependence of individual markets – absolutely crucial to any macro analysis – could not be meaningfully factored in.

The heterodox tradition has thus arisen in an attempt to move beyond this assumption that there is a mechanistic, stable system – in which the utility-maximizing rational consumer is

---

[516] See Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics,* 8th edn. (London: Macmillan, 1920), V.III.

[517] Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 66.

[518] L. Hunter Lovins, 'Growth of what?' in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from* The Limits to Growth – *what did we learn and what's next?* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereria (Exapt Press, 2022), pp. 110-120 (p. 115). Coyle contests this designation of mainstream economics today because of the shifts in thinking that have followed the Great Financial Crash, which take into consideration a dynamic and interdependent system that is not mechanistic. Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 3.

[519] Carney, *Value(s),* p. 180.

[520] See Kenneth Arrow and Geard Debreu, 'Existence of an equilibrium for a competitive economy', *Econometrica,* 22 (1954), 265-290. Equilibrium refers to the theoretical point at which aggregate demand = aggregate supply and so unemployment and inflation are static.

[521] See Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 134.

centre stage – to focus on the rather messier real world of morals, values, and purpose that we inhabit. It has, like theological economics, sought to move beyond utility.

<u>Heterodox economics and theological resonances</u>

In eschewing utilitarian thinking, a number of striking resonances appear between heterodox economics and themes picked up in the previous two chapters.

So, for example Behavioural Economics studies the complex factors that govern individuals' economic decision making, acknowledging that preferences are malleable and will change over time. Context is highly influential, as are individual biases and cognitive and emotional limitations of individuals. The connections between this strand of heterodox economics and Sarah Coakley's work *On Desiring God* are obvious. As Coakley makes abundantly clear, what we desire matters and is malleable. The connections between her work and the criticisms of utility as a value neutral agenda are also not hard to see. Our desires need purging in the divine furnace; the transformation of desire is necessary to create the conditions both for an economic system that is orientated towards just ends and for properly trustworthy markets.

The resonances between heterodox economics and some of the motifs of chapter two are probably more significant, and worth a slightly fuller exploration. Expanding on his central idea that heterodox economics is looking for a more realistic description of the world, Marc Lavoie contrasts the instrumentalism and atomism of orthodox traditions with the realism and holism of heterodox ones.[522] The contrast is illuminative.

First, mechanistic models are replaced by more complex analyses of causation. In the heterodox paradigm a materialist view (that suggests humans respond in predictable ways to the stimuli given to them) gives way to a constructivist account of human agency. This acknowledges the multitude of ways in which meaning and identity are constructed for individuals and communities through time. A constructivist account defies any simple model of cause and effect. At the macro level, this means that that there is some uncertainty and unpredictability, and that 'economic outcomes can become rapidly unhinged from a largely unchanged landscape of resources'.[523] This is what happened during the Great Financial

---

[522] Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics,* pp. 12-23.
[523] Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons, 'Re-constructing International Political Economy: Some conclusions drawn from a crisis' in *Constructing the International Economy,* ed. by Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons (London: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 237-239 (p. 231).

Crash, as a small shift in expectations and confidence brought the entire house of cards down. Reflection on this period by Mervyn King taught him to emphasise our radical uncertainty about the future and so avoid the 'pretence of knowledge.'[524]

Second, in the heterodox paradigm, static systems are replaced with dynamic ones. As already stated, one of the questionable blocks of the neo-classical tradition is the micro (static) foundations used for building macroeconomics.[525] But the latter simply cannot be deduced from the former. For example, whilst derivates are stabilizing for individuals who are less exposed to risk, they are systemically de-stabilising.[526] And so, reflecting on the Financial Crash Gordon Brown admitted that they had 'created a monitoring system that was looking at individual institutions [and so they] didn't understand how risk was spread across the system'.[527] Or again, whilst one person, or indeed one nation, might want to reduce their debt, everybody – or every nation – cannot do it at the same time (as was attempted during the years of austerity) because this simply reduces overall demand and so creates a vicious spiral (as Keynes would have been able to predict).[528]

In place of a static system most heterodox economics emphasises a dynamic system. This relies on three basic (and simple) concepts: stocks and flows, feedback loops, and delay.[529] It is the dynamic interplay of these, as one part of the system affects another, and creates either positive or negative feedbacks, at various point through time, that creates extraordinary complexity. Such an approach makes clear that, whilst equilibrium state is the 'reference state about which everything turns'[530], the economy is *never* actually at a stable point of equilibrium.[531] It is always moving, always interacting.

The close parallels to the themes of chapter 2 are rather striking. The heterodox paradigm that asserts realism over mechanism and is sceptical of certainty, parallels the emphasis in Williams' work on uncertainty and risk. Uncertainty is part of material creaturely life; we cannot get around it. We cannot see it as something "sinful" to overcome. The mechanistic

---

[524] Kay and King, *Radical Uncertainty,* p. 423. They continue, deeply critical of the 'models and bogus quantification which require users to make up things they do not know and could not know' and in doing so create a far more fragile system. (p. 423).
[525] See Keen, *The New Economics,* p. 93.
[526] Lavoie, *Post-Keynesian Economics,* p. 23.
[527] As quoted by Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 147.
[528] Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 9.
[529] See Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 137.
[530] John M. Blatt, *Dynamic Economic Systems: A Post-Keynesian Approach* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983), p. 4.
[531] More technically, Keen shows that in a chaotic, dynamic system (as the real economy actually is) what happens near and far from equilibrium can be very different. See Keen, *The New Economics,* pp. 88-91.

systems of Newtonian physics may be envied (and may even provide some useful insights), but the complexity and interdependence of economic systems and actors mean we must contend with genuine epistemic uncertainty.

Equally, the dynamic and holistic approach parallels the emphasis on relationality at the heart of Williams' work, and the emphasis on difficulty. The emphasis on a complex dynamic system provides the economic corollary to a properly Hegelian methodology, one that refuses the mended middle, and instead focuses on the complex dynamic interaction of many moving parts.

The heterodox paradigm helps us to think through, in economic terms, "how it really is with things" (to pick up Williams' useful phrase from chapter 2). In general terms, this means contending with our basic limitations; with our material and finite creatureliness. It means considering uncertainty, interdependence, and complexity (or difficulty). In doing so, we move beyond an economic paradigm of utility, with its mechanistic understanding of the economy, its unrealistic ideas of rational utility-maximising consumers, and its ethically dubious claims to be uninterested in the shape of our desires.

Instead, we embrace the insights of economic theology and the heterodox economic paradigm that chime so well with the themes of this thesis. In particular, such resonances are found as we think beyond utility, emphasising questions of purpose and desire, of realism and holism.

This forms the foundation of our analysis, but there is still a house (an *oikos*) to build together. It may be worth noting, at this juncture, that the etymological link between a house and an economy is not the only reason to use a metaphor from the built environment. It is all too easy to imagine that we are aiming for some restored Garden of Eden; an un-built paradise of biodiversity into which we harmoniously fit without leaving a footprint on the earth. But the Garden of Eden gives way to the Heavenly City. We are not just part of the eco-system but manipulators of it. The metaphor of "building" reminds us that we cannot reject the built environment in search of some ecological innocence, and that we must instead focus on how we build it.

To build this house requires us to go beyond teleological aspirations, and to think through how our goals might be met. It means not only thinking about the virtue and desire of individual economic actors (which is important, but not in the scope of this piece), but also

about systems, structures and policies. And, as we do that, we must ensure that we take heed of the heterodox economic claims that chime so well with Williams' insights: any attempt to critique and construct must be built on the foundations of realism and holism: of uncertainty, complexity (difficulty) and interdependent dynamic systems (relationality). Only by doing this can we properly attend to our lives as material, finite creatures.

As we do so the major recurring themes of this thesis will come continue to rise up. Already, the teleological, or eschatological, motif has been paramount; the question of ends has been raised even if it has not yet been answered. The chapter will also inevitably circle around the other key questions of this thesis: on sin and finitude, competition and non-competition.

As with previous chapters, we will find significant confusions in these two areas. Our finitude is forgotten; limits to growth are seen as quasi-sinful barriers to overcome rather than God-given limits for creaturely flourishing. Fundamentally competitive aspects of our economic lives are eschewed in search for non-competitive paradigms that echo the divine economy. Such confusions make it harder to properly attend to our material finitude in regard to our "making", our relation to the earth.

2. Theological Economics

2.1 Finance-Dominated Capitalism

To open these themes up, we turn to the critiques and constructions of Kathryn Tanner, as laid out in her theological economics. Having helped define the field of theological reflection on economy, her work provides the initial building blocks for us to work with – to use, re-shape, or discard – in light of the foundations already laid, and the overall task of constructing a theological economics within material limits.

Tanner is a particularly apposite conversation partner here. Not only has she been at the forefront of thinking about economics and theology, she sits within the Anglo-American Episcopal context into which this thesis seeks to speak, and her corpus circles around the overarching concern of this thesis around non-competitive and competitive logics.

As noted in the introduction, her early work *God and Creation* makes a crucial and thoroughgoing case for the non-competitive relationship between God and creatures. She is also committed to the 'fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space'.[532] She thus sets up the paradigms of competition in a way that is thoroughly consonant with this thesis.

Tanner's *Theories of Culture* also has significant resonances with Williams' thinking and lays out an understanding of Christian life that has negotiation at its heart. She draws on postmodernist theory to stress the 'interactive process and negotiation, indeterminacy, fragmentation, conflict and porosity' of every culture.[533] Thinking specifically about Christian culture, she suggests that 'the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at it*'.[534] Christian distinctiveness is not something found on its own island, self-referentially, but 'emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary, processes that construct a distinctive identity for Christian social practices through the distinctive use of cultural materials shared with others'.[535] Here is an identity found through negotiation, even contestation. Although she does not put this in terms of sin and finitude, the resonances with this thesis are obvious; utopias are spurned and the

---

[532] See footnote 1.
[533] Kathryn Tanner *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 38.
[534] *Ibid,* p. 115.
[535] *Ibid.*

essential characteristics of creaturely finite existence – which involve negotiation and forms of difficulty – are valued as part of the development of Christian identity.

Tanner should thus be an ally for this thesis. She makes a strong case for the non-competitive relation to the divine and distinguishes this (at least in principle) from essentially competitive creaturely relations. She argues firmly for the importance of negotiation and mediation in Christian life. Her basic theological stance is clearly in line with the agenda of this project. Yet, we will find that in a number of ways her theological economics is not. It refuses the limits of material creaturely life and forgets the complexities and indeterminacies of culture. The basic alignment between her agenda and this thesis, along with the significant differences appearing within theological economics, makes Tanner an obvious conversation partner at this juncture.

We start with a thorough-going analysis of *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. Whilst this has been reviewed multiple times, there is not yet (to my knowledge) any fuller discussion and critique of this work. We start with this work because it is self-confessedly a book of demolition and not construction. Before having any hope of building an economy orientated towards the common good (however we quite define that) we must tear down the stumbling blocks, which, in her view, includes the whole current edifice. It makes sense then to consider her take on what must be discarded, before thinking about her take on what must be built.

The Spirit of Capitalism

Recognising the multiple forms and spirits of capitalism through time, Tanner takes aim at the *current* form of capitalism which she designates as Finance Dominated or Finance Disciplined (herein FDC). Tanner argues that finance now dominates our economy in several ways. First, finance-generated profit is increasingly dominant. For example, car companies tend to make more money from loaning money to buy cars than from selling them.[536] Profit in the financial sector continues to grow as a percentage of national income.[537]

---

[536] Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism,* p. 11. All further references to this book, in sections 2.1 and 2.2, will come after quotes in the text.
[537] Diane Coyle points out that derivates (as a market of tradable contracts) did not exist in 1970. By 2010 the derivates markets had a nominal value of $1200 trillion. Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 24.

Second, finance is no longer 'directly in service of production elsewhere' (p. 13). Or as Diane Coyle puts it, we 'now have a banking system that no longer exists to service the real economy'.[538] Finance has its origins in service to other sectors of the economy. A loan is needed for a business; a ship needs insuring; a farmer needs to "hedge" against the possibility of a fall in price for their crop. Yet, increasingly, financial instruments – and specifically derivatives – take on a life of their own in such a way that profit generated through them has little connection to the fundamentals of the markets upon which they rely. As Kathryn Blanchard says, 'the horror of today's capitalism it its untethering from material reality'.[539]

This decoupling does not, however, mean that finance becomes insignificant to production; rather finance 'comes to discipline all other forms of economic activity' (p. 19). And this is the third feature of FDC: it disciplines public companies who are forced to pursue a 'relentless drive toward maximum profitability' (p. 20) to increase shareholder value. It means that 'National, state, and municipal governments are also increasingly disciplined by bondholders' (p. 22) as they need to keep creditors happy and interest on the debt low.[540] And, via the disciplining of corporations and governments, individuals are also disciplined as they are subject to ever greater pressures towards efficiency and productivity.

This form of capitalism, Tanner argues, brings with it an attendant Spirit (a set of 'beliefs, values and norms') (p. 9) which in her view is particularly pernicious. Principally, this spirit is so problematic because of the way it distorts and constrains our relationship to time.

Tanner consciously presents this Spirit as an 'ideal type' (p. 10) to unearth its true horror. She explicates it in the following way.

It chains us to the past. Debt becomes 'constrictive rather than expansive' (p. 35) of future possibility. Governments are forced to slash spending because of pressure from their creditors (p. 47). In general terms, Tanner argues that a loan 'takes on the character of an inexorable demand' (p. 35).

---

[538] *Ibid,* p. 28.
[539] Kathryn Blanchard, 'Review: *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism'*, in *Studies in Christian Ethics,* 34 (2021), 574-578 (p. 575).
[540] Such disciplining became unusually apparent with the spike on UK guilts following the budget of Kwasi Kwarteng in September 2022.

Next, the Spirit of FDC requires total commitment. The desire of workers 'are to be brought into complete compliance with finance-dominated corporate interests' (p. 64). Indeed, Tanner argues that over the long-haul, the generic worker begins to imbibe the spirit of the times, seeing their whole lives 'dedicated to the maximally profitable use' (p. 25) of their capacities.

It binds us to an eternal present as the time horizon collapses. For some this means a 'preoccupation with the present emergency' (p. 105) of simply getting by. For companies it means a short-termism in which decisions are made based on quick stock market boosts (p. 112). What comes to matter is not the generation of long term income, but the realization of capital gains through the exploitation of 'transient variations in the price of shares'.[541] For traders, the eternal present means that 'profit becomes a function of speed' (p. 114).

As Keynes saw, financial markets are based on the 'freedom from the constraints imposed by production and the immobility of capital'.[542] Whereas in the world of production and consumption it takes time to make things, transport, and sell things, in the world of finance billions of dollars can be transferred across the world nearly instantaneously based on decisions made by computer algorithms which work far faster than any human ever could. To exemplify: ultra-high frequency trading (meaning intervals of 650 milliseconds or less) has meant that a 'new trans-Atlantic cable has reduced transaction times by 0.006 of a second, an improvement well worth the $300 million investment'.[543]

And finally, the Spirit of FDC collapses the future such that tomorrow becomes the only preoccupation for today (in direct parody of Jesus' words not to worry about tomorrow). The aim is to 'tame the future's capacity to limit choice' (p 154). As Elena Esposito writes, money 'serves to gain time, to delay the moment when one must decide how to use one's resources'.[544]

In sum then, FDC is the current form of capitalism in our world. It is characterised by finance-based profit, by finance no longer being in the service of production, and by the discipline of finance on individuals, corporations and governments. And its spirit – the

---

[541] André Orléan, *The Empire of Value: A New Foundation for Economics,* trans. M. B. DeBevoise (London: MIT Press, 2014), p. 203.
[542] *Ibid,* p. 241.
[543] Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 26.
[544] Elena Esposito, *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011)*,* p. 47.

beliefs, values and norms that come with it – pervert our relationship to the past, present and future.

This is Tanner's claim. In Goodchild's estimation, it is one of 'the most cogent and useful summaries of research on the current era of finance-dominated capitalism'[545] to date. Yet, whilst there is no doubt that her outline of FDC and its impact on our relationship to time does resonate deeply with the experience of many, her analysis does merit some questioning.

Complexifying FDC

Perhaps the most obvious difficulty is Tanner's continual usage of an abstract and idealised type. As already noted, Tanner consciously intends to offer such a type; yet, in working with this heuristic device the precise dynamics found within or between individuals, in companies, and within the broader economic system are often occluded. The discipline that FDC supposedly enforces is far less clear than she makes out; her account of the causal connections between the dominance of finance and the spirit it produces needs to be challenged.

According to Tanner, the spirit of FDC pushes us towards a total commitment to work, and more broadly to work on oneself in pursuit of self-fulfilment. Yet, Tanner's one-dimensional construal of this total commitment means the complexity of reality is missed. Tanner only sees the negative aspects of this cultural shift. Self-involvement and self-investment in work is labelled as 'self-evacuation' (p. 69). Work on oneself (in attempting self-actualisation) is seen in wholly negative terms. Far better, it seems if a job is about temporary behaviour that leaves 'one's person alone – to daydream' (p. 79) or to 'pursue other modes of living' (p. 80) beyond work.

Whilst clearly cultural trends within the business world that applaud and reward employees working until after midnight and clocking 100 hours a week are perverted, Tanner misses some of the positive aspects of this more self-involving trend. Total focus on the task at hand is labelled as self-evacuation by Tanner, but could just as equally be construed as entering into flow, that experience of being wonderfully "lost" in a task.[546]

---

[545] Philip Goodchild, 'Culture and Machine: Reframing Theology and Economics', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 391-402 (p. 393).
[546] See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

Equally, Tanner appears critical of the shift in workplace culture which requires 'greater effort' (p. 40) and which dictates the 'reduction of idle time'.[547] But, is idle time really a positive to celebrate? As du Gay, Durand, and Lordon point out (all of whom Tanner draws upon explicitly) the shift towards a greater sense of self-involvement in the world of work has created a 'paradox'[548] at its heart. The new enterprising, self-regulating, and productive employee (whose sense of self-worth is more intimately connected to their performance at work)[549] is likely to be working both harder and longer, but is also likely to be more satisfied in their work.[550]

Yet, the paradox goes deeper than this, as Lordon's monumental work on desire and capitalism argues. Lordon speaks of the paradox of the 'spectacle of the happily dominated'.[551] On one hand self-involvement leads to 'opportunities for joy'.[552] On the other hand, self-involvement can just be a disguise for the alienation which Marx first brought to light. There *are* real problems around the identification of self with work, and yet there are also manifold possibilities of fulfilment through meaningful, and wholly engaging work. Tanner only seems to see one half of this.

The supposed discipline that FDC exerts on companies is also open to question. She states that in the world of FDC corporate responsibility is only towards shareholders, and that the resultant 'relentless drive toward maximum profitability' (p. 20) means a short-termism where redundancies and hostile take-overs become the norm (p. 112). The discipline of FDC means companies are forced to think about the short-term stock price above all, at the expense of all other stake holders, especially the worker.

The corporate shift in which shareholder value became the 'all-encompassing objective'[553] during the closing decades of the 20th Century is well documented. Tanner draws heavily on the ethnographic work on Wall Street of Karen Ho who shows, through in-depth interviews, that a culture developed on Wall Street in which the singular pursuit of

---

[547] Jean-Pierre Durand, *The Invisible Chain: Constraints and Opportunities in the New World of Employment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 204.
[548] *Ibid,* p. 5.
[549] Paul du Gay, *Consumption and Identity at Work* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 119.
[550] Durand, *The Invisible Chain, p.* 5.
[551] Frédéric Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire,* trans. Gabriel Ash (London: Verso: 2014)*,* p. xii.
[552] Lordon, *Willing Slaves,* p. 28.
[553] Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (London: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 123.

shareholder value became 'morally and economically the right thing to do'.[554] We might also think of the neo-classical theory of shareholder primacy that underpins such thinking. In Friedman's understanding, executives are responsible to the owners of the company and to their desires. The owners are understood as the shareholders, and their desires are assumed to be focused on making as much money as possible.[555] The doctrine of shareholder primacy continues to have legal underpinning in both the UK and USA.[556]

This much is therefore given. Yet Tanner's exposition needs complexifying on two fronts. First, it is not entirely clear that shareholder primacy *must* imply a focus on short term stock boosts, at the expense of employees. In Ho's analysis what becomes clear is that there was a particular work culture on Wall Street which constructed and nurtured a particular corporate culture across America. She wanted to look at what the dominance of finance capital meant 'concretely'.[557] For the abstract market does not exist ethereally, but 'in sites with particular institutional cultures'.[558] What Ho showed was that there existed a 'particular investment banker habitus' which embraced an 'organization model of "employee liquidity"'.[559] Yet, at the same time, informants could sometimes see that takeovers and lay-offs did not always create the desired shareholder value (even in the short term). The rationale for re-structuring was thus based on a particular culture that was not inevitable, even *within* the world of FDC. Ho writes:

> Shareholder value, for example, could just as easily be used to justify long-term corporate growth and employee stability […] by making the case that such practices enact sustained stock appreciation.[560]

In other words, the doctrine of shareholder primacy does not require short termism and employee liquidity. These secondary agendas were set by a particular culture on Wall Street which then served 'as a model of how employees throughout the United States should behave'.[561] Yet in Tanner's analysis the spirit of FDC and the culture of Wall Street are elided such that they appear to be the same thing; short termism and lay-offs are seen as

---

[554] *Ibid,* p. 125.
[555] As quoted by Carney, *Value(s),* p. 395. Carney points out that shareholders are explicitly not owners, they are its residual claimants.
[556] See Carney, *Value(s),* p. 397.
[557] Ho, *Liquidated,* p. 3.
[558] *Ibid,* p. 6.
[559] *Ibid,* p. 11.
[560] *Ibid*, p. 168.
[561] *Ibid.*

intrinsic to the workings of FDC. The complexity of the actual impact of lay-offs on share prices should itself be enough to make one wary of Tanner's exposition, which seems to assume that lay-offs *will* bump up the share price, even as she decries the practice. [562]

Second, the doctrine of shareholder primacy is itself beginning to crumble. In the UK, the Companies Act of 2006 requires directors to 'have regard' for a wider range of stake holders including 'employees, customers, suppliers, and the wider community'[563] whilst still serving the interests of shareholders. In the USA, a recent (2019) statement by the Business Roundtable, signed by 181 CEOs of the country's largest corporations, rejected the idea that corporations have the sole principal aim of increasing shareholder value. They put the *long-term* generation of such value alongside a commitment to other stakeholders.[564] This so-called enlightened shareholder value is underpinned by the belief that what is good for the shareholder over the long term will also be good for other stake holders. The Harvard Business School veteran, Michael Porter, speaks about 'corporate social integration'.[565] He argues that companies should refuse to see the good of society and the good of the company as being in tension, and that companies should focus energies where the two elide.

Some countries have gone further, rejecting shareholder primacy through case law or legislation, and requiring corporations to prioritise a range of stake-holders.[566] We might also think of the rise of B Corp certification, in which companies have to show a positive societal impact and re-write their Articles to include a purpose beyond profit.[567] There are signs of a possible culture shift here then, and one that Tanner seems to ignore. The 'multiple spirits of capitalism' (p. 10) – that Tanner acknowledges at first – are kept out of the picture to enable her to develop a heuristically simple portrayal of FDC and the discipline it exerts on both people and corporations.

Tanner's focus on the discipline that FDC exerts on individuals, corporations and governments, means that her analysis also has some significant omissions. She gives no attention to the concrete macro-economic effects of a capitalist system dominated by finance. Nichole Flores questions her for not plumbing 'the depths of this system to ask

---

[562] Peggy M. Lee, 'A Comparative Analysis of Layoff Announcements and Stock Price Reactions in the United States and Japan', in *Strategic Management Journal 18* (1997), 879-894.
[563] See Carney, *Value(s),* p. 398.
[564] *Ibid.*
[565] Porter, *On Competition,* p. 499.
[566] See Carney, *Value(s),* pp. 396-7.
[567] See B Corp Certification. <https://bcorporation.uk/certification-overview/> [accessed 6th Feb 2023].

what happens to those who are harmed most profoundly in the twenty-first century global economy'.[568] For example, LiPuma and Lee point out that derivatives have not just begun to 'displace production as the leading edge of capitalism'[569] (i.e. finance dominates), nor have they just shifted power from states to financial markets (i.e. finance disciplines) but they also and most importantly now stand behind the local realities of 'interest rates, food costs, and the price of petroleum'.[570] The vast derivatives market has real and problematic consequences for the ability of people to buy and sell food, and access energy. Similarly, speculative capital (principally in the currency markets) can lead to huge currency devaluations and bring with it 'social calamities that cost businesses and lives'.[571] Somewhat oddly, Tanner bypasses this macro view to focus on the connection between derivatives and our relationship to the future on a more individual or psychological level.

Tanner also gives little attention to the cultural, political or ideological context into which FDC fits. Hence, she appears to want to point the finger at FDC when the problems she identifies may in fact be a product of a far wider socio-economic-political shift towards 'neoliberalism'. For Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism is characterised by a world of generalised competition whereby social relations are aligned 'with the model of the market'.[572] In neoliberalism, market rationality is 'extended to all spheres of human existence'[573] such that politics and morality can all simply be reduced to economics. The beliefs, norms and values of FDC as described by Tanner certainly fit into this but are only part of this wider picture. It could be argued that the real problem is not so much the dominance of finance – credit, stocks and their derivates – but the dominance of *markets* in every corner of life. The problem then is not so much FDC as neoliberalism.

As Michael Sandel points out, allowing markets into areas where goods are traditionally seen as non-marketable corrupts the goods we are speaking of. In perhaps the best-known example, Sandel references the different blood donation schemes of the UK and the USA. In

---

[568] Nichole M. Flores, 'Capitalism and the Face of the Oppressed: A Response to Kathryn Tanner and Devin Singh', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 358-368 (p. 362). In her response, Tanner accepts this critique admitting that she 'does not draw enough attention to those who are oppressed by the system'. Tanner, 'Response to the Respondents', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 403-408 (p. 404).
[569] Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 6.
[570] *Ibid,* p. 27.
[571] *Ibid,* p. 49. They reference Turkey, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brazil as examples of where this has happened.
[572] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society,* trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2013), p. 3.
[573] *Ibid,* p. 302.

the UK all blood is donated without payment; in the USA blood donors are paid. Simply put, 'commercializing blood changes the meaning of donating it'.[574] The problems of FDC may well be seen as part of a wider neo-liberal agenda of *Market* Dominated Capitalism.

In sum, Tanner's construal of FDC and its spirit fails to properly build upon those foundations of realism and holism. Put differently, Tanner's analysis parallels the neo-classical paradigm – it presents a static picture, considers FDC atomistically, and makes causal connections with too much certainty. It does not account for the complexity, uncertainty and interdependence at the heart of the economic system.

As already noted, this seems particularly odd given the thinking she lays out in her earlier work, *Theories of Culture.* In this book, Tanner rehearses the established critique that is laid out against the modernist study of culture. The modernist approach assumed that cultures were 'self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and values simply transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order'.[575] In contrast, the post-modern understanding assumes that no culture is internally consistent; no culture is stable or bounded, reliant on consensus or on a set of foundational ideas. A culture is always in flux, moving through time. As such, cultural identity is always a 'hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures [...and] includes its own alternatives' within itself.[576] Tanner explicitly aligns her own thinking with this post-modernist approach, and yet in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism,* she appears to revert to a modernist approach, in which FDC is static, bounded, and unified.

2.2 The Spirit of Christianity

<u>Temporal Discontinuity</u>

We turn next to Tanner's construal of Christianity. In contrast to the world of FDC in which we are chained to the past, live absorbed in the present, all for the sake of the future, Tanner presents Christianity as a religion of 'radical time discontinuity' (p. 31). If FDC forces a 'time collapse' (p. 30), Tanner wants to present Christianity as an alternative in which there is an absolute 'break' (p. 31) between the past, present, and future.

---

[574] Sandel, *What money can't buy,* p. 126.
[575] Tanner, *Theories of Culture,* p. 38.
[576] *Ibid,* p. 58.

In relation to the past, Christianity promises the possibility of a 'break from oneself by way of some dramatic upheaval' (p. 31). It enables a radical time discontinuity and the 'complete repudiation of what one has become through sin' (p. 54). It means seeing ourselves as having been one sort of person, and now as 'entirely different sort of person, across some unbridgeable divide' (p. 59).

As for the present, it should be our 'only concern' (p. 126).[577] What matters is re-orientating ourselves Godward, 'at each succeeding moment' (p. 130). In this construal, the present is not a narrative to be made sense of but a series of disconnected presents which each give an opportunity to turn towards (or away) from God. As disconnected moments, they cannot be compounded one upon another. Each moment has enough grace so that the failures of the past are not pulled into the present (p. 127). The only thing that brings coherence to these discrete moments is the 'single point of orientation that unifies one's life as a whole' (p. 131).

The future is again characterized by radical discontinuity. Tanner views the coming future as a 'massive disruption' (p. 157) which cannot be mastered but comes entirely by grace. There is no self-propelled advancement into this Kingdom. Instead, there will be the God-given 'ultimate transformation of human existence itself' (p. 160).

For Tanner the time collapse of FDC is combatted by this radical time discontinuity of Christianity. She is, in keeping with her previous work, emphasising the way in which the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life emerges from engagement with the culture of the day.[578] The emphasis on radical time discontinuity is quite consciously a reaction to the time collapse of FDC. In her earlier work though this 'engagement with other ways of life rarely involves a face-off between distinct wholes'.[579] Usually, the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is seen as being shaped at the boundary, appropriating, and sometimes re-shaping the cultural material of the day. Yet, in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* we are quite clearly presented with just such a face-off. Tanner presents two opposing cultures that are self-contained, fixed and bounded. A temporal collapse is opposed to a temporal break.

---

[577] Tanner does not mean that the future should not be thought about at all. Rather, 'The future requires its own special attention', as something radically discontinuous from the present. Tanner. *New Spirit,* p. 159
[578] Tanner, *Theories of Culture,* p. 115.
[579] *Ibid,* p. 117.

In setting up this face-off Tanner emphasises a 'very specific, and minority, style of Christian faith as typically Christian'.[580] Her emphasis on the break between past, present and future creates significant questions, and in some instances seems to promote a reading of Christianity that simply parodies the spirit of FDC.

<u>Slowing Down</u>

Rather than think about temporal breaks we might instead think about slowing down. Where the temporal break parodies the spirit of FDC, the notion of *slowing down* might provide the theological spirit necessary to break open the spirit of FDC, and so find the places in which it might be challenged or changed.

In place of a total repudiation of what was, we might instead think about a slow and difficult transformation of what was into something more Christ-like. Our past does not simply stand apart from us, beyond some unbridgeable divide, but does (by simple fact) continue to bear significant hold over our current lives in terms of our responsibilities, commitments and constraints. We grow slowly, through time. This is not to make our past our fate, nor to suggest that we are "chained" by it. Moments of 'complete surprise' (p. 56) will always occur and be one way in which grace is actualized in each and every person. Transformation is always possible, but not in such a way as to render the past entirely other. To make it so takes to an extreme a particular Protestant sensibility. It also abstracts faith from our everyday experience in which the past *does* continue to exert significant influence over the present. What is significant is not the complete repudiation of our past (although this might sometimes be required) but the process by which fate is transformed into destiny.[581]

Tanner's exposition of the present is also difficult to connect with lived experienced. We can, quite clearly, make our situation worse over time, by making bad choices, and perhaps more significantly inculcating bad habits. The present is *not* a series of disconnected moments. Habits – whether of bitterness, or greed, or whatever they may be – in no sense nullify one's faith, but they do require counter habits and not just a singular conversion at every point. Again, for all Tanner's focus on time, her construal of Christianity ignores that we are creatures who journey *through* time.

---

[580] John E. Thiel, 'Money Matters: A Response to Devin Singh and Kathryn Tanner' in *Modern Theology 36* (2020), 369-377 (p. 377).
[581] See Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 1998).

In presumably unintentional ways, her vision of the discontinuous present parodies the kind of liquidity that Tanner sees as inimical to the Christian faith. If the past has no hold, and if each present moment is entirely new with no connection to the missteps or good steps that have come before, then we become entirely unbound, free of constraint. In other words, we become entirely liquid. We are flexible, versatile, the perfect liquid employee ready to be moulded and shaped anew as every present moment requires.

As Lordon suggests though, liquidity is 'fundamentally anti-social'.[582] In the language of Gillian Rose, if we accept Tanner's construal of the Christian present, we never need to "stake ourselves". We never need to commit to something we have said or done, such that we are bound and limited by what has gone before. Yet to "stake ourselves" is precisely the act of faith that is required of us on our Christian journey. We step out in uncertainty, not knowing how we might be received or what the consequences might be, taking moral responsibility for what may come. Tanner's vision of the present reads more like a description of Mishkin from *The Idiot* who has no history, no narrative to make sense of.

The response to the problem of speed and liquidity at the heart of FDC cannot be a vision in which the present moment is the only concern, and in which past actions have no hold. Such a vision only exacerbates the problem of liquidity and presents a Christianity of the instantaneous moment. Instead, we need something that slows us down, that forces us to work with difficulty and in the midst of uncertainty, in which we step out into responsibility, whilst knowing that the past does not determine our future.

Finally, turning to the discontinuous future: John Thiel wonders whether the rupture Tanner imagines implicitly relinquishes 'the hope of the immanent transformation of our fallen economic structures'.[583] Her suggestion that the future might be pulled into the present (a suggestion presumably given to avoid Marxist critique) has little or no purchase on contemporary realities.

This becomes clearest if we step back to consider Tanner's overall hope of presenting an 'anti-work ethic' (p. 202). This anti-work ethic stands in opposition to the way in which FDC (supposedly) moulds us. If FDC shapes us into people who give our all to the maximisation of the profit held within our persons, the spirit of Christianity forms us into people whose identities remain at a crucial distance from our 'social roles and tasks' (p. 91). Our

---

[582] Lordon, *Willing Slaves,* p. 44.
[583] Thiel, 'Money Matters', p. 377.

commitment to God relativises and qualifies all other projects and allegiances, and ensures our value remains distinct from what we do.

It would be hard to argue with this qualification of allegiances under God. However, it is the particular construal of this relativisation of work as an *anti*-work ethic that becomes harder to maintain. Her anti-work paradigm pushes her to conceive of paradise as a world that requires 'no effortful goal directed labor'.[584] Yet, it is difficult to see how such a vision of paradise could ever be pulled into the present; a world without labour has no purchase on the world of today. A vision of *anti*-work thus forgoes the possibility of genuine revision and reform. Tanner ends up with an eschatological vision that is in complete disjuncture from the present world, a world in which work is necessary and may indeed be made beautiful.

In simply thinking the temporal break, Tanner becomes unable to help us think beyond the break to new constructions of Capitalism, or indeed to any other imaginable economic system at all. A 'religion of radical time discontinuity' (p. 31) leaves us floating free in a-temporality. She wants to show the coherence 'of a whole new world' (p. 219), but instead we have an abstraction, an idea of a past that has no hold, a present of disconnected moments, and a disjunctive future. There is no time to change, no time to grow, no possible future to build over time.

The construal of Christianity she gives arguably shapes persons in a very *similar* way to FDC. The temporal collapse of FDC is countered with the temporal breaks of Christianity. But the break only mirrors the collapse. In FDC, past, present and future collide in an unending present moment. In her construal of Christianity, past and present disappear as we live in unending (disconnected) present moments. But we are people who journey through time.

2.3 Creatures of Time

We could – and I think would – do better to think of how the Christian story might shape us to live *through* time, as those who have been given the gift of time. Much of the work of Stanley Hauerwas exhorts us to think in just such a way. Over the course of his career, he has written again and again of how God has given us the gift of time, and how we need to take our time if we ever hope to build communities of peace.[585]

---

[584] Tanner, 'Response to the Respondents', p. 407.

[585] See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Prime in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 135-151; Stanley Hauerwas, 'Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial', in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Eugene: Wipf, 2010),

Hauerwas has been criticised for idealising virtue formation over time.[586] Yet, at least some of his writings on time are less about cultivating habits of peace over time, and more about simply being people who embrace the everyday joyful and peace-filled activities that *take time*, like friendship,[587] raising children, running a lemur sanctuary, or watching a baseball game (or even a whole season).[588]

Hauerwas presents us with a very different understanding of time to Tanner. The promised future – that will come by grace – means we have all the time we need now to slow down and be friends of time. One wonders whether this theological foundation might have presented a far better alternative to the time collapse of FDC than Tanner's vision of a simple temporal break.

As it is, the "break" allows no vision for reform through time. There is, for Tanner, the spirit of FDC which radically perverts our relationship to time and the contrasting vision of Christianity which abstracts time into the radical discontinuities that come through conversion (again and again).

No construction is possible from this, which puts Tanner in a somewhat awkward position. For on one hand she is clear that we do need a complete *break* away from FDC. This is what her theology of time pushes her to say. She writes, the 'financial transactions that dominate present-day capitalism are not […] in principle ones that can be transformed in a mutually beneficial direction'.[589] Yet, on the other hand, she is also clear that there *are* ways to interrupt FDC and take it apart piece by piece (rather than simply overthrow the whole Capitalist system). Such ways are in fact, she says, rather obvious and just require political

---

pp. 253-266; Stanley Hauerwas, 'Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped', in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 143-156; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The End of Sacrifice: An Apocalyptic Politics', in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 22-36.

[586] See Duncan B. Forrester, 'The Church and the Concentration Camp: Some Reflections on Moral Community' in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas,* ed. by Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 189-207, for an account of how both the church and the concentration camp are unsuccessful in the task of formation. See also John Thomson, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

[587] See Hauerwas, ''Timeful Friends'. pp. 143-156.

[588] See Hauerwas, 'Taking Time for Peace', pp. 258-263. Hauerwas considers this his best essay on peace, see Stanley Hauerwas, 'Explaining Christian Nonviolence: Notes for a Conversation with John Milbank and John Howard Yoder', in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp. 169-184 (p. 182).

[589] Tanner, 'Response to the Respondents', p. 406.

will. They include, 'making financial transactions less lucrative through the levying of taxes on them; setting interest rate caps; prohibiting predatory lending; and so on'.[590]

Tanner seems to have been caught by her own constructs here. Her theology of time demands a decisive and total break from FDC, such that no constructive proposals seem possible. And yet, she is clear that practically what is needed is a move *within* capitalism away from financial domination and discipline. It is as though the theological underpinnings force her hand, requiring her to eschew constructive proposals and simply assert a radical break. This, despite her knowledge and esteem of the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, who argue that critique alone – without constructive proposals – achieves little.[591] Tanner simply does not seem to be able to heed their advice because of her theological construal of time.

Constructive proposals are needed, but for this we need a different understanding of time; one that is less concerned with temporal breaks, and more concerned with slowing down, with taking our time, and cultivating habits over time. This would allow more constructive proposals, built upon theological foundations, that could shift present day capitalism away from financial domination.

Such proposals are not novel: speculation needs to be discouraged and productive investment encouraged; international capital flows need to be slowed to avoid massive currency swings; a Financial Transaction Tax, aimed at disincentivizing short term currency speculation, could be introduced. Long-term thinking needs to be restored. However it quite happens, the world of liquidity needs to be *slowed* to encourage productive investment over speculation. As Blanchard says, critiquing Tanner, there are a vast array of secular re-imaginings in the business world out there already, that are taking hold today, from B corporations to stakeholder capitalism.[592]

Tanner's vision of a temporal break does not create space for such imaginings. A theology of radical time discontinuities makes it impossible to build something positive. It is not just

---

[590] *Ibid,* p. 403.
[591] See Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005), who – in their preface to the English translation – reflect on the time since the original French book was published in 1999, stating that since then there has been a rapid revival of critique and yet also a 'virtual stagnation when it comes to establishing mechanisms capable of controlling the new forms of capitalism and reducing their devastating effects'. p. xxviii. In hindsight they see their own original work as 'simultaneously rather timid when it comes to a resumption of critique… and decidedly over-optimistic about the effects of critique' alone. p. xxix.
[592] Blanchard, 'Review', p. 577.

therefore simply that Tanner is presenting a more radical position than myself, suggesting (for example) that Capitalism needs to be replaced wholesale by something else. Given her construal of time it becomes hard to imagine any constructive task at all. Her temporal break makes it hard to think about any economic system in a world like ours, in a world of time and space.

Her construal of time leaves no place for construction. FDC appears orientated to death, but it is unclear where we go from here. Instead of being left with atemporal utopias then, we need something that has purchase on *this* world. One could still argue for something more revolutionary than revisionist of course, as long as it was still bound by our creaturely limits. But in line with Tanner's earlier work *Theories of Culture,* properly attending to our finitude should make us alert to cultural indeterminacy and therefore sceptical of pitting one "complete" system against another. We will find 'more fruitful critiques and interactions with *particular* markets, players, behaviours, and policies'.[593] We would expect nothing less if we are going to contend with the interdependencies, complexities and uncertainties of the real economy, or more broadly of our lives in space and through time.

2.4 An Economy of Grace

This more constructive approach, that engages with policy, is exactly what we see in Tanner's book written nearly twenty years ago: *Economy of Grace.* In contrast to her later work this text is explicit in its desire to find the 'intersections and interventions'[594] between theological economics and capitalism, and makes a vast number of concrete proposals.

Tanner begins the book by making the argument that theology and economics have everything to do with one another because both are concerned with the 'production and circulation of goods' (p. x). She begins by thinking about the production and circulation of goods in the economy of grace, suggesting the principles of: unconditional giving, universal giving, and non-competition. She then considers how such an economy of grace might be enacted within the global economy of today. In line with her thinking in *Politics of God* she takes uncontroversial and traditional beliefs about the grace of God and then unpacks them

---

[593] Blanchard, *The Protestant Ethic or the Spirit of Capitalism,* p. 183.
[594] Tanner, *Economy of Grace,* p. 89. Further references to this book, in this section, will appear after quotes in the text.

in politically radical ways.[595] As chapter 3 is entitled, she puts this 'Theological Economy to Work', making 'realistic, practically viable' (p. 90) proposals for changing the present system according to the theological principles of an economy of grace. Such change is possible because global capitalism is not 'the immovable object or implacable juggernaut that neoliberal economists would like us to think it is' (p. 90). On that basis, she sets out to find the "intersections" (the places where capitalism already displays aspects of unconditional and universal giving, or non-competition) and the "interventions" (the places where capitalism may be re-worked to display such aspects more fully) between the economy of grace and the economy of our world.

Reviews of Tanner's more recent work notice the shift away from the concrete proposals laid out in *Economy of Grace.* Responding to those that questioned this shift, Tanner is clear that she no longer sees *Economy of Grace* as presenting workable solutions. Without quite explaining why, or what in particular has changed since 2005, she notes that she does not any longer believe, 'for example, that, without fundamental alteration, finance-dominated modes of profit generation can be turned into a mutually beneficial direction along the Keynesian lines discussed in my *Economy of Grace'.*[596]

The crux, of course, is on what we quite mean by fundamental alteration. The proposals in *Economy of Grace* are far more radical than any policy that has been implemented in Europe or North America in the years since the book was published, and she ends that book by speaking of a 'whole new shape' for the global economy (p. 142). Even if, in a later edition, Tanner might want to have added more proposals aimed at curtailing the possibilities of money making money, that does not mean that the proposals she put forward in 2005 are no longer valid, nor that they would fail to fundamentally alter that shape of the capitalist system such that it would no longer be dominated by finance. As she wrote then, capitalism is not a fixed beast, but 'can be changed and redirected by human decision' (p. 90). This then is in sharp distinction to her later work in which it is not clear that any economic system, however fundamentally different, could emerge, at least not one for this world – a world in which slow and time bound labour is required.

---

[595] Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). In this work she considers how belief in the transcendence of God and the universal providential agency of God can lead towards politically radical understandings of Hierarchy, respect for Others, and respect for Difference.
[596] Tanner, 'A response to the respondents', p. 403.

It is worth pausing to outline some of the practical ideas found in *Economy of Grace,* not least to show just how much she shifts away from this approach in her more recent work. In brief then, based on the principle of universal giving, Tanner argues for an intensification of 'global concern' (p. 95) rather than a retreat from it. She argues for *freer* trade – and so an end to unfair trade practices which keep developing nations locked out of mutually beneficially trading relationships. She calls too for incentives for investment in areas which are seen as too risky and so excluded from global capital. The focus, she says, to align capitalism with God's universal giving, needs to be on 'full employment and poverty reduction' (p. 95).

Turning to the principle of unconditional giving, Tanner argues for far better welfare provision, and suggests that the expenses of this could well be met by the productivity gains that come with it. Interestingly - and in sharp contrast to her later work – Tanner suggests that generous welfare provision should make it easier for companies to hire and fire, and to do so without creating want or ire.[597]

Thinking about how the capitalist economy might inculcate patterns of non-competition, she begins by highlighting the non-competitive features already built in, before then vociferously arguing for an 'international Keynesianism' (p. 121) which looks for domestic market creation in developing nations. She is deeply critical of financial markets which are 'almost completely competitive' and so act as one of the 'major vehicles blocking the development of a win/win spiral in the real economy' (p. 124). To counter their pernicious impact she suggests fixed international exchange rates, a cross border financial transaction tax, and the harmonizing of international regulations to stop arbitrage. She also calls for an international funding bank which can lend on good terms to unattractive places, with the aim of economic growth and employment, rather than relying on the fast and free flow of international finance.[598]

Finally, Tanner turns to consider public goods – forms of mutual benefit which cannot be provided for by capitalist markets. These include parks, and lighthouses, roads and so forth. Such goods are non-competitive, and instead of privatising them – as is happening – we should, she argues, be seeking to multiply them. Tanner's argument here is less coherent

---

[597] See Tanner, *Economy of Grace,* pp. 100-103.
[598] *Ibid,* pp. 127-8.

than in previous sections, and her suggestion that 'scarcity problems simply do not arise' (p. 137) is questionable. Yet the basic point, that shows the limits of markets, is clear.[599]

The one major question that Tanner's proposals in this book raise is about the place of continued economic growth in the developed world. Tanner's proposals in *Economy of Grace* assume a world of growth. Efficiency and productivity gains are foundational to her economic proposals. Profit should come, she argues, not through job losses and depressing wages, but through increases in productivity (p. 114). Productivity gains mean more output for each input; increased output in turn increases incomes which increases demand, and so a virtuous cycle is born.

Yet, questions need to be raised about the increasing pressure humanity is exerting on the planet, and whether we can continue to hope for economic growth without destabilising the ecological conditions upon which we, and all our fellow creatures, entirely depend. There is growing concern that we are pushing at the limits of (or indeed already overshooting) various 'planetary boundaries',[600] including, for example, the amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide, or the saturation levels of calcium carbonite in our oceans (which causes acidification). Pushing beyond these planetary boundaries may well cause novel, unexpected, and massively destabilising effects on our ecosystem with devastating impacts upon our, and other, species. We are (as this chapter opened with) now having to ask, 'what it might mean for us to live well within the limits of a finite planet'.[601]

If Tanner is right that her proposals in *Economy of Grace* are unfit for purpose today, it is not because they would fail to properly disrupt FDC (they would!), but rather because they fail to contend with the limits to growth. Interventions and intersections *are* still precisely what is needed, not a theological face-off. If *Economy of Grace* does not provide us with the right interventions, then, it does at the very least provide a helpful methodological blueprint for a form of economic theology that engages in policy debate and makes significant economic proposals that are grounded in, or better still, converse with, theological thinking.

---

[599] See Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy,* for a more cogent account of the limits of markets.
[600] See Will Steffen et al. 'Planetary Boundaries: guiding human development on a changing planet', *Science,* 347 (2015), 736-747.
[601] King Charles III, 'Foreword to the first edition', p. xxiii

2.5 An Economy with Limits

Following Tanner's methodological lead then, the rest of this chapter will seek to put in some building blocks for a theological economics of material finitude, understanding limits not as something sinful to overcome, but as something good and God-given.

In critiquing Tanner's economic theology three crucial aspects of this finitude, as relates to the economy, have come to the fore. First, in contrast to Tanner's heuristically one-dimensional portrayal of FDC, we need an economic approach that deals with the uncertainties, complexities, and interdependencies that are at the heart of our lives as material finite creatures. Second, in contrast to Tanner's construal of time as radically discontinuous, we need an economic approach that coheres with the reality of our creaturely lives in which we move *slowly* through time. Third, in contrast to Tanner's earlier economic vision that assumed ongoing economic growth, we need an economic approach that attends fully to our planetary limits. These three elements set the agenda for the rest of this chapter.

Starting from the last of these, I begin by considering the limits to growth that arise from the basic reality that we – and the planet we call home – are materially finite. It is in properly attending to the limits to growth that the resonances with the overarching themes of the thesis become most clear. In the neoclassical paradigm limits have a quasi-sinful status: the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space are forgotten, and ceaseless growth becomes the sole telos. In asserting the genuine and fundamental limits of material creaturely existence I am suggesting a different paradigm, one in which limits are good, the competitive strictures of time and space are accepted, and purpose is thought of in more holistic terms.

The final section will pick up the other two crucial elements identified from the critique of Tanner's theological economics. First, I will consider how we might better contend with the uncertainties, complexities, and interdependencies of our home-making. To do justice to this will require us to complexify how we measure and value our economy. On the assumption that we are not simply creatures of utility maximization, I will ask how we might think about an economic end other than ever increasing GDP. The teleological thread of this thesis becomes paramount.

Finally, I will turn to explore the economic policy implications of the fact that we are creatures who move slowly through time. I will consider our financial infrastructure and how we might seek to slow finance down. In the background to this are our thematic questions around sin and finitude. To move slowly and in one direction through time is to be finite. First though, we turn to the limits to growth.

3. The Limits to Growth

3.1 Ecological Economics

If we are going to consider the impact that material limitations have upon the economy, we need to consider how our economy fits into the wider ecosystem. Questions about the source of our collective wealth have been around since the time of the classical economists. Throwing out the traditional mercantilist idea (that saw wealth purely in terms of a physical amount of gold) Adam Smith, and Richard Cantillon before him, argued that a nation's wealth came from the land and the labour of its people. They (quite rightly) saw that wealth had nothing to do with a single physical commodity, and instead was grounded in the people and the natural world.[602] A nation's wealth was seen to be founded upon the land.[603] What was obvious to these early political economists was that the economy was only a subsystem of the wider ecosystem.[604] This is the basic fact that ecological economists and all those advocating for a post-growth economy have been pushing and explicating ever since. As the recent Dasgupta Review puts it, 'our economies are embedded within Nature, not external to it'.[605]

One of the first of those advocating such a line in the 20th Century was Frederick Soddy. He was a chemist by trade but became interested in economics and was adamant that the 'principles and ethics of human law and convention must not run counter to those of thermodynamics'.[606] He argued that the laws of thermodynamics must be the starting point for economic theory. In other words, the basis for economics must be the simple fact that we cannot produce energy or matter, but only convert them, and in doing so cannot help but create waste product.

---

[602] Steve Keen blames Smith for causing 'economics to deviate from the physically realistic approach that economics should have taken' which was established by the physiocrats such as Cantillon. Keen, *The New Economics,* p. 101. But this drives too much of a wedge between Smith and his predecessors. Whilst Smith's emphasis is most famously on the division of labour, he remains wedded to the idea that such labour is grounded in the 'annual produce of the land [which...] how great soever, can never be infinite, but must have certain limits'. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations,* p. 135.

[603] As Tom Butler-Bowdon writes, for Smith, 'A frugal and intelligent custodianship of the land was, he believed, the original source of national wealth'. Butler-Bowdon, 'Introduction', in *The Wealth of Nations,* pp. xvii - xliv (p. xxxii).

[604] Daly, *Beyond Growth*, p. 11.

[605] Patha Dasgupta, *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review - Headline Messages* (HM Treasury, 2021), 1-10, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review> [accessed 20th Nov 2023] (p. 2).

[606] Frederick Soddy, *Cartesian Economics: The Bearing of Physical Science upon State Stewardship* (London: Hendersons, 1922), p. 9. As quoted by Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 177.

One of the other thinkers who was foundational in this area was Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. In his 1971 *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* he sought to warn economists of the 'irrevocability of the entropic degradation of matter-energy'. He argued that economists could not and must not 'isolate their subject from the material world by ignoring natural laws'.[607] He lambasted economists such as Milton Friedman for implying that the price mechanism was a sufficient instrument for 'creating energy and matter'.[608]

According to such thinkers then, it is not so much that the discipline of economics should try and emulate physics (as some neo-classical economists have been accused of attempting) but rather that the laws of physics should provide the context within which our economic theorising and activity takes place. As the economist Kenneth Boulding argued, back in the 1960s, we need to move from a 'cowboy economy' which treats "sources" (our resources) and "sinks" (our waste systems) as infinite, to a 'spaceman economy' in which humanity finds its place within a 'cyclical ecological system' where the only true external input comes as energy from the sun.[609]

It is this context that needs re-asserting. For the orthodox tradition has too often begun with 'nonphysical parameters'[610], and left natural resources 'out of the equation altogether'.[611] This is clear to see, for example, in the formulation of the classic production function which connects output to the inputs of capital and labour. Keen argues that the Cobb-Douglas Production Function works on the pretence that 'outputs can be produced without inputs from nature, and also, without waste'.[612] It is usually written as follows:

$$Y = AK^{\alpha}L^{1-\alpha} \text{ where } 0 < \alpha < 1$$

Y = The Total Output.

A = The Total Factor Productivity. (Technology and the skill of the workforce).

K = The Capital Input. (Machinery).

---

[607] Roxana Bobulescu, 'From Lotka's biophysics to Georgescu-Roegen's bioeconomics', in *Ecological Economics,* 120 (2015), 194-202 (p. 199).

[608] *Ibid*, p. 201.

[609] See Kenneth Boulding, 'The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth', in *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy,* ed. by Henry Jarrett (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1966), pp. 3-14 (pp. 7-8), as quoted by Edward Barnier, *Economics for a Fragile Planet: Rethinking Markets, institutions and Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2022), p. 1.

[610] Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 6

[611] Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow,* 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. xxxiv.

[612] Keen, *The New Economics,* p. 102.

L = Labour.

α = The contribution of capital to production. [613]

What this seems to miss is the contribution of energy and matter. A number of proposals have been put forward to re-think the production function in a way that considers energy and matter. One option is to simply tag them on, but if they are taken as additional independent variables their impact on production will always be grossly understated.[614] Hence, Keen argues for energy (he does not consider matter in his revision) to be incorporated into the formula by treating both labour and capital as the means by which energy is harnessed for useful work.[615] By doing this a much more realistic production function can be modelled, which not only emphasizes the importance of energy, but also includes the inevitability of waste. Only with energy and waste brought back into the equation do we have a model that is consistent with the laws of thermodynamics; or, in the terms of this thesis, consistent with our creaturely finitude.

Energy and matter are put to useful work (through labour and capital) and in so doing their usefulness is used up. As Herman Daly, sometime senior economist at the World Bank, put it, 'we destroy the improbable arrangement of those building blocks, arrangements that give utility for humans'.[616] Energy and matter cannot simply be added on as independent variables – they are the very foundation of all production.

Another way of looking at this is by considering the impossibility of asset substitution for energy. One of the strengths of the Cobb-Douglas Function is that it enables the modelling of substitution between capital and labour. But such substitution is simply not possible when it comes to energy. We cannot add another machine in the factory to make up for less electricity. It is this inability to substitute for energy that means its impact on production is so much more than its cost share. Its output elasticity (in other words, the percentage change in output divided by the percentage change in input) is far, far greater than its cost contribution to production. A small change in input (energy) will have a big change in output.

[613] See N. Gregory Mankiw, *Macroeconomics,* 9th edn. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016), pp. 59-61, 510.
[614] See Robert U. Ayres et al., 'The underestimated contribution of energy to economic growth', in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics,* 27 (2013), 79-88 (p. 81).
[615] Keen, *The New Economics,* p. 105.
[616] Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 62.

As Robert Ayres *et al.* put it, if an essential input is depleted and there is no substitute for it then the whole system must fail.[617] Unfortunately, most growth models – even ones that take materials into consideration – still 'exclude realistic constraints on the substitution possibilities between energy and capital'.[618]

In sum then, a theological economics that seeks to re-assert the importance of our material finitude must start by considering the sources and the sinks of our economy, the energy in and the waste out. Our economy, our making, happens within this wider ecosystem. At its simplest, our economy is built on energy and matter that we cannot create. Such should be obvious for any form of creaturely theology: we are creatures; curators not creators.

3.2 The Limits to Growth

One of the corollaries of the fact that the economy is a subsystem of the ecosystem is that the whole economy operates within the limits of the ecosystem. As Partha Dasgupta so eloquently puts it at the start of his review on the economics of biodiversity, 'We are part of Nature, not separate from it'.[619]

Around the same time that Georgescu-Roegen was applying biophysics and the laws of thermodynamics to economics, a group – that became known as the Club of Rome – gathered under the leadership of Aurelio Peccei. Their main concern was the alleviation of poverty, and with it a fairer distribution of wealth, but in thinking about this they also quickly became concerned about the constraints upon the ballooning production and consumption of the world economy.

Soon after the establishment of the "club", Peccei met an engineer from MIT, Jay Wright Forrester, who was developing System Dynamics – a cutting-edge computer simulation that could cope with complexity and multiple feedback loops. In 1970 the Club of Rome met with Forrester, in an initial attempt to make a System Dynamics model of the world economy. Forrester's colleague Dennis Meadows and his team were then commissioned to develop a model and write a report for the Club of Rome, which was published in 1972 as 'The Limits to Growth'.[620]

---

[617] Ayres, 'The underestimated contribution of energy', p. 82.
[618] *Ibid*, p. 80.
[619] Dasgupta, 'Headline Messages', p. 1
[620] Dennis Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Humankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

The basic predicament of humankind the Club of Rome asked the MIT researchers to investigate was how equitable wellbeing for all could be achieved within the bounds of a healthy planet. The team took five basic elements for their analysis: population, food production, industrial output, pollution, and consumption of non-renewable natural resources. They sought to model the interlocking, time-delayed complex, nonlinear, relationships between these variables, using real world data.

The conclusions were stark. First, if the current growth rates of these five elements continued at the current growth rates the world economy would hit the limits to growth within 100 years and would then face a sudden economic collapse. Second, economic and ecological stability are possible, if humanity adapts. Third, if humanity wants to avoid a massive collapse in human welfare then the sooner we start adapting the better.[621]

Before even putting the figures through the World3 model that underpins their analysis, the basic point the team sought to make was obvious: exponential growth of industrial output alongside growth in population, with a corresponding impact on land, pollution, and resources, simply cannot continue unabated. We would (unless something changed) reach the limit of the earth's ability to support one or other of these factors at some point. As the team wrote 30 years later, 'In every realistic scenario we found that these limits force an end to physical growth in World3 sometime during the twenty-first century'.[622]

The model tested various possible future scenarios, including the discovery of far more resources than were known of in 1970 (the discovery of which has in fact happened), controls on pollution, technological breakthrough in food production, and global birth control. What the World3 model simulated was that even with all of these breakthroughs the system still collapsed at some point, with a massive reduction in food per capita, and industrial output per capita.[623]

The only simulation that did not lead to collapse was one with stable industrial output and a steady population, combined with a slower use of resources, pollution control, and a focus on food production over other uses of land.[624] Here, according to the model, was a possibility of a sustainable world in which the basic material needs of all were met, but in

---

[621] *Ibid,* p. 23
[622] Dennis Meadows, Donella Meadows, and Jorgen Randers, *Limits to Growth: The Thirty Year Update* (London: Earthscan, 2004), p. xi.
[623] Meadows, *Limits to Growth* (1972), p. 140.
[624] *Ibid,* p. 165.

which there was no 'overshoot' (where one element or another shoot beyond the limit of what the earth can sustain until the rest of the system, with its inherent delays, reacts to stop growth) and no subsequent collapse.[625]

Criticism of Limits to Growth

The reaction to *Limits to Growth* was not 'good scientific debate'[626] but the entrenchment of two camps, with neo-classical economists on one side and biophysical (or ecological) economists on the other. One of the key critical voices was William Nordhaus, who – somewhat concerningly for those convinced by the analysis of *Limits to Growth* – won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2018 for 'integrating climate change into long-run macroeconomic analysis'.[627] He wrote a hugely influential paper that enabled mainstream politics to ignore the conclusions of the report to the Club of Rome.[628]

The paper made three main critiques of the World3 model. The first is that the model is not based on real world data. Nordhaus' principal target was the apparent implication in World3 that the population of affluent countries grows faster than poorer countries when the opposite is the case. But Nordhaus failed to consider the System Dynamics analysis that underpinned the model, and that explicitly refuses such linear correlations. As the authors replied, 'He does not recognize the dynamic behavior of multiple-loop feedback systems'.[629] If two variables were always correlated, regardless of other factors, then they would have been aggregated together in the model. As it is, on any given simulation a number of factors might come together to mean that population growth and affluence rise simultaneously for one particular period – this does not mean they have a simple, linear correlation.

The second argument Nordhaus made concerns the 'highly pessimistic assumptions about substitution'[630] which the model is based upon. For Nordhaus such pessimistic assumptions

[625] *Ibid,* p. 145.

[626] Ugo Bardi, '*The Limits to Growth*, the Story of an Idea', in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from the Limits to Growth, what did we learn and what's next?,* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereira (Exapt Press, 2022), pp. 9-14. (p. 27).

[627] See 'The Prize in Economic Sciences' (2018) <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/10/press-economicsciences2018.pdf> [accessed 3rd Oct 2022].

[628] William D. Nordhaus, 'World Dynamics: Measurement Without Data', in *The Economic Journal,* 83 (1973), 1156-1183. Whilst the paper is written directly as a rebuttal of Jay Forrester's independent work produced a year earlier than *Limits to Growth,* the model underpinning *Limits to Growth* is simply a slightly altered version of Forrester's own model. Hence the critique can be taken to apply to both Forrester's work and the work of Meadow's team.

[629] Jay W. Forrester, Gilbert W. Low and Nathaniel J. Mass, 'The debate on "World Dynamics": A Response to Nordhuas', in *Policy Sciences,* 5 (1974), 169-190 (p. 171).

[630] Nordhaus, 'World Dynamics', p. 1167.

fly in the face of the historical precedent. Yet, the underlying assumption in the model is not that technology fails to enable all sorts of extraordinary substitutions of one material for another, but that as the limited stock of material resources on this earth are depleted, a linear increase in production and consumption requires exponentially more effort, in terms of resource extraction, labour, capital input and waste management. Further, even if one might assume infinite resources (including energy) it is the inevitable waste output (that laws of thermodynamics mean we cannot eradicate) that create the limits. In the World3 model run with infinite resources, it is pollution that causes the system to collapse.[631]

Nordhaus' third critique is that the model does not consider the impact of prices which work to help ration scarce resources as well as motivate innovation and behavioural change. But as *Limits to Growth* makes explicit, prices are implied within the feedback-loops of the model itself. Prices are one of the drivers of those feedback-loops, motivating innovation and behavioural change.[632] Indeed, in the prose the authors of the report suggest that pricing in current externalities could well be one of the effective ways of enabling the behavioural change necessary, if we have any hope of a sustainable future.[633]

The other major in-depth critique of *Limits to Growth* came in *Models of Doom.*[634] Cole and his co-authors were critical of the assumptions around ongoing exponential growth, suggesting that there was no reason to assume growth in industrial output and population would continue exponentially. They also used sensitivity analysis to show how small changes in the use of empirical data would lead to large changes in the outputs for the model. Yet, such questions about possible refinements to the data have not seemed to change the enduring relevance of the model, which has continued to prove itself depressingly accurate.

Limits and Beyond

In 2004 Meadows and Jorgen published a thirty-year update. They could, at that stage, look back and see whether the model – in its standard run – conformed to the world as it then was at the turn of the 21st Century. Doing so showed that 'its assumptions and [the]

---

[631] Meadows, *Limits to Growth* (1972)*,* p. 132.

[632] See, *Ibid,* pp. *63-67* for an example of how price mechanisms are embedded within the model.

[633] *Ibid,* p. 181. Making the cost of pollution and other externalities part of the price of a product is seen by many to be an obvious route towards sustainabilty. See for example, Diane Coyle, *The Economics of Enough: How to Run the Economy as if the Future Matters* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 70.

[634] H.S.D. Cole et al., *Models of Doom: A Critique of The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1973).

conclusions still warrant consideration today'.[635] More than that, this thirty-year update confirmed that the world was already in overshoot in several key areas, pushed by humanity beyond its carrying capacity. The update called for political action that heeded the real physical limits of the earth, in order to avoid collapse.

Since then, empirical data has continued to show that the System Dynamics model is worthy of attention. In 2014 Graham Turner compared empirical data with the modelled scenarios and found that the world was still following the baselines 'business as usual' scenario.[636] That scenario showed a halt in welfare around 2020 and a decline by 2030.

In 2021 Gaya Herrington produced some updated analysis[637] that revealed the two scenarios that most closely aligned with real world data fifty years on from the original publication.[638] The first was Business as Usual 2 (BAU2), which assumed far more abundant natural resources than the standard scenario.[639] The second was Comprehensive Technology (CT), which assumed technological breakthroughs in food production, pollution management, and resource efficiency.[640] Both of these scenarios, as originally modelled back in the 1970s, aligned with real world data from 2021, show a 'halt to growth within a decade or so from now'.[641]

Such forecasts cohere with the current global difficulties of meeting GDP growth targets (for example in the USA, UK and China). These two scenarios lead to very different futures. Whilst BAU2 shows significant overshoot and subsequent collapse, the CT scenario suggests the possibility of stabilisation of population and food production per capita, with a reduction in industrial output without collapse. As Herrington points out, these two scenarios parallel the contemporary debate between those who think that we are reaching a

---

[635] Meadows, *Thirty Year Update,* p. xviii. There was also a twenty-year update suggesting the world was already in overshoot. See Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows, *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future* (London: Earthscan 1992).
[636] Graham Turner, *Is Global Collapse Imminent?*, MSSI Research Paper No. 4, (The University of Melbourne: Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, 2014), 1-22, <https://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2763500/MSSI-ResearchPaper-4_Turner_2014.pdf> [accessed 10th March 2024]
[637] Gaya Herrington, 'Update to Limits to Growth: Comparing the World3 Model with Empirical Data', *Journal of Industrial Ecology,* 25 (2021), 614-626. Herrington uses real world 2019 date and compares it to the recalibrated World3-03 model used in the *Thirty Year Update.*
[638] Herrington is cautious about her conclusions as even up till 2020 all scenarios track the empirical data relatively closely. *Ibid*, p. 623.
[639] See Meadows, *Thirty Year Update,* p. 173.
[640] See *Ibid,* p. 219.
[641] Herrington, 'Update to Limits to Growth', p. 623.

tipping point on climate change (part of the pollution aggregate in the model) and those who believe in humanity's ingenuity to overcome almost any obstacle through technology.[642] Crucially though, the CT scenario still imagines, or perhaps better demands, that industrial output plateaus and even falls. In the model, technology does not overcome limits, but it may avert collapse.

All this more recent analysis shows that the original thinking behind the World3 model has proved presciently accurate. Whilst it is important that empirical data shows that the assumptions and workings of the model are at least plausible, Meadow and Janders are equally clear that the main point should really be startlingly obvious (and require no model at all). A global system of 'erodable limits, incessant pursuit of growth, and delays in society's responses to approaching limits'[643] will be prone to overshoot and collapse.

Meadows and his team understood this (well before climate change became such a focus). Thus, even in the Comprehensive Technology scenario:

> Industrial output begins to decline around 2040 because the rising expense of protecting the population from hunger, pollution, erosion, and resource shortage cuts into the capital available for growth. Service output per person and the level of material consumption begin to fall soon thereafter. Ultimately this simulated world fails to sustain its living standards as technology, social services, and new investment simultaneously become too expensive—a cost crisis.[644]

It is more than possible that we are already seeing the beginnings of such a scenario. The point is that even massive technological breakthrough in multiple areas across land use, food production, and resource efficiency, cannot ultimately escape the limits of our planet. In such a scenario, at some point investment has to be diverted away from consumption towards energy production, food production and pollution mitigation. Material throughput simply cannot go on expanding forever. This is simply 'not an option on a finite planet'. [645]

The only model that avoids some kind of decline is the Sustainable World model.[646] In this scenario technological breakthroughs are combined with a move towards a steady

---

[642] *Ibid*. Herrington points out that the CT scenario assumes incredibly optimistic technological progress.

[643] Meadows, *Thirty Year Update,* p. xviii.

[644] *Ibid,* p. 220.

[645] *Ibid,* p. 13.

[646] Meadows, *Limits to Growth,* p. 165.

population and a stable industrial output. This equilibrium state[647] (where industrial output and population are stable) enables pollution to stabilise, food production to stabilise, and resources to be depleted only very slowly through time. The hope ultimately remains – for the authors of *Limits to Growth* and its followers – that we might move to align ourselves with the Sustainable World model. Whilst currently the data veers furthest away from this model, Herrington suggests there is still time to change trajectory if we pivot away from a focus on growth in industrial output now.[648]

Contemporary Concerns

One of the reasons *Limits to Growth* did not garner the attention it deserved is that the 'business as usual' model massively underestimated the resources available. What is becoming clear over time is that one of most urgent and pressing concerns is not the planet's stocks being run dry, but rather the planet's sinks filling up. Options for substitution are few, or simply non-existent, when it comes to dealing with waste. That pollution rather than resource scarcity would be the issue was simply not envisaged back in the 1970s.

Yet, even if it had been envisaged, it is unclear that the scenarios pointing to some kind of collapse would have been taken any more seriously. For mainstream thinking continued, up until very recently, to under-emphasise the fact that the economy is reliant upon a wider, stable, and functioning ecosystem. To think about this wider system upon which the economy (and indeed human life itself) is reliant of course includes thinking about sources and sinks but it stretches wider too: it is about the 'benevolent conditions [of] our Holocene home: its stable climate, ample fresh water, thriving biodiversity, and healthy oceans'.[649]

Our reliance on this planet, and its stable conditions, have been devastatingly under-emphasised. By way of example, Nordhaus sought to argue that a 6°C increase in global temperatures from pre-industrial levels would only reduce economic output by 8.5% compared to what it would have been otherwise.[650] In an earlier survey of other (mainly orthodox economists) the average prediction was that a 3°C rise in global temperatures by

---

[647] *Ibid,* p. 171.
[648] Herrington, 'Update to Limits to Growth', p. 624. Originally the authors believed that a pivot in 2000 would be too late. Meadows, *Limits to Growth,* p. 169.
[649] Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 48.
[650] William Nordhaus, 'Projections and uncertainties about Climate Change in an Era of Minimal Climate Policies', in *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy,* 10 (2018), 333-360 (p. 345).

2090 would cause global GDP to be 3.6% lower than it would have been otherwise.[651] This amounts to an annual difference that is negligible: a simple rounding error of 0.015%.[652] Even the 2014 IPCC report suggested that the impact of climate change on economic activity would be small compared to other socio-economic developments,[653] and (even more absurdly) that those activities that take place indoors would not be exposed to the impacts of climate change.[654]

Such conjectures are only plausible if the economy is seen as somehow outside of the societal and ecological context. More recent assessments of the impact of climate change seem to take the basic reliance of the economy on the wider and finite ecosphere more seriously. Carney notes recent estimates suggest climate change could lead to global GDP being 15-30% lower than it might have otherwise been.[655] The most recent IPCC report (AR 6) also notes that, 'the global economic and social benefit of limiting global warming to 2°C exceeds the cost of mitigation in most of the assessed literature'.[656] As climate change is beginning to show us, the biosphere is integral and foundational to all economic activity.

The ballooning literature around planetary boundaries emphasises the ecological grounding of all our homemaking. In 2009 Johan Rockström and his team identified nine critical processes in our biosphere, and the pressure that human activity is putting on them. For each process they highlighted the change that human activity is making and the boundary point beyond which positive feedback loops might take us into a very different set of planetary conditions, much less well suited for human life. The impacts of human activity upon these critical processes are: climate change, ocean acidification, chemical and plastic pollution, nitrogen and phosphorous loading, freshwater depletion, land degradation, biodiversity loss, ozone depletion, and air pollution.[657]

---

[651] William Nordhaus, 'Expert Opinion on Climate Change' in *American Scientist,* 82 (1994), 45-51 (p. 48).

[652] See Keen, *The New Economics,* p. 113.

[653] Douglas Arent and Richard Tol, 'Chapter 10: Key Economic Sectors and Services', in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 659-708, <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 10th October 2022], (p. 662).

[654] *Ibid,* p. 668.

[655] Carney, *Value(s),* p. 280.

[656] IPCC, 'Summary for Policymakers', in *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. by H. Lee and J. Romero (Geneva: IPCC, 2023), 1-34, <10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001> (p. 26).

[657] Johan Rockström et al*.,* 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity', in *Nature,* 461 (2009), 472-475.

Whilst the notion of planetary boundaries has received some criticism (as most of the processes identified are local and not global in character)[658] the basic principle remains; we are utterly dependent upon stable and biodiverse ecological systems. It is only from these, and upon these, that we can then start thinking about the economics of sources and sinks. To forget our "grounding" in the earth, is as Partha Dasgupta puts it 'to image that, ultimately, humanity is "external" to Nature'.[659]

If we fully recognise our reliance upon these stable planetary systems it becomes near impossible to continue to think about climate change (or other processes) purely in terms of loss of GDP. These processes are so foundational that the impact of their breakdown, or even gradual change, will not simply be to make production processes slightly more expensive. The ongoing change in these processes will have significant societal and geo-political impacts, including mass migration and increased competition for basic necessities. To consider this simply in terms of GDP rather misses the point.

The rhetoric of planetary boundaries helps remind us that "sources" and "sinks" are not just about how much oil or lithium we have left, or simply about CO_2 parts per million, but about the soil and the sea, our fellow creatures, and the health of the whole ecosphere of which we are a part.

Yet, even thinking about planetary boundaries can still make it sound as if the rest of creation is simply there to serve humanity, as if considering the limits to growth is purely about human welfare. As David Clough (and, from a very different perspective, the secular utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer) would want to enjoin upon us, to properly understand our embeddedness in the ecosystem means forgoing our anthropocentricism. Recognising the fundamental limits of our planet is not just about maintaining human welfare at a certain level but is also about "making space" for fellow creatures. Taking heed of our planetary boundaries, the depletion or sources and the filling of sinks, is not just for our benefit, but for the whole of creation (at least on this planet) which is tied together in a web of relationality and dependence.

Here, we see the three themes of this thesis writ large. The fundamental limits of our material finitude must be attended to. Such limits do not have a (quasi) sinful status that we can overcome through ingenuity or human creativity, or from which we can be rescued by

[658] See Barbier, *Economics for a Fragile Planet,* p. 47.
[659] Dasgupta, 'Headline Messages', p. 2.

the purification of our hearts. They are basic, and as such there is a fundamentally competitive character about creaturely existence that we cannot escape from. The non-competitive relation between God and creatures cannot be mapped onto creaturely relations. Yet, accepting this much, does not mean inscribing sacrifice into the heart of reality. The fact that fresh water supplies (for example) are limited does not mean my gain only comes at another creature's loss. After all, I only need so much water; any more does me no good whatsoever, indeed it may do me harm. The contrast to a sacrificial economy then is not a non-competitive economy, but an economy of "enoughness". It is about creating "space" around the table for all.

If we have any hope of shifting our economy, such that it even faintly resembles something of the heavenly banquet, then our goals must be orientated around something other than growth in production and consumption. Accepting limits means putting an end to our constantly growing use of sources and sinks. Any other economic hope is built upon the illusion that we might escape our bodies, or the confinements of this world; it is built on the hope that we might indeed become God. We must overcome our addiction to growth and the 'idolatrous belief' that 'our derived creative power is autonomous and unlimited'.[660] We turn then to imagine an economy that looks beyond such growth.

---

[660] Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 224.

4. Post-Growth Economics

4.1 Beyond Growth

It is worth stating that there are, of course, many things that should *not* stop growing; aspects of our creaturely lives that *can* in fact echo the non-competitive relation between creatures and the creator. A report published a few years after *Limits to Growth* was entitled, *No Limit to Learning*.[661] The contrast was intentional. There is much that should not stop growing: education, health, wellbeing.

As well as the question about what kind of growth then, there is also the question of *where* we are talking about. Whilst many are over-satiated by material consumption, many others do not have access to adequate shelter or sanitation. We must consider the quality (or type) of growth and its distribution.

With that needfully acknowledged, we do still have to attend to the reality that planetary boundaries are being crossed, finite sources are being eroded, and sinks are being filled. Growth in material production and consumption simply cannot continue. Or, in the words of *Limits to Growth,* growth in industrial output must be brought to an end globally, even if it needs to continue to grow in some places to ensure what Kate Raworth calls the '*social foundation of well-being*'.[662]

There are two questions that arise from this which the rest of this chapter will seek to tackle. The first is what such limits to growth might mean for GDP. Given its foundational significance to most modern economies, we cannot avoid this question. The second, is how we might begin to imagine or even build an economy that looks beyond growth.

De-Coupling Growth

Whether or not we think GDP is a useful measure (more on this below) the reality is that it is *de facto* the primary economic indicator, and therefore the question of whether growth in GDP can continue without a corresponding growth in industrial output must be addressed, even if – as we shall see – a definitive answer seems elusive.

---

[661] James W. Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra and Mircea Malitza, *No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap: A Report to the Club of Rome* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979).
[662] Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 11.

The *Limits to Growth* report does not argue one way or another.[663] It simply states that population and industrial output need to be stabilised. The crux of the matter for the researchers was that wellbeing for all replaces 'growth as the primary value of society'.[664] Such a reorientation is crucial if we are to avoid the tragic consequences of overshoot and come to terms with the reality of the 'quantitative restraints of the world environment'.[665] Whether an end to physical growth meant an end to GDP growth was simply left unaddressed.

Randers – reflecting fifty years after *Limits to Growth* – still does not believe we have 'had a final resolution on the technological fix' and that as such the possibility of continued GDP growth without growth in industrial output (as the original authors coined it) remains an open question.[666] Others – such as the former World Bank Economist, Herman Daly – have regarded the question primarily as a distraction. Whilst he was clear that, in his view, economic growth alongside a constant level of physical throughput through the "dematerialization" of the economy *is* a fantasy,[667] he was far more concerned with delineating between development (measured in his work by the Index for Sustainable Economic Welfare – more on this below) and physical growth. Development must continue; physical growth must not.

Tim Jackson argues that the evidence is clear: de-coupling growth in physical throughputs and their environmental impact, from growth in GDP is simply impossible. Technology creates many possibilities, enabling a reduction in waste (including carbon dioxide emissions) and a more efficient use of materials. But, on its own such "fixes" do not guarantee the de-coupling required. Jackson distinguishes between absolute and relative decoupling. The former would mean more economic activity with a total reduction in environmental impact; the latter would mean more economic activity with a reduction per unit in environmental impact. To maintain economic growth without increased material throughput requires *absolute* decoupling.

The stark reality is this: not only has absolute decoupling been historically absent, but relative decoupling has also been very minimal. Recent studies have suggested that the

---

[663] See Jorgen Randers, 'A Co-author's view: What did *The Limits to Growth* really say?', in *Limits and Beyond*, pp. 45-55 (p. 53).
[664] Meadows, *Limits to Growth* (1972), p. 178.
[665] *Ibid,* p. 190.
[666] Randers, 'A Co-author's view', p. 53.
[667] Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 28.

overall material footprint of OECD nations rose by about 50% between 1990 and 2008 whilst GDP grew by 53% over the same period. [668] Worldwide trends in primary resource extraction paint a similar picture. In fact, the production of iron ore, bauxite, copper and cement have all increased by far more than GDP since the year 2000 (figures run up until 2015).[669]

Jackson also looks at the history of decoupling carbon dioxide emissions from GDP growth. Whilst the carbon intensity for each dollar of goods and services produced has been declining, although by less than 1% per year, this is overshadowed by a population increase of 1.3% per year and an average per capita income increase of 1.3% per year, which together have led to a significant overall rise in carbon emissions.[670] The carbon intensity of our energy production has also been falling, although only by about 15% cumulatively since 1965 (until 2022). This is a very meagre improvement in context in which overall energy production has tripled during the same period. In sum, relative de-coupling has been occurring (a little), absolute decoupling has not.

Yet, despite Jackson's clear historical data on this, it does not necessarily show us the future. It might just be possible that recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) lead to far more significant de-coupling – perhaps even an absolute decoupling – between material throughput and GDP growth. It is also possible that renewable energy production may lead to a massive fall in the carbon intensity of each dollar of goods and services produced. Such technological advances may mean that an increase in GDP is possible with a corresponding overall decrease in our usage of sources and sinks. For example, the International Energy Agency now expect CO2 emissions to peak by around the middle of this decade, even as global GDP is expected to continue to grow.[671] This would represent a qualitive shift, a move from relative to absolute decoupling in this area, with global carbon emissions falling even as GDP grows.

---

[668] Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth,* p. 93.
[669] *Ibid,* p. 94.
[670] *Ibid,* p. 97. See also, Our World in Data, 'Carbon intensity: CO2 emissions per dollar of GDP' (2023) <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/co2-intensity> [accessed 11th Dec 2023].
[671] International Energy Agency, 'World Energy Outlook 2023', 1-355, <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/42b23c45-78bc-4482-b0f9-eb826ae2da3d/WorldEnergyOutlook2023.pdf> [accessed 11th Dec 2023], (p. 22). See also, OECD, 'Economic Outlook' (2023) <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/economic-outlook-a-mild-slowdown-in-2024-and-slightly-improved-growth-in-2025.htm> [accessed 11th Dec 2023].

Even if we see this come to pass though, there are the wider environmental impacts to consider of a shift towards renewable energy. There are current questions around long-term supply of resources, the possibility of resource substitution, the viability of recycling, not to mention the impact of the green transition on vulnerable communities where rare earth metals are mined.[672] A global and total reduction in material throughput and environmental impacts may be possible alongside continuing growth in GDP, but if it is, we have not seen it come to pass yet.

Jackson's work thus raises the question of whether the aspiration for absolute de-coupling might be nothing more than the desire to escape from our material, creaturely, limitations? Our economy almost definitely will continue to "de-materialise" such that the material intensity of each dollar produced will continue fall, partly due to the burgeoning world of AI. We might well also be moving into a future in which abundant clean energy is produced in increasingly efficient ways. Yet, we will always remain creatures of the earth, wedded to time and space. Even a thoroughgoing service economy is utterly reliant on and embedded in the material world.

I cannot help but wonder whether the aspiration towards absolute de-coupling is nothing more than an implicit denial of the fundamental limitations of creaturely existence. If we accept our grounding in the earth, then it is counter intuitive to think that the flow of goods and services (GDP) could continue to increase whilst the production and consumption of material goods decreases. At the very least, aspiring to endless GDP growth on the *assumption* that such growth is possible, without it putting ever increasing strains on our material world, seems unwarranted.

Perhaps this is yet another implication of accepting our finitude as something inherent to our creaturely existence and not something sinful to overcome. The aspiration towards absolute de-coupling appears to be an aspiration towards spirit devoid of matter. To put it another way, and again in the broad terms of this thesis, I wonder whether the hope of absolute de-coupling is founded upon a non-competitive paradigm that is at odds with the fundamentally competitive limitations of our existence in space and time. There need be – so the logic goes – no competition between GDP growth and the restoration of the

---

[672] See, for example, Davide Castelvecchi, 'Electric Cars and batteries: How will the world produce enough?, in *Nature,* News Feature, 17th August 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02222-1> [accessed 11th Dec 2023].

ecosphere; our economic growth can fly free of material constraint, the problems of waste, and the pressures put upon planetary boundaries. Yet the reality is that our economic activity will always be grounded in the "stuff" of earth.

This is not to say that absolute de-coupling is definitely impossible. The jury still seems to be out. Instead, I am questioning what our aspiration towards such de-coupling reveals. In theological language, it seems to treat finitude as sin, and assume that the non-competitive logics of creature-creator relations can be applied *tout court* to our home-making.

<u>Less Growth</u>

Aside from the question of whether growth in GDP can be de-coupled from material throughput (a question that we simply cannot answer conclusively at this time, even if I am clearly sceptical of the possibility), is the question of whether continued economic growth is possible at all.

The recent well documented trend in diminishing productivity gains in developed countries suggests it may not be. Presuming a stable number in the workforce, gains in labour productivity are crucial for economic growth – each worker produces more additional value per hour. But not all sectors of the economy are open to such productivity gains. Jackson focuses on 'care, craft and culture'[673] as three crucial sectors that are not open to such gains. A nurse can only look after so many patients, if the quality of care is not to be diminished. A cabinet maker can only make so many bespoke pieces. An artist cannot simply work faster. In all these sectors the time spent is intrinsically connected to the value provided.

But this leads to a problem: increases in labour productivity (in sectors open to this like IT) will lead to higher wages. If those working in sectors that are not open to such gains are to avoid a real-term wage cut then their wages will need to rise as well. But, without increased productivity gains, this wage rise will simply result in increased costs to consumers or to the government. Over time, this means that those sectors that are not open to productivity gains will take up an ever-larger proportion of the economy. This simple effect was first outlined by the distinguished economist William Baumol, who referred to it as the 'cost

---

[673] Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth,* p. 147

disease'.[674] Empirical data from William Nordhaus gives substance to this theory.[675] The key point is this, 'if productivity in one sector and the total labour force remains constant the growth rate of the economy will asymptotically approach zero'.[676] The sectors that are not open to labour productivity gains will slowly drag down overall productivity. This has clearly happened in the UK, where 'trend labour productivity growth' has been negative since 2013.[677] If Baumol is right about the cost disease, the political push to get growth back through increased labour productivity may simply be impossible.[678] Again though, as with the possibility of absolute de-coupling, we are left with a question rather than a definitive answer. What has been true over the last couple of decades does not necessarily dictate what will be true going forward: AI may well change the paradigm, even in those industries that Jackson points to.

Stability and Growth

There is then – at the very least – cause to question whether absolute de-coupling is possible (making continued GDP growth undesirable for the health of our planet), and cause to question whether GDP growth remains a long-term possibility. Yet, in our current system, despite these questions, GDP growth seems to be utterly essential; its opposite creates instability and misery. As such, questions about whether it should grow, and any challenges to the dominance of GDP seem to be a political impossibility. In our current system we need GDP growth.

As Coyle notes, look at what happens when an economy is not growing and it is clear – so it seems – that economic (GDP) growth is essential.[679] Recession leads to massive financial volatility, debts that cannot be paid, and a huge spike in unemployment. We are caught in a system of virtuous or vicious cycles in which the economy is either expanding or contracting. We have either positive or negative feedback loops: 'When consumption falters

---

[674] William Baumol, *The Cost Disease: Why Computers get Cheaper and Health Care Doesn't* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2013).

[675] William Nordhaus, 'Baumol's Cost Disease: A Macroeconomic Perspective', NBER Working Paper 12218, (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006), 1-57, <https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w12218/w12218.pdf> [accessed 13th February 2022].

[676] William Baumol, 'Macroeconomics of unbalanced growth: the anatomy of the urban crisis', in *American Economic Review,* 57 (1967), 415-426 (p. 419).

[677] Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth,* p. 173.

[678] Coyle also notes how inappropriate the notion of productivity is for any sector that does not produce a physical product. What would it mean for her own productivity as an economist and author to rise? See Coyle, *Economics of Enough,* p. 200.

[679] Coyle, *Economics of Enough,* pp. 9, 24.

the system is driven towards a potentially damaging collapse with a knock-on impact on human flourishing'.[680]

The problem exists because we have structured our economy to tend towards cycles of growth or decline. Ever since the 2008 crash the work of Hyman Minsky – who was once seen as an economic outlier – has become mainstream. He argued that financial crises are endemic to later-modern (financially dominated) capitalism. Any period of economic prosperity encouraged borrowers and lenders into riskier, innovative behaviour, that would spiral virtuously, until (quite suddenly) there would be a loss of faith and the bubble would burst. All bankers, he argued, are 'merchants of debt who strive to innovate'[681] to create profits. In good times, the innovators court more and more risk, as so-called 'hedge' borrowing, turns into 'speculative' borrowing, and finally into (what he termed) 'ponzi' borrowing.[682] When the ruse is spotted, and it becomes obvious that money has been lent out that will never be returned, the market has (what has now become known as) its 'Minsky Moment'.[683] The market and the economy come crashing down.

Behind this cycle of boom or bust lies something rather counter-intuitive, namely, that most money in our economy comes into existence through the issuance of debt.[684] Commercial banks increase the money supply every time they issue a loan and with it a matching deposit. Money creation – in our current system – is thus based on debt creation. Similarly, the repayment of debt (without the issuance of new loans), reduces the total supply of money; it is the primary form of money destruction.

The fractional reserve system in place in most countries theoretically limits bank lending by ensuring a certain percentage of a banks liabilities (deposits) are held in bank reserves. However, in reality, what actually dictates the amount a bank lends is not set by the reserve

---

[680] Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth,* p. 82.

[681] Hyman Minsky, 'Working Paper No. 74: The Financial Instability Hypothesis' (The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 1992), 1-9, <https://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp74.pdf> [Accessed 27th February 2023], (p. 6)

[682] See Minksy, 'Working Paper No. 74', p. 6

[683] See Jaromir Benes and Michael Kumhof, 'IMF Working Paper: The Chicago Plan Revisited' (The International Monetary Fund, 2012), 1 -69, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2012/wp12202.pdf> [Accessed 27th February 2012], (p. 53).

[684] See Rupal Patel and Jack Meaning, The Bank of England, *Can't We Just Print More Money? Economics in Ten Simple Questions* (London: Cornerstone Press, 2022), pp. 169-170. For a long time, economic theory suggested that banks were simple intermediaries between lenders and borrowers, but modern economic theory is very clear that most money is created by commercial banks in the form of loans. The Central Bank does create some money through physical printing, and (since the financial crash) through Quantitative Easing (although the latter is simply another form of debt).

requirements but simply by 'whether they think a loan will be profitable'.[685] In other words, the amount a bank loans out is entirely dependent on the expectations of what the market will be doing. In Iceland this led to commercial banks expanding the money supply nineteen-fold in the fourteen-year period that ended with the 2008 financial crash.[686] As Minsky highlighted, a cycle of boom and bust is written into the current financial system.

This is only exacerbated by banks that are too big to fail and who know they will be bailed out by the government if everything goes wrong. This creates so-called moral hazard. The state guarantee of deposits – necessary because banks only have to keep a fraction of customer's deposits on reserve – encourages risky behaviour. Banks are shielded from the inherent uncertainty and risk that comes from lending; they know they will be bailed out if their coffers run dry. They can act *as if* they were unlimited, not bound by contingency or uncertainty. They can leave material bounds behind and soar into the heights of "riskless" lending. When the conditions are good there are no limits to how high they might soar. They can take on 'extraordinary – indeed absurd – levels of leverage',[687] operating in a risk-free world.   As debt piles mount higher the only way to keep the whole thing steady is to keep growing, so that debts can be serviced and that the whole edifice does not tumble down. Our current financial system is structurally reliant on continued growth.

There is another, connected but distinct, reason that our current system seems to require growth for stability. In what has now become a seminal text, the French economist Thomas Piketty argued that declining growth will – and indeed has – led to rising inequality.[688] Inequality grows when the rate of return on capital is larger than the rate of increase in national income. This matters because, as numerous studies have shown, a rise in inequality within a country leads to a rise in societal discontent and a range of health and social problems. Indeed, in wealthier countries income inequality is a better predictor of child

---

[685] Joshua Farley et al., 'Monetary and Fiscal Policies for a Finite Planet', *Sustainability,* 5 (2013), 2802-2026 (p. 2808).

[686] Frosti Sigurjónsson, 'Monetary Reform: A Better Monetary System for Iceland. A Report Commissioned by the Prime Minister of Iceland' (Reykjavik, 2015), 1-110, <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/skyrslur/monetary-reform.pdf> [Access 27th February 2023], (p. 10).

[687] Mervyn King, 'Banking: From Bagehot to Basel and Back Again. The Second Bagehot Lecture', (New York City, 2010), 1-25, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/speech/2010/banking-from-bagehot-to-basel-and-back-again-speech-by-mervyn-king> [Access 27th February 2023], (p. 10).

[688] See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014).

well-being than the average income.[689] As Coyle puts it, inequality 'corrodes the social scaffolding on which a prosperous economy must be built'.[690]

The problem, as Piketty outlines, is that in a capitalist system profit and wages compete for a share of national income. During the middle part of the twentieth century, with high growth rates based on increases in labour productivity, inequality within most countries fell. Since the late part of the twentieth century though the trend has reversed – labour productivity gains and GDP growth with it have fallen – and the share of national income taken as profit has increased again.[691] Inequality is getting worse, and the reason – unequivocally according to Picketty – is because of low economic growth. Wages are stagnant and profits take an increased proportion of national income.

The top 1% of earners in USA doubled their total share of income from 8% in 1980 to 18% in 2007. During Clinton's administration the top 1% of earners captured 45% of total growth in pre-tax income, and during the Bush administration they captured 73% of it.[692] Money makes more money, and those in debt become more indebted. It appears Quantitative Easing – which has massively increased the money supply - has only exacerbated this problem.[693] Low growth, so it seems, inevitably means a rise in inequality and so a rise in social instability.

At present then, we seem to be left with no choice – we must pursue continued economic growth. And perhaps because we believe we have no choice we tell ourselves that such growth might be (we desperately hope) concordant with living within our planetary boundaries as well.

But Jackson – and others – believe another way is possible; that we can provide social stability without continual growth in GDP. Philip Lawn, for example, argues that the "growth imperative" comes not from the capitalist system as such but because in its current form it

---

[689] See Andrew Briggs and Michael J. Reiss, *Human Flourishing: Scientific Insight and Spiritual Wisdom in Uncertain Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 49. See also Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2010).

[690] Coyle, *Economics of Enough,* p. 143.

[691] See Facundo Alvaredo, 'Inequality over the Past Century', *Finance and Development,* 48 (2011), 28-29 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2011/09/picture.htm> [accessed 13th March 2023].

[692] See Mark Blyth, *Austerity,* p. 15.

[693] See Keen, *A New Economics,* p. 66; see also Christopher Leonard, *Lords of Easy Money: How the Federal Reserve Broke the American Economy* (London: Simon Schuster, 2022).

is designed to grow.[694] Another way is possible. And if this is so, then the question of whether endless GDP growth is compatible with planetary limits can recede into the background. If stability is possible without GDP growth, we can leave the outdated measure behind and instead focus on what categorically must stop growing within a limited ecosphere, as well as what is essential to keep growing for the wellbeing of humanity, our fellow creatures, and the biodiversity of the planet. Whether GDP grows or not can then become an irrelevance.

To achieve stability without needing GDP growth, Jackson argues for changes to our economy under (what I see as) two broad headings. The first area he considers is our societal attention (my term). If our focus changes to matters of equality, health, the nature of work, the quality of our natural sources and sinks, then we might – so Jackson argues - be able to facilitate a stable economy that is not reliant on GDP growth.

There is, the reader might notice, an evident circularity here. GDP growth is necessary for stability. If we can create stability without GDP growth, then we can stop thinking about GDP. One of the ways we create stability without GDP growth is by no longer thinking about GDP. Such circularity should not surprise us, it is built into macroeconomics which is so dependent upon expectations. If we think GDP is a crucial measure, and so it is what inspires confidence, then stability will (at least in part) be dependent on GDP growth. If, conversely, we lose confidence in it as useful measure (as we must) then it simply will not have the same effect on investment and business decisions. By shifting the focus of our attention the connection between GDP and stability will be disrupted.

Picking up the threads that came out of the analysis of Tanner's work any new measures need to attend to the genuine complexity of human life and meaning. The problem with Tanner's account of FDC was that it was one-dimensional. In a parallel way GDP, as a measure of societal well-being and progress, is utterly one-dimensional. We need measures that will do justice to the complexity of social well-being. In broader terms still, and picking up the overarching themes of the thesis, we are back to thinking about *telos*. In a world of material limits, we must ask questions of purpose and end.

The second broad consideration concerns the role of money and the need for a very different financial infrastructure from the one currently in play. As explored above, our

---

[694] Philip Lawn, 'Is steady-state capitalism viable? A review of the issues and an answer in the affirmative' in *Ecological Economics Reviews,* 1219 (2011), 1–25.

current financial infrastructure is built for continuous GDP growth. Any move away from this trajectory can send our economies into financial tail spins. To create the possibility of stability without the need for GDP growth we must reconfigure the financial landscape.

In accord with Tanner, what is required is a wholesale move away from Financial Dominated Capitalism. In its place, an economy that is not reliant upon GDP growth will require a slower paced financial system, focused on socially productive long-term investment. This is the economic corollary of a theology that emphasises our creaturely lives *through time*, in contrast to Tanner's construal of discontinuous time.

I am not suggesting that changing what we measure and re-thinking our financial infrastructure would be sufficient for an economy to leave its reliance on GDP growth behind, but both of these changes are necessary. They are both crucial to building the possibility of a post-growth economy, one which is uninterested in the question of GDP figures, and instead properly attends to both the genuine limits of our sources and sinks, and to matters of human wellbeing and purpose. We consider changing what we measure and our financial infrastructure, in turn.

4.2 Accounting

GDP Growth and wellbeing

One of the reasons to leave GDP figures behind is because GDP fails to give us useful and meaningful data. I want to suggest two things: that GDP figures do not work as a proxy for wellbeing, and – just as importantly – as an economic indicator GDP simply measures the wrong things.

First then, we turn to consider the correlation between GDP and wellbeing. There is no doubt that in many developing countries there is a direct correlation between Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) adjusted GDP, and subjective measures of well-being. People who live in countries with a higher GDP per capita (up to about $40,000) also report to being happier.[695] More objective measures – such as life expectancy – also rise along with GDP, *up to a point.*[696] Economic growth that lifts people out of absolute poverty remains essential, and the agenda of this thesis in no way seeks to undermine the extraordinary reduction in

---

[695] Briggs and Reiss, *Human Flourishing,* pp. 30-33.
[696] See Jackson, *Prosperity,* p. 74.

absolute poverty during the second half of the twentieth century and the ongoing attempts to eliminate absolute poverty. [697]

However, above a certain point, the evidence for a correlation between rising well-being and rising GDP becomes less clear. Objective measures, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW)[698] designed by Herman Daly and John Cobb (and subsequently replaced by the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI)) show that the correlation between GDP and GPI breaks down from the 1970s onwards.[699] At the individual level it also appears that emotional well-being stops being correlated (even logarithmically) to income over $100,000.[700]

Subjective measures such as the Subjective Wellbeing Index also suggest that in countries with a higher income per capita, 'economic development has no statistically significant link to improved wellbeing at all.'[701] In 1974, Richard Easterlin wrote a seminal paper that revealed what became known as the Easterlin paradox. Despite constantly growing GDP the reported life-satisfaction of those in the US had not risen in three decades.[702] There is then a good case for saying that above a certain level of income the correlation between GDP and wellbeing breaks down, and as such GDP simply fails to work as a proxy for human welfare.

Second, GDP is a poor economic indicator. It only accounts for present flows of goods and services. It does not account for forms of wealth (natural, social, economic). It counts all economic flows as positive, including, for example, the destruction of primary forests, the

---

[697] See Briggs and Reiss, *Human Flourishing,* p. 29.

[698] See Herman Daly and John Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy towards Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1989). The index adjusts for "defensive" expenditures, such as policing, environmental degradation, and – positively – the many services provided without pay (e.g., caring for children).

[699] Jackson, *Prosperity,* p. 54.

[700] See Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, 'High Income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being', *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences,* 107 (2010), 16,489-16,493.

[701] Jackson, *Prosperity,* p. 59. See also Briggs and Reiss, *Human Flourishing,* p. 31.

[702] Richard Easterlin, 'Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?', in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz,* ed. by Paul A. David and Melvin W Reder (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 89-125. There have been some more recent disputable defences of the connection between GDP growth and increased wellbeing in developed nations. See Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, 'Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox', in *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity,* 2008 (2008), 1-87 (p. 3). Diane Coyle, at one time, also challenged the idea that there was no correlation. See Coyle, *Enough,* pp. 40-44. Her more recent work is far more sceptical of GDP as a useful measure of progress. See Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 138.

employment of more riot police to combat increasing civil unrest,[703] all forms of clean-up operation, and massively risky speculative investment.[704] It is also unable to account for non-monetary goods, such as familial care giving, as well as the massive benefit of improved goods and services that have often gone hand in hand with lower prices (for example, in computing).[705]

GDP thus fails as a measure on at least two counts: it fails to work as a proxy for wellbeing; it fails to consider wealth or externalities. These are the foundational problems, added to these are the serious problems of data collection that beset GDP figures.[706]

GDP has outlasted its usefulness. It is time to move on. It will not be possible to move the focus away from growth in material throughput unless we change what we measure. For what we measure is determined by and determines what we care about. As Diane Coyle puts it, 'we see what we measure'.[707] And if our sights are set on GDP then that will determine the shape of policy.

Alternative Measures

We need an approach that shifts the focus away from economic throughput alone and considers what matters to people and to planet. The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, set up by the French government in 2008, was clear that our national statistical apparatus needed serious revision, concluding that governments needed a wider range of measurements for good decision making, including environmental indicators and direct measures of well-being.[708]

Alongside measures around present wellbeing, we need measures that consider the future. For this reason, perhaps the most widely used indicator other than GDP, namely the Human Development Index (HDI), simply will not do. This measure brings together life expectancy

---

[703] These examples are given by Julia C. Kim, 'Bhutan and Beyond: The emergence of wellbeing economies' in *Limits and Beyond,* pp. 131-142 (p. 132).
[704] Coyle notes that in the UK the financial sector makes up a large proportion of GDP; she continues, that it, 'in effect counts the risk-taking as a plus for the economy'. Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 28.
[705] See Coyle, *Enough,* p. 36.
[706] Coyle notes that digital technology is not captured well at all in GDP figures. See Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 171.
[707] *Ibid,* p. 145.
[708] See Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Jean Fitoussi, 'Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress', (2009), 1-292, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf> [access 11th Dec 2023].

at birth, average length of schooling, and gross national income per capita.[709] This may well be an improvement on GDP, but still fails to think about sources and sinks.

As Coyle writes emphatically, we must 'take into account the stock *of resources*'.[710] She argues for some form of 'comprehensive wealth' measure, which takes capital (both sources and sinks) into consideration. In her later work, she argues more forthrightly for a 'new framework'[711] that can tell a different story: one of the degradation of natural capital, and the transformation of life (both positive and negative) through digital technology.[712] Similarly, Mark Carney argues that we need 'measures of income and welfare that reflect our values. Measures that count natural and social capital as well as economic capital'.[713]

Based on the work of John Hicks, Herman Daly also argues that crucial in any national accounting is the division of income from capital, yet our current system considers the consumption of capital as income.[714] As noted above, various measures exist such as Daly and Cobb's Index for Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW),[715] or the later Sustainable Net National Product (SNNP),[716] or the more commonly used Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI).[717] These are complex aggregates made up of environmental, economic and social elements, which seek to take into consideration depletion of resources, and negative impacts of their use, to give a full balance sheet, rather than just an income sheet, as GDP does. Or again, we might look to Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, which is another aggregate that collects national data across nine domains including health, education, the environment, psychological wellbeing, community vitality and good governance. It brings together objective measures of progress, with environmental measures, and subjective wellbeing measures.[718]

---

[709] 'Human Development Index', <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI> [accessed 13th February 2023].
[710] Coyle, *Enough,* p. 187.
[711] Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 138.
[712] Coyle, *Cogs and Monsters,* p. 165.
[713] Carney, *Value(s),* p. 338.
[714] See John Hicks, *Value and Capital,* 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, London: 1946). Hicks pointed out that any measure of income should indicate the maximum amount that can be produced and consumed without eroding the ability to produce and consume the same amount next year. Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 88.
[715] Daly and Cobb, *For the Common Good.*
[716] Daly, *Beyond Growth,* p. 99.
[717] See, for example, Philip Lawn and Matthew Clarke (eds.), *Sustainable Welfare in the Asia-Pacific: Studies using the Genuine Progress Indicator* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008). The book argues that Australia, Japan and New Zealand have already reached a level of GDP which means further growth could only be detrimental to their sustainable welfare.
[718] See Kim, 'Bhutan and Beyond'.

Finally, we turn to Kate Raworth's 'Doughnut'. Rather than create an aggregate, the doughnut highlights the necessary social foundations and the ecological ceilings for '*human prosperity in a flourishing web of life*'.[719] Between the social foundation and ecological ceiling lies the safe and just space for human flourishing built upon a 'regenerative and distributive economy'.[720] Rather than thinking about one aggregate it may be that indicators on *all* of these factors – the foundations and the ceilings – may well provide a set of far better measures, that do justice to the complexity of our common life, and so also be better able to guide policy.
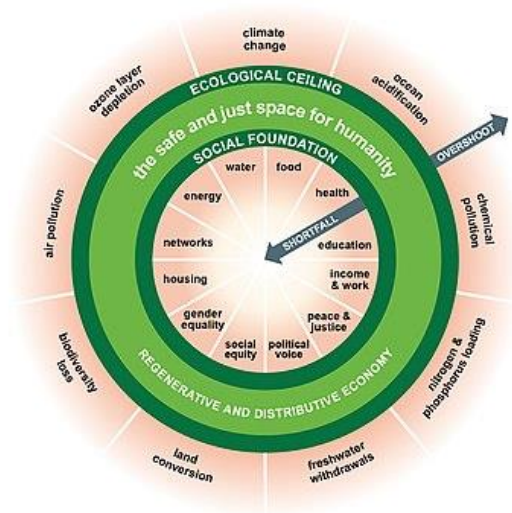
[721]

Unless and until GDP is scrapped as a measure it will continue to control our cultural imagination and so also governmental policy. If we started measuring a range of other things instead, we may find they begin to impact what we think is important, which may in turn enable us to look to a future beyond growth in production and consumption.

If economic stability without such growth is ever going to be possible it must begin with a change in expectations and a shift in our societal attention. Only by attending to something other than GDP, to our deeper hopes and dreams of social well-being, to something more eschatological in orientation, might we be able to move to a post-growth economy, to a system that is not reliant on self-destructive growth without limit.

---

[719] Raworth, *Doughnut Economics,* p. 60.
[720] *Ibid,* p. 44.
[721] *Ibid,* p. 44.

4.3 Finance

The significance of changing what we measure should not be underestimated because of the way it directs our vision. Yet, without fundamental reform to the financial system we are still in the grip of an unstable system which is either in a virtuous or vicious cycle, and which seems set to only exacerbate wealth inequalities.

Stemming out of the analysis of Tanner's economic theology, part three of this chapter focussed on the importance of asserting material limitation for economic thinking, and part four – so far – has tried to unpick some of the complex interdependencies between GDP growth and material throughput, well-being, and stability, and argue that a change of vision that gives attention to a range of indicators for flourishing is crucial if we are to aim for an economy that is not beholden to GDP data.

<u>Slowing Down</u>

This final section focuses on time, thinking through some of the implications of the fact that we are material creatures who move *slowly* through time. This will become the primary lens through which we can consider financial reform.

In emphasising discontinuous time, Tanner presents a schema that cannot contend with such reform. On her account what is needed is radical discontinuity; the hope of "interventions" in the capitalist system – so crucial in her earlier work *Economy of Grace* – disappear. My hope is that by thinking about *slowing down*, instead of a temporal break, we might be able to present something more constructive than Tanner.

Before we can think about any of that though, we need to consider what financial services are *for*. We are back to questions of teleology. As the first section of this chapter noted, the most fundamental question that theological economics can ask is simply, what is it all for?[722] Financial reform must surely start then, in the broadest terms, with finance re-finding its purpose in service to the wider economy. Finance cannot be an end in itself.

The financial services industry is there to serve the making of our common "home". It is more like a basic utility, a piece of infrastructure, like water and drainage, that should enable the work of the economy. It should sit underneath the goods and services that enable human flourishing and the enrichment of the earth's ecosystems.

---

[722] See Williams, 'Knowing our Limits', p. 24.

Yet finance can easily become an end, rather than serving the wider economy. Money moves around the financial markets with no purpose other than accumulation. So, for example, some estimates suggest that only 2% of the trillions of dollars traded daily on the currency markets is of significance for the "real" economy (importing or exporting goods and services), the rest is purely for speculation.[723]

In the USA, Christopher Leonard has argued that the Quantitative Easing (QE) by the Federal Reserve has created a massive inflation of financial assets. Rather than being put to productive use money created through QE poured into the stock market or housing market. (This may well be the primary reason QE did not cause inflation).[724] The money has not been put to use in service to societal goals; it has instead flowed into the financial economy, as "investors" hope that money will simply make more money. Speculation has taken over from productive investment as money moves around at dizzying speeds in search of yield or price rises, without having to ever touch the ground or be invested in illiquid assets that take time to come to fruition. The knock-on effect of all this has also been to hugely widen inequality, as financial assets have ballooned in value.[725]

If financial flows are going to become less speculative flows of money need to be slowed down, forced to somehow reconnect to the material economy, rather than simply float free in a virtual world which defies the limits of time and space. There are a range of policy proposals that have been suggested which seek to slow money down and re-connect it to the material economy. They aim at making the whole financial system more stable and so less reliant on economic growth. None of the ideas below are particularly novel – I would be more concerned if they were – they are simply presented here as they cohere with the theological emphases of this thesis.

First then, there have long been calls for a Financial Transactions Tax (FTT). Such a tax is aimed at those financial trades which seek to profit from tiny swings in currency markets

---

[723] As noted in Frans Doorman, 'Our Money: Towards a New Monetary System' (Research Triangle, NC: Lulu Press, 2015), 1-74, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Our-Money-06-4-2015-A5-Download-Positive-Money-28-8-2015-2.pdf> [accessed 13th March 2023], (p. 27 n. 10).
[724] The recent massive increases in inflation do not appear to have been triggered by QE, but by supply sides shocks.
[725] See Leonard, *Lords of Easy Money.*

over minute time frames. Reducing the volume of these so-called Ultra High Frequency Trades would help stabilise markets.[726]

More radically, Steve Keen suggests that policy is needed to ensure that primary markets are primary, and that secondary markets simply support them. A primary market is an IPO (an initial public offering) where shares are sold so that a company can raise revenue. The stock market on which such shares may be traded again and again and again forms a secondary market. It is important to have this secondary market, because no one would buy the initial shares if they could not be sold on. Keen proposes limits on the number of times shares can be traded, in order to 'make borrowing money to gamble on the prices of existing shares a very unattractive proposition'[727] The point here is to make financial markets less liquid (liquidity is the ease with which an asset can be converted into cash) in order to encourage longer term investment over short term speculation.

Next, productive investment – which by its very nature is *slow* - needs to be encouraged through government incentives and regulations, and through direct government investment. Specifically, investment is needed in 'assets that maximise our potential to flourish with the minimum level of material consumption, rather than in assets that maximise the throughput of material commodities'.[728] This means investing in the infrastructure of our common life and specifically the *services* they provide (education, health, sport, the arts and so forth). It also means investing in our ecosystems, and our management of waste, as well as working towards the so-called "circular economy". All of this is slow work though. It requires a much longer time horizon for profit than the profit that comes through the maximization of material throughput.

There also needs to be a shift away from investment in labour productivity towards investment in resource productivity. If our social and ecological wealth are in jeopardy, then the answer cannot be to simply use resources faster in order to make each labour hour

---

[726] See James Tobin, 'A Proposal for International Monetary Reform' in *Eastern Economic Journal,* 4 (1978), 153-159, for the original proposal. A FTT does exist in the UK, but it is far from comprehensive and does not tackle high volume low margin ultra-high frequency trading. See Laurey Boughey, Max Harris and Michal Rozworsk, 'The Case for a Comprehensive UK Financial Transactions Tax' (London: Stamp out Poverty, 2021), <https://www.robinhoodtax.org.uk/sites/default/files/Case%20for%20Comprehensive%20FTT.final_.Sept_.2021.pdf> [accessed 20th March 2023].
[727] Keen, *A New Economics,* p. 73.
[728] Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth,* p. 151.

more productive. Instead, we should focus on using energy and forms of wealth at a slower pace, on getting more out of each resource input.

Interestingly, a shift away from labour productivity, and towards a focus on the service sectors of the economy that are less open to productivity gains, may also combat the problem that Thomas Piketty identified - that low growth leads to greater inequality. His rule, so it seems, only applies when there is a high elasticity of substitution between labour and capital. In other words, if it is easy to switch out labour input for capital input (which is what labour productivity gains amount to) then, without economic growth, the share of national income does inexorably tend towards profit rather than wages. However, where there is a low elasticity of substitution – where it is hard to switch out labour for capital (for example in economies of "care, craft and culture" as Jackson puts it) – then Piketty's rule no longer applies.[729] If investment was focused on using resources productively (slowing down their transition to waste), rather than on speeding human work up, then equality could increase even in the context of no economic growth.

Financial transaction taxes, an emphasis on primary markets, policy to encourage productive investment, and a policy shift towards resource productivity over labour productivity; all these things that are about slowing down are crucial if we want to build an economy that can look beyond GDP growth.

In the analysis so far, we have left out one area that – because of its significance – needs to be treated in more detail, and that is debt. For an economy to be stable, without GDP growth being a necessity, requires a reduction in the amount of, and our reliance on, debt. Once again, much of this is about slowing down financial flows.

Reducing Debt

I begin by outlining some of the problems. First, whilst debt makes a claim on future production – because a loan needs to be paid back with interest – the levels of debt in the system are not grounded in material reality but in the expectations of other people's behaviour. What matters to a lender is not whether a debt can be paid over the long term, but whether that debt can be sold on in the short term.[730] Profit becomes a function of speed, and the connection to the material economy is severed.

---

[729] See *Ibid,* pp. 176-178.
[730] See Farley et al., 'Monetary and Fiscal Policies', pp. 2807-2809.

Second, As Minsky discovered (and as others ignored at the time), a system based almost exclusively on debt is inherently unstable. As good times lead to ever more complex financial innovation, we find ourselves in the position of an increasing number of highly complex unintelligible financial products: for example, Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs) – pools of loans bundled together to be sold as a single product – give way to CDOs squared – bundles of the bundles of loans. Profit is made through repackaging debt, as money makes money off money, in ways that are 'set loose from sagging profits through production'.[731] All that is needed to make a tidy profit becomes the circulation of financial products. What matters is not whether the underlying assets are credit worthy, but whether the financier can pass the product on. No one need think about that loosening thread connecting the financial product to the "real" economy.

At the same time, such products – although purportedly designed to spread risk – concentrate risk as everything becomes connected to everything else and no one can possibly trace the interdependencies within the system. Things move so fast that complex webs are built and become impossible to fully trace. As was found out in 2008, the interdependencies were not understood and the house of cards came crashing down.

Third, we find ourselves limited, bound and constrained by debt rather than the real limits of our shared world. For those that become debtors, the focus inexorably shifts towards paying one's debts. Tanner makes this point with rhetorical verve.[732] She also highlights the way in which government debt constrains and controls the decisions of governments, which are forced – by the markets, public perceptions, and their own ideologies – to prioritise the payment of their debts over other spending priorities.[733] Debt becomes limiting rather than the material constraints of our shared world. The focus becomes simply "tomorrow" and the payment of debt, rather than the long-term horizon. The ability to slow down, to think about purpose, recedes.

Fourth, under the current debt-based system, 'the condition of our payments system is directly linked to the condition of our financial and credit system'.[734] The fractional reserve

---

[731] Tanner, *A New Spirit,* p. 17

[732] *Ibid,* pp. 34-50.

[733] See Tanner, *A New Spirit,* pp. 22-23.

[734] Fran Boait and Graham Hodgson, 'Escaping Growth Dependency: Why reforming money will reduce the need to pursue economic growth at any cost to the environment' (London: Positive Money, 2018), 1-72, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Escaping-Growth-Dependency-final_print.pdf> [accessed 7th Jan 2024] (p. 28).

banking system ties a banks' liabilities (the deposits used by ordinary people to pay their day-to-day bills) to the loans it makes. This means that the payment system – that needs to be as robust as possible – is entwined with the riskier business of lending money. The ring fencing of retail banking divisions from investment banking divisions – recommended after the financial crash – may have separated the riskiest aspects of banking but has not ultimately separated the dual role banks play in enabling a means of payment and supplying loans. As Mervyn King notes, it is a 'pretence that risk-free deposits can be supported by risky assets'.[735]

Ironically, the fractional reserve system remains robust whilst depositors move slowly. But if a banks' loans look shaky and depositors get spooked, the system can get into trouble very fast indeed. As the crisis at Northern Rock in 2008 showed us, bank runs are not simply consigned to history.

Finally, as explored above, the current debt-focussed system takes the supply of money out of the hands of government and places it in the hands of commercial, profit seeking, banks. This entails the loss of a significant monetary tool in the economy. Quantitative Easing (and Tightening) brings a degree of control over the money supply to the central bank, but the money that comes from the central bank through QE only ever goes to the banks who then control what happens to that new money. They can use it to lend more money or invest it in financial assets, or simply sit on it – the banks remain in control. There is no encouragement towards investment in public goods which are (by their nature) unlikely to create revenue to pay the interest of debt.[736] Slow productive investment becomes side-lined in favour of making money from money as fast as possible.

These are some of the problems then around our current economy of debt. Debt, of course, is not a ubiquitous phenomenon, and so different types of debt may need to be thought about differently. For instance, Modern Monetary Theory argues that governments (whose debt is denominated in their own currency) should be unconcerned about running a massive deficit. On this account, government debt does not really matter, what matters are

---

[735] Mervyn King, 'Banking', p. 17
[736] See Farley, 'Monetary and Fiscal Policies', p. 2811.

the 'availability of our *real productive resources*' (such as labour supply and skills, available materials, energy, waste management, infrastructure, and so forth). [737]

Privately held debt is a different thing altogether, and as Keen puts it bluntly, 'we need to reduce private debt back to its levels during that Golden Age [1950-1973] – but we should find a better way of doing so than another world war'.[738] He argues for a massive debt jubilee through which private and corporate debts are massively reduced or written off. (No extra spending power would be created; there would just be a vast decrease in credit backed money). He then argues for a new system for mortgages in which potential loans are tied to the income potential of the property. This would mean that every potential buyer would be able to borrow the same amount of money; the person who could make the highest offer on a house would thus be the one who had the most savings, not the one who could secure the largest loan.[739]

Another possibility is regulation or incentives to promote equity financing rather than debt financing. As Mervyn Kind suggests, in broad terms, what our financial system needs is 'much, much more equity; much, much less short-term debt'.[740] Companies, and indeed banks themselves, could be funded less by loans, and more by investment (shares) that have a long-term time profit horizon.

Another proposal – currently being given serious thought – is a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC). In previous eras cash was a far more significant part of the financial system than it now is. In contrast to the majority of our money supply, cash does not enter the economy through a commercial bank making a loan, but by the Central Bank printing money which is then bought by wholesalers and sold on to commercial banks.[741] As our economy becomes increasingly cashless though, our money supply becomes ever more dependent on commercial banks issuing debt, rather than the issuance of cash, and that means that our means of payment becomes ever more tied to the riskier business of borrowing and lending. A 'digital pound' (as the Bank of England are referring to it) would

---

[737] Stephanie Kelton, *The Deficit Myth: How to Build a Better Economy* (London: John Murray Press, 2021), p. 3. See Appendix I for more on Modern Monetary Theory.
[738] Keen, *A New Economics,* p. 65.
[739] Keen, *A New Economics,* pp. 65-73.
[740] King, 'Banking', p. 18.
[741] See Bank of England, 'How do we know how much money to print?'. <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/explainers/how-do-we-know-how-much-money-to-print> [accessed 20th March 2023].

act in the same way as cash and so make our means of payment less reliant on debt. As the Bank of England put it, 'We think the digital pound could help us maintain trust in money and protect our financial system, while also improving payments by increasing efficiency and enabling innovation'.[742] By reducing the reliance on commercial banks and debt issuance it would improve stability in the system and ensure that money is orientated towards its primary purpose, as a token of trust to enable exchange.[743]

More radical proposals

There are also some more radical proposals that have been put forward, that seek to break the connection between the issuance of loans and the money supply. Such proposals assume that more regulation will not change the underlying instability of the current system, and that something entirely different is needed. As the Club of Rome put it, there is *No Limit to Learning*; we have the imaginative capacity to dream up a different financial architecture.

One such proposal replaces the creation of money by banks with the creation of money by the Central Bank. New money would enter the economy, not through the issuance of further loans, but by the treasury issuing perpetual zero-coupon bonds which would be bought by the central bank. This would then give the Treasury new money which could be used to: 'finance government spending, in place of taxes or borrowing; to make direct payments to citizens; to redeem outstanding debt, public or private; or to make new loans through banks or other intermediaries'.[744] The most thoroughly worked out proposal for a Sovereign Money System can be found in *Modernising Money.*[745]

Perhaps surprisingly, a Sovereign Money System has recently been researched by the IMF.[746] In 2012 Jaromir Benes and Michael Kumhof, revisited the original Chicago Plan (proposed by Henry Simmons and pushed by Irving Fisher). This original Plan forms the basis for later sovereign money systems. Fisher suggested that the Chicago Plan would mitigate against booms and busts, eliminate the risk of bank runs, enable governments to issue money

---

[742] See Bank of England, 'The digital pound'. <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/the-digital-pound> [accessed 20th March 2023].

[743] David Barmes and Fran Boait, 'The Tragedy of Growth: to protect wellbeing and avoid ecological disaster we must abandon GDP growth and transform our economic system' (London: Positive Money, 2020), 1-46, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Positive-Money-Tragedy-of-Growth-Digital-Single-Pages.pdf> [accessed 20th March 2023], (p. 27).

[744] Boait and Hodgson, 'Escaping Growth Dependency', p. 54.

[745] Andrew Jackson and Ben Dyson, *Modernising Money: Why Our Monetary System is Broken and how it can be Fixed* (London: Positive Money, 2012). See especially pp. 219-240. See Appendix II.

[746] See Benes, 'The Chicago Plan Revisited'.

directly at zero interest, and enable a massive reduction in government and private debt. The IMF paper concludes that there is good reason to believe that implementing some version of the Chicago Plan would indeed result in all four of these outcomes.

In the context of this thesis, the most important of these outcomes are stability and the reduction of debt. As for stability, the theory suggests that in "good times" there would be an absolute limit on lending: banks could only ever lend by borrowing from what their customers had. In "bad times" the lack of new loans would *not* lead to an automatic reduction in the money supply (as loans are not creating money, and more money could be supplied via the Central Bank without increasing the debt burden, when required). This would have a particularly significant impact on the housing market where house prices are largely determined by how much money banks create via mortgages. As Steve Keen suggests, there is a problem when 'credit-based demand' becomes the major component of 'aggregate demand' as is the case in the housing market.[747] The argument is that in this new system, with banks unable to create money in the good times, the inherent instability that Minsky identified would largely disappear.

The hope of this proposal is that cycles of boom and bust are brought under control; stability becomes possible. First, with a 100% reserves requirement the possibility of a bank being too big to fail disappears and with it the perverse incentives to flirt with egregious risks. Second, it should reduce levels of debt. Under the old system, when a loan is repaid the bank reduces both its liability (the borrower's bank balance) and the asset (the loan). In order to ensure the money supply does not fall more loans have to be issued. Debt must keep circulating. But in the new system debt repayment does not affect the money supply; it simply involves a transfer of an asset. New loans do not therefore need to be made to maintain the supply of money. Loans could – and indeed must – continue to play a crucial role, ensuring productive investment and innovation, but they would not expand excessively during good times. If, and when, the money supply is increased, the new money issued to the government could be used to pay down government debt or – preferably – spent on productive investment directly into the economy. The supply of money can be increased without new debt being created, and so in time the levels of debt could fall. Third, a reduction in debt also means the possibility of a reduction in inequality and so a more stable

---

[747] Keen, *New Economics,* p. 59.

society.[748] In all then, the advocates of this system argue it would enable the possibility of stability, and even stability without growth.

That is the theory, at least. However, it is unclear whether the proposal would work out in the way its advocates suggest. Principally, it may be that the proposals for a Sovereign Money System fail to consider the extent to which the financial system is a de-centralised and largely organic complex system. The relational foundation of money, as a token of trust, and the complex interdependencies at work within the financial system, do not seem to have been fully considered. The problem for this proposal seems to parallel my earlier critique of Tanner – the complexities of the system are underplayed.

Beat Weber critiques a Sovereign Money System on this basis. First, he argues that a Sovereign Money System appears to assume that money gains its legitimacy from its legal status rather than gaining legitimacy from the people who use it as a mutual token of trust within a society.[749] As the Bank of England seems keenly aware, the introduction of a CBDC depends on it being trusted and accepted by the people who may use it.[750] If a new supply of money is not trusted then it cannot be the foundation of any form of stability.

Second, Beat argues that state control of the money supply is neither possible nor particularly helpful. New and private means of payment can always be created - 'debts held by those of good reputation can always be swapped with third parties, creating a new means of payment'.[751] And, even if the state did control the supply of money there is no guarantee that this would bring stability. The velocity of money (the number of times money changes hands) is unstable – being inherently based on people's expectations – and so it cannot be controlled centrally.[752] And, further, the extent to which changes in money supply 'promotes growth, inflation or purely financial expansion escapes control of a monetary authority'.[753]

---

[748] *Ibid,* p. 260.
[749] Beat Weber, *Democratizing Money?: Debating Legitimacy in Monetary Reform Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 168-169.
[750] See Bank of England, 'The digital pound: a new form of money for households and businesses?' (2023), pp. 1-118. <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/paper/2023/the-digital-pound-consultation-working-paper.pdf?la=en&hash=5CC053D3820DCE2F40656E772D9105FA10C654EC> [accessed 20th March 2023].
[751] Weber, *Democratizing Money?,* p. 171.
[752] Weber's more theoretical point is that a Sovereign Money System is based on the quantity theory of money (monetarism) advocated by Friedman. This theory has now largely been abandoned.
[753] Weber, *Democratizing Money?,* p. 172.

The complexities and uncertainties are simply too great for one tool (supply of money into the economy) to stabilise the whole system.

Thirdly, there are those knock-on effects which Weber thinks have not been properly thought through. He suggests a Sovereign Money System might exacerbate risk, as the regulated and controlled banking sector is scorned by those seeking higher returns in riskier financial assets. He also argues that such a system would not necessarily cause debt levels to fall, that it may in fact cause productive investment to fall, and that it could lead to an increase in inequality.[754]

It may be then that such a radical proposal as this does not actually provide quite the answer its advocates would hope for. Initially, in the terms of this thesis, it seems appealing. In curtailing the commercial banks' ability to issue debt it appears to create a system that re-grounds money in our material finitude; and in so doing it reconnects money to purpose, and to slow productive investment. However, it may be that ironically such hopes flounder because the proposals forget that money is a human relational construct, with all the attendant complexities and uncertainties that come with that.

What instead may be possible, as a less radical proposal, would be Sovereign Money Creation, as an additional tool of monetary policy.[755] Money could be supplied as indicated above through direct government spending, but commercial bank loans would also continue to be part of the monetary supply. This would mean new money could enter the economy without the issuance of new debt. And it could be spent on long term investment and infrastructure. This then may be a more modest, but workable addition to a suite of changes to make finance less dominant, and to slow money down, thus making the financial system fit for a post-growth economy.

I may wish that a Sovereign Money System was the answer. But there was never going to be a silver bullet here. To hope to find one would be to disappear into fantasy land again and take flight from our material finitude once more. Our financial world is inevitably messy, indeterminate, and complex, for that is what we are. Yet, even if such a system is not the answer there is no doubt that our current financial system needs massive overhaul, disconnected as it has become from material limits and our slow march through time.

---

[754] *Ibid,* pp. 174-179.
[755] See Boait and Hodgson, 'Escaping Growth Dependency', p. 53.

To counter this we need a range of "interventions" in the current system that all slow money down, make the system more stable, and so make a post-growth economy possible. Such interventions include new forms of taxation, incentives towards productive investment and the replenishment of our sources and sinks, as well as a reduction in the levels of, and our reliance on, debt.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to engage in economic debate, informed by a theological emphasis on finitude. The basic presentation of the chapter has proceeded from theological foundations to economics. The theology worked out in the previous two chapters pushes towards certain economic positions and possibilities, and away from others. Yet there is no simple linear movement. The encounter with economics has reinforced the need to think theologically about finitude; ecological economics suggests certain theological ways of looking at the world. As noted in the introduction, the road is not one way. It is the ecological need to attend with proper seriousness to our finitude that was the starting place for questioning certain theological approaches to limits. At the end of this chapter, we thus come full circle.

The chapter began by surveying some of the current field of economic theology, suggesting that much of the current field is concerned with asking questions of purpose. Whilst this is clearly crucial, I have sought to move beyond asking "what is it all for?" and put in some building blocks for a theological economics that emphasises our creaturely material finitude.

To do this I began by assessing Kathryn Tanner's economic theology. Her Keynesian reflections in *Economy of Grace* were viewed as having much to commend them (despite the fact that she has distanced herself from this work more recently). However, in as much as her proposals assumed continued increases in labour productivity and economic growth they failed to properly attend to the finite sources and sinks of our planet.

I was more critical of her newer work. I suggested that in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism,* Tanner presented a flattened, one-dimensional picture of FDC, and so failed to do justice to the properly variegated and complex reality of our economy. I also identified problems with the theological underpinnings of the work. Her emphasis on a temporal break, that allows us to break from the past, live largely free from future concern, and focus on the immediate present, not only pushed a questionable theological outlook, but also

made it impossible for her to propose genuine and incremental reforms that might reduce the dominance of finance within the system. She was only able to 'think the break'[756] as she herself put it.

Pushing forward then, the chapter sought to think through what it might mean to attend to the finite nature of our planet, the complexities and uncertainties of human existence, and the inexorable but slow turning of time.

It argued that a theological emphasis on our material finitude forces us first and foremost to contend with the very real limits to growth that our planet presents. Such limits are not to be regarded as something sinful to overcome but part of God's good creation. We are to work within them, viewing ourselves as part of the earth to which we belong, rather than as somehow above it. Theological economics must include an acceptance of the fundamentally competitive logics of finitude: the interdependencies of the ecosphere (of which we are a part), as well as the limits of sources and sinks.

Stemming out of this I suggested that if theology is to take limits seriously it will support a post-growth economics. The question of whether GDP can continue to grow despite planetary boundaries was left open. Instead, I emphasised the need to move away from GDP as a criterion for success. Simply counting GDP only measures income and entirely forgets assets – our dependence upon a wider ecosystem – and it ignores the complex and relational way humans find meaning and happiness. Instead, we need measures that focus on *telos,* and that pay attention to our embeddedness in the wider ecosystem.

The other aspect of post-growth economics I considered was our financial infrastructure. In contrast to temporal breaks, we need ways to force money to slow down, and so be re-orientated towards productive investment. I suggested that there can be no single radical fix which forgets the complexities of the system – to look for such is but another attempt to leave our finitude behind, to confuse what is part and parcel of our finite lives with what is sinful. Hence, instead of "thinking the break" or looking for the fix that might take us to a utopia (a no place) beyond the difficulties of capitalism, we should instead seek those "interventions" in as many places as possible, such that the dominance of finance might recede. With such interventions we might begin to re-orientate our financial infrastructure to better serve our common homemaking, and not just serve the increase of mammon.

---

[756] Tanner, *New Spirit,* p. 31.

A theological economics that focusses on material finitude requires a change in what we measure and a shift in our financial infrastructure. This is at least part of what is entailed by a theological anthropology that seeks to live with – rather than to overcome – the fundamentally competitive limitations of time and space, that accepts our finitude instead of seeing it as something sinful to break away from, that focuses on purpose, and gives this-worldly ideas as to what economic "success" might really mean.

Conclusion

There are many forms of limitation and constraint that are clearly abhorrent. We might think about the constraints that come from violence and war, political tyranny, economic injustice, prejudice, or the intersections of them all. The manifold oppressions and coercions in our world must be fought against, and nothing in this thesis seeks to suggest that we should ever come to terms with such limitations to freedom and to flourishing.

Yet precisely because we stand opposed to such sinful constraints, we do need to be clear about the kind of limitations that are part and parcel of our God-given creaturely lives. If we want to oppose the sinful imposition of limits then we need to be able to properly attend to the competitive limits of creaturely life, distinguish between the effects of sin and finitude, and have positive, this-worldly, visions of what life together could actually look like.

First, and most importantly in all this, is the fundamentally competitive logic of temporal and spatial finitude. Such a logic can be contrasted both with the non-competitive logic of our relation to the divine and the sacrificial logics of our sinful existence. The competitive realities of material finitude have though too often been confused with either one of these. The problem with our approach to creaturely limits is that we either see them as inherently sacrificial or we try to erase them; neither is right.

On one side, the non-competitive relation with God has been too easily and simply seen as the paradigm for thinking about our relation to others, without proper attention being given to the difference that material finitude makes. Creaturely flourishing does not depend on overcoming the competitive limits of time and space. Equally, on the other side, the inherently competitive limits of our creaturely existence should not shape our thinking about our relation to the divine; God's presence does not come via our absence.

In the work of all three of our main interlocutors, I have shown confusions in and around these non-competitive and competitive logics. Coakley is avowedly committed to the non-competitive relation between God and creatures, and at the same time she is invested in properly attending to the competitive limits of material life. Yet, she does not always manage to hold these two logics apart. The competitive limitations of time and space seem to creep into her understanding of contemplation such that our relation to God is predicated on a withdrawal; only through a contemplative effacement do we meet God. This

is the now familiar critique of Coakley, given such force by Tonstad. Yet, the critique can suffer the opposite problem: the non-competitive relation to the divine can begin to shape our hopes for life within material finitude. The competitive limitations of time and space are erased, such that there is a failure to do justice to our creaturely limits.

Williams' thinking about difficulty and risk help build a picture of the constraints of material life. The competitive realities of material finitude mean that not all goods can be realised, that there must be some form of negotiation with the desires of others, desires which will not perfectly align with my own. All this means that non-sinful difficulty is central to creaturely life. Equally, our contingent existence means we cannot but take risks, take one path and not another, step out into a future of unknown consequences. The competitive constraints of creaturely life are clear in Williams' work. Yet, his rhetoric of dispossession confuses the matter. In advocating for a life without defences, without boundaries, the competitive constraints of creaturely life seem to be forgotten.

Tanner, particularly in her systematic work, is exceptionally clear about both the non-competitive logic of divine-creature relations and the competitive logic of creaturely relations. Yet, when it comes to her economic theology, those competitive limitations seem to recede or even disappear. Planetary limits to endless growth are not considered, but living with limits must mean attending to the real and genuine constraints of our shared earth. We – and all our fellow creatures – rely on the same biosphere, and the same limited sources and sinks. We cannot continue to extract more and dump more without impact; the sources have limits, the sinks fill up, ecosystems tip as planetary boundaries are crossed. This is the basic reality of the competitive constraints of our existence.

Stemming out of this primary theme, around the fundamentally competitive limits of creaturely life, are the two other major threads of this thesis. Again and again, we have come to questions of sin and finitude. In both Coakley and Williams, a purgative journey seems to be elided with a unitive one. It is never clear whether forms of vulnerability, or difficulty, or risk are due to our lives as contingent beings, or our lives in a fallen world. We are called, by both authors, to effacement and dispossession, to forms of erasure or self-abandonment. Whilst these may be ways to describe our attempts to repent of the egotistical inward turn, they do not seem to express anything of the vocation we might be called into.

Dispossession may be a way of thinking about a life in extremis, the act of a martyr. Or alternatively it may be a way of thinking about the purgative and difficult task of dis-possessing ourselves of our egotistical self-absorption. In either case dispossession finds its referent in relation to sin. The rhetoric categorically fails to do justice to a vision of contemplation, or a vision of good human relations, where we find ourselves in relation to others' voices.

Life as we might hope it to be is precisely *not* found in dispossession, in the giving up of oneself, in a sacrificial logic. Instead, following Bakhtin, we find our voice only in and through the voice of others. The metaphors of making music together, or dancing, or feasting, provide much more apt ways of thinking about our life together, than the rhetoric of dispossession – with its sacrificial logic – ever could.

In Tanner's work, confusion around sin and finitude is most clearly seen in relation to her theological reflections on time. In her construction, the one who is set free from sin is also set free from the constraints of time. In contrast, I suggest that accepting creaturely limits means being people who live with time, through the slow passage of time. I argue for the need to build a financial infrastructure that reflects, and is grounded in, this slow movement through time.

The final major thread concerns the need for teleological visions that remain rooted in the earth. Without these we lose any sense or any hope of what might be, and instead float into the non-competitive relations of the divine life, unmoored from the competitive realities of material existence. If we have any hope of building a common home together on this earth then we need to think about what that might look like at its best, rather than simply wishing such limits away.

This means developing the kind of visions of contemplation and goodly relation that are noted above. For economics, it means spurning the obsession with GDP and turning instead to think about purpose, creating measures that are focused upon the welfare of the earth and our communities.

Through these three threads, and in conversation with three significant Anglican thinkers, I have sought to outline a theology of limits. Such a theology is so crucial in our day as we are forced to face up to the limits of our planet. To attend to our fundamental limits, in regard

to our relation with God and with others, matters particularly because it shapes how we then think about making our home together.

The clarifications needed around competition, sin and finitude, and teleology, are more than just conceptual clarifications for theologians. There is a genuine danger for theology, if it makes confusions in these areas, that it might find itself accidentally aligned with a form of economics that utterly refuses limits and continues to pillage our common creaturely home. Indeed, as was made clear in chapter three, it is the present urgent ecological question that forces theology to re-think its understanding of creaturely finitude, as much as it is a theological assessment of limits that forces a particular economic outlook. The road is not straight: a theology of limits certainly does suggest a particular understanding of our common economic task, but it is also our present predicament which shows us that theology must properly clarify the implications of the fundamental limitations of temporal and spatial finitude.

Such clarification is what this thesis has sought to provide, not by providing a comprehensive picture, but by showing where confusions exist in the contemporary Anglican theological landscape, where wrong turns have been taken, and where clarifications can be made. By engagement in the work of three scholars deeply committed in principle to the non-competitive relation to the divine *and* the inherently competitive logics of creaturely finitude I have sketched out some of the contours of a theology of finitude. I have advocated for a theological approach that positively values the constraints, negotiations, and limits, that are essential to our material creaturely existence.

If theology has any hope of creating foundations for a sustainable future, then it must begin with such an approach, paying heed to the intrinsic competitive limits of our creaturely lives. The fundamentally competitive realities of creaturely life must not be eclipsed by the temptation towards purely non-competitive utopias; the effects of finitude must not be mistaken for the perversions of sin; our eschatological visions must give us a glimpse of the world we might seek, here and now, as creatures of the dust. The theological task is urgent: we must learn to live with limits.

Appendix I – Modern Monetary Theory

Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) argues that a currency issuer that only has debt in its own currency does not need to be bound by financial constraints. Government spending is not financed by "our" taxes, rather the government first creates the money that it gives to us and requires us to pay some of it back in taxes. Taxation does not actually go to the government, so much as it is simply money that is taken out of circulation, whilst government spending puts money into circulation. The real limits then come from our material, ecological and productive capacity.

So, by way of example, the challenge for the NHS and Social Care is not how we fund it but one of capacity. There are simply not enough health and social care workers, whilst demand only increases as people live longer and the population ages. As Frans Doorman argues, focusing on the monetary side of this is a distraction from the real limits we face.[757]

MMT continues to be a hotly contentious economic theory. There is significant online chatter about the merits or otherwise of MMT, particularly its constructive proposals including a job guarantee programme. Most striking in my mind is that it was written during an era of incredibly low interest rates and low inflation. For now, at least (2023), both have disappeared. It is also unclear of its relevance outside of the USA, given the status of the Dollar as the global reserve currency.

Even if one accepts that a currency issuer is not *necessarily* bound by financial constraints, the current financial set up – including a very powerful bond market and foreign exchange market – means that *de facto* government debt *does* create constraints and limits. The government is constrained by debt as Tanner suggests. The market tantrum following the UK mini-budget of September 2022, and the subsequent government's priority to calm the markets, make this constraint abundantly clear.

---

[757] Frans Doorman, 'Our Money: Towards a New Monetary System' (Research Triangle, NC: Lulu Press, 2015), p. 52 n. 18. http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Our-Money-06-4-2015-A5-Download-Positive-Money-28-8-2015-2.pdf (accessed 13th March 2023).

Appendix II – Sovereign Money

The basic idea is as follows.

Each bank would have three accounts with the Central Bank. The first is the transaction account. This account provides a means of payment. Each customer would have a transaction account, with all deposits requiring 100% backing by government issued money. If a customer had £1,000 in their account, then there would have to be a corresponding £1,000 sitting in the transaction account of the bank at the Central Bank. Money in these accounts would be sovereign money and entirely guaranteed. This thus protects the central function of money – as a means of payment. The second account is the investment account. This account could include money from the bank's earnings, and money invested or borrowed from customers wishing to make a return on funds that they do not need access to. Any money that customers held in this account would not be guaranteed. And crucially – as deposits (ie money in the transaction account) must be backed by 100% reserves – the bank cannot create credit though the creation of new deposits ex-nihilo. The third account would be the bank's own business account, for paying salaries and so forth.

New money would be created by the Bank of England, and the control of the money supply would be overseen by some form of Monetary Committee, probably with an inflationary target set by government (much as the MPC is tasked with targeting 2% inflation now). The new supply of money would be credited to the Government's account with the Central Bank. The money could be used to finance government spending, finance tax cuts, make direct payments to citizens, or pay down the national debt (assuming this has not been got rid of in another way). Aside from this, some of the new supply could be lent directly to banks to fund productive business investment.

The transition to such a system would involve two stages. The initial stage would involve an overnight switch in which the liabilities that banks currently hold in the form of customers' current accounts would convert into a 'transaction account'. The money in this account would be state issued, and would be held in the Central Bank, accessible to the customer through their bank. No new money comes into circulation through this, it just converts bank-issued money into state-issued money. Yet it does massively reduce the liabilities of the banks without reducing their assets, and so some form of 'Conversion Liability' would have to be applied to the banks by the Central Bank, charging £1 for every £1 converted from a deposit liability into state-issued currency. This liability would then be paid down

over time as existing loans given out by the banks matured. To avoid a reduction in the amount of money circulating the money paid back to the Central Bank would automatically be given to the Treasury to be spent back into the economy. At the switchover, fixed term savings accounts would convert to Investment Accounts, and customers could open new Investment Accounts. These would continue to be liabilities to the bank, providing money to invest and loan. The banks would (initially) have far more in their own operational account (converted from their reserves) which could also be transferred to their investment pool, ensuring that there is enough money available for productive investment.

Bibliography

Abdelal, Rawi, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons, 'Re-constructing International Political Economy: Some conclusions drawn from a crisis' in *Constructing the International Economy,* ed. by Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons (London: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 237-239

Adams, John, *Risk* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Adams, Nicholas, *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013),

Alvaredo, Facundo, 'Inequality over the Past Century', *Finance and Development,* 48 (2011), 28-29 <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2011/09/picture.htm> [accessed 13th March 2023].

Apollinaris of Laodicea, 'Fragments', in *The Christological Controversy,* trans. and ed. by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 82-85

Arent, Douglas, and Richard Tol, 'Chapter 10: Key Economic Sectors and Services', in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 659-708, <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 10th October 2022]

Arrow, Kenneth, and Geard Debreu, 'Existence of an equilibrium for a competitive economy', *Econometrica,* 22 (1954), 265-290

Ayres Robert U. et al., 'The underestimated contribution of energy to economic growth', in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics,* 27 (2013), 79-88

Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist, ed. by Michael Holoquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

—— *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

—— *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* trans. by Vern W McGree, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986)

Bardi, Ugo, '*The Limits to Growth*, the Story of an Idea', in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from the Limits to Growth, what did we learn and what's next?,* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereira (Exapt Press, 2022), pp. 9-14

Barmes, David, and Fran Boait, 'The Tragedy of Growth: to protect wellbeing and avoid ecological disaster we must abandon GDP growth and transform our economic system' (London: Positive Money, 2020), 1-46, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Positive-Money-Tragedy-of-Growth-Digital-Single-Pages.pdf> [accessed 20th March 2023]

Barnier, Edward, *Economics for a Fragile Planet: Rethinking Markets, institutions and Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2022)

Barrera, Albino, *Economic Compulsion and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Baumol, William, *The Cost Disease: Why Computers get Cheaper and Health Care Doesn't* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2013)

—— 'Macroeconomics of unbalanced growth: the anatomy of the urban crisis', in *American Economic Review,* 57 (1967), 415-426

Beard, Mary, 'Risk and the Humanities: Alea iacta est', in *Risk*, ed. by Layla Skinns, Michael Scott and Tony Cox (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 85-108

Becker, Ernest, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, repr. 2011)

Begbie, Jeremy, *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Benedict XVI, *caritas in veritate,* <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html> [accessed 16/01/2023]

Benes, Jaromir, and Michael Kumhof, 'IMF Working Paper: The Chicago Plan Revisited' (The International Monetary Fund, 2012), 1 -69, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2012/wp12202.pdf> [Accessed 27th February 2012]

Berners-Lee, Mike, *There is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

Bezzant, Rhys, 'The Ecclesiology of Rowan Williams', in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays,* ed. by Matheson Russell (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), pp. 1-24

Blanchard, Kathryn D., *The Protestant Ethic or the Spirit of Capitalism: Christians, Freedom, and Free Markets* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010)

—— 'Review: *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*', in *Studies in Christian Ethics,* 34 (2021), 574-578

Blatt, John M., *Dynamic Economic Systems: A Post-Keynesian Approach* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983)

Blond, Philip, 'There is no wealth but life', in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice,* ed. by Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 77-99

Blyth, Mark, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Boait, Fran, and Graham Hodgson, 'Escaping Growth Dependency: Why reforming money will reduce the need to pursue economic growth at any cost to the environment' (London: Positive Money, 2018), 1-72, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Escaping-Growth-Dependency-final_print.pdf> [accessed 7th Jan 2024]

Bobulescu, Roxana, 'From Lotka's biophysics to Georgescu-Roegen's bioeconomics', in *Ecological Economics,* 120 (2015), 194-202

Boltanski, Luc, and Éve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005)

Bonhoeffer, *Christology,* trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966).

Booth, Wayne, 'Introduction', in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) pp. xiii-xxvii

Botkin, James W., Mahdi Elmandjra and Mircea Malitza, *No Limits to Learning: Bridging the Human Gap: A Report to the Club of Rome* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979)

Boughey, Laurey, Max Harris and Michal Rozworsk, 'The Case for a Comprehensive UK
Financial Transactions Tax' (London: Stamp out Poverty, 2021),
<https://www.robinhoodtax.org.uk/sites/default/files/Case%20for%20Comprehensive%20FT
T.final_.Sept_.2021.pdf> [accessed 20th March 2023]

Boulding, Kenneth, 'The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth', in *Environmental Quality in a
Growing Economy,* ed. by Henry Jarrett (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1966), pp.
3-14

Bourgeault, Cynthia, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Plymouth: Cowley, 2004)

Briggs, Andrew, and Michael J. Reiss, *Human Flourishing: Scientific Insight and Spiritual Wisdom in
Uncertain Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

Butler-Bowdon, Tom, 'Introduction', in *The Wealth of the Nations: The Economics Classic - A
Selected edition for the Contemporary Reader,* intro. and ed. by Tom Butler-Bowdon
(Chichester: Capstone, 2010) pp. xvii - xliv

Carney, Mark, *Value(s): Building a Better World for All* (London: William Collins, 2021)

Castelvecchi, David, 'Electric Cars and batteries: How will the world produce enough?, in
Nature, News Feature, 17th August 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-
02222-1> [accessed 11th Dec 2023].

Cha, Boram, 'Suffering, Tragedy, Vulnerability: A Triangulated Examination of the Divine-
Human Relationship in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Rowan Williams, and Sarah Coakley'
(Doctoral thesis: University of Durham, 2019, pp. 1-205)
<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/13372/1/PhD_thesis_(final).pdf?DDD32> [Accessed 28th June
2021]

Charles III, 'Foreword to the first edition', in Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations
for the Economy of Tomorrow,* 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. xxiii-xiv

Cheyne, Allan, and Donato Tarulli, 'Dialogue, Difference and Voice in the Zone of Proximal
Development', in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* ed. by Harry Daniels, 2nd edn., (London:
Routledge, 2005), pp. 122-141

Coakley, Sarah, 'Afterword', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed.
by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 168-170

—— *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)

—— *The Cross and the Transformation of Desire: The Drama of Love and Betrayal* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2014)

—— 'Dark Contemplation and Epistemtic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila', in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology,* ed. by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 280-312

—— 'Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology', in *Practicing Theology: Belief and Practices in Christian Life,* ed. by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Cambridge, 2002), pp. 78-93

—— 'Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake? Three Kenotic Models in Patristic Exegesis' in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying God,* ed. by C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 246-264

—— 'Ethics, Cooperation and the Gender Wars: Prospects for a New Asceticism', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures: Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God* (online video recording, Youtube, 26 April 2012) <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/sacrifice-regained-evolution-cooperation-and-god> [accessed 5th June 2023]

—— 'Evolution, Cooperation and Ethics: Some Methodological and Philosophical Hurdles', *Studies in Christians Ethics,* 26 (2013), 135-139

—— *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

—— 'Gregory of Nyssa', in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity,* ed. by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 36-55

—— 'The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor, in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage,* ed. by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 301-319

—— 'In Defense of Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac', in *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion,* ed. by Linda Martin Alcoff and John D. Caputo (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), pp. 17-38

—— 'Introduction: Gender, Trinitarian Analogies and the Pedagogy of *the Song'*, in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa,* ed. by Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 1-13

—— 'Is there a future for Gender and Theology?: On Gender, Contemplation and the Systematic Task', *Criterion,* 47 (2009), 2-12.

—— '*Kenōsis* and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing', in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 3-39

—— 'Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis,* ed. by John Polkinghorne (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 192-210

—— 'Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality', *Anglican Theological Review,* 80 (1998), 223-232

—— *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

—— 'Palliative or Intensification?: Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites', in *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture,* ed. by Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 77-100

—— '"Persons" in the "Social" Doctrine of the Trinity: Current Analytic Discussion and "Cappadocian" Theology', in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 109-129

—— 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. xii-xx

—— 'Reconceiving "Natural Theology": Meaning, Sacrifice and God', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures: Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God* (online video recording, Youtube, 3 May 2012) <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/sacrifice-regained-evolution-cooperation-and-god> [accessed 22nd May 2023]

—— 'Response', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed. by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 144-149

—— 'Response to My Critics', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology,* 26 (2017), 23-29

—— 'Stories of Evolution, Stories of Sacrifice', in *The 2012 Gifford Lectures: Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God* (online video recording, Youtube, 17 April 2012) <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/sacrifice-regained-evolution-cooperation-and-god> [accessed 22nd May 2023]

—— 'Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Dom John Chapman OSB (1865 – 1933), on the meaning of "Contemplation"', in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 40-54

—— 'The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered', in *God's Life in Trinity,* ed. by Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Augsburg: Augsburg Press, 2006), pp. 133-142

—— 'Visions of the Self in Late Medieval Christianity: Some Cross-Disciplinary Reflections', in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 71-88

—— 'Voices in "God and Difference"', in *Symposium: God and Difference* (The Syndicate Network, 5 June 2017) <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/god-and-difference/> [accessed 8th June 2020]

—— 'Why Gift?: Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner', *Scottish Journal of Theology,* 16 (2008), 224-35

—— 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles,* ed. by Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 29-56

Cole H.S.D., et al., *Models of Doom: A Critique of The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1973)

Copeland, M. Shawn, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race and being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010)

Coyle, Diane, *Cogs and Monsters: What Economics Is, and What It Should Be* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021)

—— *The Economics of Enough: How to Run the Economy as if the Future Matters* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011),

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991)

Cyril of Alexandria, 'Second Letter to Nestorius' in *The Christological Controversy,* trans. and ed. by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 101-104

Daley, Brian E., *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Daly, Herman, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Boston: Beacon Press,1996)

Daly, Herman, and John Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy towards Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1989)

Daniels, Brandy R., 'Getting Lost at Sea? Apophasis, Antisociality, and the (in-) Stability of Academic Theology', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016), pp. 67-97

Daniels, Harry, 'Introduction', in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* ed. by Harry Daniels, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.1-31

Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society,* trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2013)

Dasgupta, Patha, *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review - Headline Messages* (HM Treasury, 2021), 1-10, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review> [accessed 20th Nov 2023]

Davies, Oliver, 'Sounds: towards a theological poetics of silence', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 201-222

Doorman, Frans, 'Our Money: Towards a New Monetary System' (Research Triangle, NC: Lulu Press, 2015), 1-74, <http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Our-Money-06-4-2015-A5-Download-Positive-Money-28-8-2015-2.pdf> [accessed 13th March 2023]

Douglas, Mary, and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (London: University of California Press, 1982)

du Gay, Paul, *Consumption and Identity at Work* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996)

Durand, Jean-Pierre, *The Invisible Chain: Constraints and Opportunities in the New World of Employment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Easterlin, Richard, 'Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?', in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz,* ed. by Paul A. David and Melvin W Reder (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 89-125

Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (London: Granta Books, 2007)

Eriksson, Anne-Louise, '"Behold, I am the Lord's Handmaiden, not the lords'!": On Sarah Coakley's *Powers and Submissions*' in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift,* 85 (2009), 70-74

Esposito, Elena, *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011)

Farley, Joshua, et al., 'Monetary and Fiscal Policies for a Finite Planet'*, Sustainability,* 5 (2013), 2802-2026

Flores, Nichole M., 'Capitalism and the Face of the Oppressed: A Response to Kathryn Tanner and Devin Singh', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 358-368

Ford, David, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Forrester, Duncan B., 'The Church and the Concentration Camp: Some Reflections on Moral Community' in *Faithfulness and Fortitude: Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas,* ed. by Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 189-207

Forrester, Jay W., Gilbert W. Low and Nathaniel J. Mass, 'The debate on "World Dynamics": A Response to Nordhuas', in *Policy Sciences,* 5 (1974), 169-190

Francis I, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Shuster, 2020)

Friedman, Milton, 'The Methodology of Positive Economics', in *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 3-43

Goodchild, Philip, 'Culture and Machine: Reframing Theology and Economics', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 391-402

—— *Economic Theology: Credit and Faith II* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020)

Gray, Brett, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

Hampson, Daphne, 'On Autonomy and Heteronomy', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed. by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 1-16

—— 'On Power and Gender' *Modern Theology,* 4 (1988), 234-250

—— 'Response', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed. by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 112- 124

Hart, David Bentley, 'The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan William's *The Tragic Imagination', Modern Theology,* 34 (2018), 220-234

Hauerwas, Stanley, 'The End of Sacrifice: An Apocalyptic Politics', in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 22-36

—— 'Explaining Christian Nonviolence: Notes for a Conversation with John Milbank and John Howard Yoder', in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), pp. 169-184

—— *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Prime in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1983)

—— 'Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial', in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Eugene: Wipf, 2010), pp. 253-266

—— 'Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped', in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 143-156

Herrington, Gaya, 'Update to Limits to Growth: Comparing the World3 Model with Empirical Data', *Journal of Industrial Ecology,* 25 (2021), 614-626

Hicks, John, *Value and Capital,* 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, London: 1946)

Higton, Mike, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2004)

—— 'Editor's Introduction', in *Wrestling with Angels,* pp. xxi-xxv

Hilkert, Mary Catherine, 'Desire, Gender and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley's Feminist Contemplative Theology', *Modern Theology,* 30 (2014), 575-581

Ho, Karen, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (London: Duke University Press, 2009)

Holquist, Michael, 'Introduction', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist, ed. by Michael Holoquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. xv-xxxiii

Howes, Rebekah, 'In the Shadow of Gillian Rose: Truth as Education in the Hegelian Philosophy of Rowan Williams', in *Political Theology,* 19 (2018), 20-34

Hughes, John, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007)

International Energy Agency, 'World Energy Outlook 2023', 1-355 <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/42b23c45-78bc-4482-b0f9-eb826ae2da3d/WorldEnergyOutlook2023.pdf> [accessed 11th Dec 2023]

IPCC, 'Summary for Policymakers', in *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. by H. Lee and J. Romero (Geneva: IPCC, 2023), 1-34, <10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001>

Isherwood, 'Erotic Celibacy: Claiming Empowered Space' in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism,* ed. by Lisa Isherwood (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 149-163

Isherwood, Lisa, and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998)

Jackson, Andrew, and Ben Dyson, *Modernising Money: Why Our Monetary System is Broken and how it can be Fixed* (London: Positive Money, 2012)

Jackson, Tim, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow,* 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)

Jennings, Willie James, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of* Race (London: Yale University Press, 2010)

Jenson, Robert, 'Review: *On Christian Theology',* in *Pro Ecclesia,* 11 (2002), 367-369

Kahneman, Daniel, and Angus Deaton, 'High Income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being', *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences,* 107 (2010), 16,489-16,493.

Kanazawa, Satoshi, 'In defence of unrealistic assumptions', in *Sociological Theory,* 16 (1997), 193-204

Kay, John, and Mervyn King, *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-making for an unknowable future* (London: Bridge Street Press, 2020)

Keen, Steve, *The New Economics: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022)

Kelton, Stephanie, *The Deficit Myth: How to Build a Better Economy* (London: John Murray Press, 2021)

Kilby, Karen, 'Death: A Hesitation', at *The Annual Barth Conference* (Online video recording, Youtube, 25 June 2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGfaJxrBzA4> [accessed 18th June 2023].

—— 'Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology' in *Game Over?: Reconsidering Eschatology,* ed. by Christophe Chalamet and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 279-292

—— 'Is an apophatic trinitarianism possible?', in Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp.31-44

—— 'Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the status of suffering in Christian theology' in Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 121-138

—— 'Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 92-104

—— 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity', in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 5-16

Kim, Julia C., 'Bhutan and Beyond: The emergence of wellbeing economies' in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from* The Limits to Growth – *what did we learn and what's next?* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereria (Exapt Press, 2022)*,* pp. 131-142

King, Mervyn, 'Banking: From Bagehot to Basel and Back Again. The Second Bagehot Lecture', (New York City, 2010), 1-25, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/speech/2010/banking-from-bagehot-to-basel-and-back-again-speech-by-mervyn-king> [Access 27th February 2023]

Kirkland, Scott, 'Prayerful Dispossession and the Grammar of Thinking Theologically: Sarah Coakley and Gillian Rose' in *New Blackfriars,* 95 (2014), 662-673

Lash, Nicholas, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

—— *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM Press, 1988)

—— *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979)

Lavoie, Marc, *Post-Keynesian Economics: New Foundations,* 2nd edn. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022)

Lawn, Philip, 'Is steady-state capitalism viable? A review of the issues and an answer in the affirmative' in *Ecological Economics Reviews,* 1219 (2011), 1–25

Lawn, Philip, and Matthew Clarke (eds.), *Sustainable Welfare in the Asia-Pacific: Studies using the Genuine Progress Indicator* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008)

Lee, Peggy M., 'A Comparative Analysis of Layoff Announcements and Stock Price Reactions in the United States and Japan', in *Strategic Management Journal,* 18 (1997), 879-894

Leonard, Christopher, *Lords of Easy Money: How the Federal Reserve Broke the American Economy* (London: Simon Schuster, 2022)

Levitt, Steve, and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2005)

LiPuma, Edward, and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (London: Duke University Press, 2004)

Long, D. Stephen, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Lordon, Frédéric, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire,* trans. Gabriel Ash (London: Verso: 2014)

Loughlin, Gerard, 'Rhetoric and Rhapsody: A response to David Bentley Hart's "The Beauty of the Infinite"', *New Blackfriars,* 88 (2007), 600-609

Lovins, L Hunter, 'Growth of what?' in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from* The Limits to Growth – *what did we learn and what's next?* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereria (Exapt Press, 2022), pp. 110-120

Lowrance, William W., 'The Nature of Risk', in *Societal Risk Assessment: How safe is safe enough?* ed. by Richard C. Schwing and Walter A. Albers Jr. (Boston: Springer, 1980), pp. 5-17

Lupton, Deborah, *Risk* (London: Routledge, 1999)

MacCulloch, Dairmaid, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2012)

MacFarlane, Robert, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Penguin Books, 2020)

MacKinnon, Donald, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays,* ed. and intro. by George Roberts and Donovan Smucker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968),

Maitland, Sara, *A Book of Silence: A Journey in Search of the Pleasures and Powers of Silence* (London: Granta Books, 2008)

Mankiw, N. Gregory, *Macroeconomics,* 9th edn. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016)

Marshall, Alfred, *Principles of Economics,* 8th edn. (London: Macmillan, 1920)

McCabe OP, Herbert, *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987)

McCormack, Bruce, 'Kenoticism in Modern Christology' in *Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. by Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 444-457

McFague, Sallie, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

—— *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

McGuckin, John, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology and Texts* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004)

McRandal, Janice, 'Being George Eliot: An Impossible Standpoint?', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016), pp. vii-xi

—— 'Power, Sin, and Epistemic Transformation in Sarah Coakley's Theology: Reading Coakley with Foucault', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016), pp. 187-201

Meadows Dennis, et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Humankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972)

Meadows, Dennis, Donella Meadows, and Jorgen Randers, *Limits to Growth: The Thirty Year Update* (London: Earthscan, 2004)

Meadows, Donella, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows, *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future* (London: Earthscan 1992)

Mercedes, Anna, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark, 2011)

Midgley, Mary, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Milbank, John, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?', in *New Blackfriars,* 73 (1992), 341-352

—— *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,* 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)

Minsky, Hyman, 'Working Paper No. 74: The Financial Instability Hypothesis' (The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 1992), 1-9 <https://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp74.pdf> [Accessed 27th February 2023],

Mouatt, Simon, and Arturo Hermann (eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Heterodox Economics: Implications for Theory and Policy Action* (London: Routledge, 2017)

Musgrave, Alan, '"Unreal Assumptions" in Economic Theory: The F-Twist untwisted', in *Kyklos,* 34 (1981), 377-387

Myers, Benjamin*, Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum, 2021)

—— 'Exegetical Mysticism: Scripture *Paideia,* and the Spiritual Senses', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016) pp. 1-14

Nash, Laura, *Good Intentions Aside: A Manager's Guide to Resolving Ethical Problems* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1993)

Nordhaus, William, 'Baumol's Cost Disease: A Macroeconomic Perspective', NBER Working Paper 12218, (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006), 1-57, <https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w12218/w12218.pdf> [accessed 13th February 2022]

—— 'Expert Opinion on Climate Change' in *American Scientist,* 82 (1994), 45-51

—— 'Projections and uncertainties about Climate Change in an Era of Minimal Climate Policies', in *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy,* 10 (2018), 333-360

—— 'World Dynamics: Measurement Without Data', in *The Economic Journal,* 83 (1973), 1156-1183

Norris, Jr., Richard, 'Chalcedon Revisited: A Historical and Theological Reflection' in *New Perspective on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff,* ed. by Bradley Nassif (Eerdmans: Cambridge, 1996), pp. 140-158

OECD, 'Economic Outlook' (2023) <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/economic-outlook-a-mild-slowdown-in-2024-and-slightly-improved-growth-in-2025.htm> [accessed 11th Dec 2023]

Oppenheimer, Mark, 'Prayerful Vulnerability', in *The Christian Century,* 120 (2003), 25-31

Orléan, André, *The Empire of Value: A New Foundation for Economics,* trans. M. B. DeBevoise (London: MIT Press, 2014)

Patel, Rupal, and Jack Meaning, The Bank of England, *Can't We Just Print More Money? Economics in Ten Simple Questions* (London: Cornerstone Press, 2022)

Pierdziwol, Annette, 'The "How" of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016) pp. 15-48

Piketty, Thomas, *Capital in the 21st Century,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014)

Porter, Michael, *On Competition,* updated and expanded edn. (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2008)

Pseudo-Dionysius, 'Divine Names', in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* trans. by Colm Luibheid, with Paul Rorem and others (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 47-132

Quash, Ben, *Abiding* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

Randers, Jorgen, 'A Co-author's view: What did *The Limits to Growth* really say?', in *Limits and Beyond: 50 years on from the Limits to Growth, what did we learn and what's next?,* ed. by Ugo Bardi and Carlos Alvarez Pereira (Exapt Press, 2022), pp. 45-55

Raworth, Kate, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (London: Random House, 2017)

Rector, Lallene J., 'Are we making love yet? Theological and Psychological Perspectives on the Role of Gender Identity in the Experience of Domination', in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism,* ed. by Lisa Isherwood (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 74-95

Roberts, Michelle Voss, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017)

Rockström, Johan, et al*.,* 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity', in *Nature,* 461 (2009), 472-475

Rogers, Eugene F., *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside of the Modern West* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005)

Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)

Rose, Gillian, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)

—— *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981)

—— *Love's Work* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995)

Ross, David, *Inexhaustibility and Human Being: An Essay on Locality* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1989)

Russell, Matheson 'Introduction', in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays,* ed. by Matheson Russell (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), pp. xiii-xxiii

Sandel, Michael, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Penguin, 2012)

Schick, Kate, *Gillian Rose: A Good Enough Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Sen, Amartya, Joseph Stiglitz, and Jean Fitoussi, 'Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress', (2009), 1-292 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/8131721/8131772/Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-Commission-report.pdf> [access 11th Dec 2023]

Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009)

—— *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Co-operation* (London: Yale University Press, 2012)

Shanks, Andrew, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008)

Sigurjónsson, Frosti, 'Monetary Reform: A Better Monetary System for Iceland. A Report Commissioned by the Prime Minister of Iceland' (Reykjavik, 2015), 1-110 <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/skyrslur/monetary-reform.pdf> [Access 27th February 2023]

Simard, Suzanna, et al., 'Net transfer of carbon between ectomycorrhizal tree species in the field', *Nature,* 388 (1997), 579-582

Singh, Devin, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018)

——— *Economy and Modern Christian Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2022)

Smith, Adam, *The Wealth of the Nations: The Economics Classic - A Selected edition for the Contemporary Reader,* intro. and ed. by Tom Butler-Bowdon (Chichester: Capstone, 2010).

Soddy, Frederick, *Cartesian Economics: The Bearing of Physical Science upon State Stewardship* (London: Hendersons, 1922)

Soskice, Janet Martin, 'Turning the Symbols', in *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity,* ed. by Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 17-32

Spiegelhalter, David, 'Quantifying uncertainty', in *Risk,* ed. by Layla Skinns, Michael Scott and Tony Cox (Cambridge: CUP, 2011). pp. 17-33

Steffen Will, et al. 'Planetary Boundaries: guiding human development on a changing planet', *Science,* 347 (2015), 736-747

Stevenson, Betsey, and Justin Wolfers, 'Economic Growth and Subjective Well-Being: Reassessing the Easterlin Paradox', in *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity,* 2008 (2008), 1-87

Tanner, Kathryn, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

——— *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Yale University Press, 2019)

——— *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005)

——— *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988)

—— *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001)

—— *The Politics of God: Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

—— 'Response to the Respondents', in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 403-408

—— *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997)

Theodore of Mopsuestia. 'On the Incarnation', in *The Christological Controversy,* trans. and ed. by Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 87-94

Thiel, John E., 'Money Matters: A Response to Devin Singh and Kathryn Tanner' in *Modern Theology,* 36 (2020), 369-377

Thomson, John, *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)

Ticciati, Susannah, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2013)

Tobin, James, 'A Proposal for International Monetary Reform' in *Eastern Economic Journal,* 4 (1978), 153-159

Tonstad, Linn Marie, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)

—— 'Reply: Response to Sarah Coakley', in *Symposium: God and Difference* (The Syndicate Network, 5 June 2017) <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/god-and-difference/> [accessed 8th June 2020]

Turner, Denys, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 11-34

Turner, Graham, *Is Global Collapse Imminent?*, MSSI Research Paper No. 4, (The University of Melbourne: Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, 2014), 1-22, <https://sustainable.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2763500/MSSI-ResearchPaper-4_Turner_2014.pdf> [accessed 10th March 2024]

Waller, Giles, 'Felix Culpa? On Rowan Williams' *The Tragic Imagination',* in *Modern Theology* 34 (2018), 243-251

Ward, Graham, 'In the Daylight forever?: Language and Silence', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 159-184

—— 'John Milbank's Divina Commedia', *New Blackfriars,* 73 (1992), 311-318

Weber, Beat, *Democratizing Money?: Debating Legitimacy in Monetary Reform Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)

Volpe, Medi, 'Taking Time and Making Sense: Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination', in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology,* 15 (2013), 345-360

Vygotsky, Lev S., *Mind in Society: The Development of High Psychological Processes,* ed. by Michael Cole and others (London: Harvard University Press, 1978)

—— *Thought and Language,* ed. and trans. by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1962)

Wells, Samuel, *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 1998).

Werntz, Myles, 'The Body and the Body of the Church: Coakley, Yoder, and the Imitation of Christ', in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology,* ed. by Janice McRandal (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2016)*,* pp. 99-114

Wertsch, James, and Peter Tulviste, 'L.S. Vygotsky and contemporary developmental psychology', in *An Introduction to Vygotsky,* ed. by Harry Daniels, 2nd edn., (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 57-78

Wilkinson, Richard, and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2010).

Williams, Rowan, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Pres, 2001)

—— 'Author's Introduction', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. xiii-xx

—— 'Balthasar and Difference', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 77-85

—— 'Beginning with the Incarnation', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 79-92

—— *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014)

—— *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2016)

—— *Being Human: Bodies, Minds and Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018)

—— 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 53-76

—— 'Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 183-196

—— *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018),

—— 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response', in Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 196-207

—— 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure' in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation,* ed. by Oliver Davies & Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 115-135

—— *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008)

—— *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Continuum, 2014)

—— 'Ethics, Economics and Global Justice', in Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 211-224

—— 'Evensong Address', at Jesus College Chapel, (online video recording, Facebook, 3 October 2021) <https://fb.watch/8qn1rc_FaZ/> [accessed 4th October 2021].

—— 'The Finality of Christ', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 93-106

—— 'Foreword', in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice,* ed. by Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. x-xiii

—— 'Hegel and the gods of postmodernity', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 25-34

—— 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 239-264

—— 'Knowing our Limits' in *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice,* ed. by Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 19-34

—— 'Law, Power and Peace', in Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 49-61

—— 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 35-53

—— 'Lossky, the *via negativa* and the foundations of theology', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 1-24

—— *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: Continuum, 2000)

—— 'Making Moral Decisions' in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics,* ed. by Robin Gill, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-15

—— 'Maurice Wiles and doctrinal criticism', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 275-299

—— 'The Media: Public Interest and Common Good: lecture delivered at Lambeth Palace' (15 June 2005) <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1534/archbishop-delivers-major-address-the-media-public-interest-and-common-good.html> [accessed 11th Sept 2023]

—— '"Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed": A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination', Modern Theology,* 34 (2018), 280-288

—— On Being Creatures', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 63-79

—— *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994)

—— '"Religious realism": on not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 228-254

—— 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 265-275

—— 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision', in *New Blackfriars,* 73 (1992), 319-326

—— 'Simone Weil and the necessary non-existence of God', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 203-207

—— 'The suspicion of suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer', in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), pp. 186-202

—— 'Theological Integrity', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 3-15

—— *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (London: Canterbury Press, 2007)

—— *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

—— 'Trinity and Ontology', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 148-166

—— 'Trinity and Revelation', in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 131-147

—— *The Truce of God: Peacemaking in troubled times,* rev. edn. (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2005)

—— *The Wound of Knowledge,* rev. edn. (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1990)