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RESPONSE TO MY INTERLOCUTORS

THOMAS PFAU

Let me begin by thanking the editors of *Modern Theology*, Jim Fodor and Bill Cavanaugh, for proposing and organizing this forum and for convening such a distinguished group of contributors. With one exception, the responses to my book strike me as consistently rich, thoughtful, and constructive, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the papers. While there is some overlap in the individual position papers, it still seems best to address each contribution individually so as not to obscure intellectual nuances and the grounds on which specific observations are being advanced. Naturally, not all points and queries can be addressed, for which reason I thought it best to focus primarily on those observations and queries whose implications reach beyond the present occasion, raising as they often do fundamental questions about the metaphysical and theological underpinnings of hermeneutic work, while also speaking more generally to what a phenomenology of visual experience may contribute to the study of art, poetry, and theological aesthetics.

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In his exceedingly generous response, **Cyril O'Regan** remarks on my book's "asceticism: the experience of reading this book is the experience of a happening to which the author is simply the subjective pole of the deliverances of the discourses." I am grateful to O'Regan for pointing to this feature, not least because it allows me now to restate the ethos that, I think, ought to animate humanistic study far more than it does. If there is one thing that my books have in common, particularly the last two, it's that they were the result of a prolonged quest on my part, not to make assertions but, rather, to better understand the deep histories of key concepts (will, conscience, judgment, person, image, intuition, et al.) that undergird a great deal of humanistic and theological inquiry. My goal most certainly was not to overcome our historical entanglements by making yet another "intervention" or to insist on every other page on my argument's "radical" nature. Instead, *Incomprehensible Certainty* attempts to gather a variety of distinctive voices that reach us from the past, above all in order to listen to what they may teach us, while thinking of them primarily as gifts, to be received, curated, and ultimately transmitted with gratitude, rather than (mis)spent as fuel for advancing unilateral claims of our own. The default stance thus had to be what medieval exegesis calls "the rule of charity" (in contrast to a modern hermeneutics of suspicion), which is to say,

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to approach the task of "understanding" (*Verstehen*) humbly and patiently by situating ourselves in relation to a complex tradition. Gadamer's characterization of tradition as an immersive, open-ended process (*ein Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen*), and of understanding as a three-tiered "art" (*subtilitas*)—of understanding, interpretation, and application—remains for me deeply compelling both intellectually and morally. The more we succeed in eliding our professional and personal ego, the better the prospects will be for genuine and communicable insight to eventuate, and for humanistic and theological inquiry to bear substantive and relevant fruit. O'Regan's happy formulation of such an ethos, namely, "to engage in the praxis of attention by stepping out of our own way," perfectly captures my book's intention. What's more, it is precisely this ethos that the image (*eikon*) means to instill in its beholder, what O'Regan calls the "iconic function in delivering the self from the self."

Regarding my discussion of Cusa and what he calls my book's "first area of contribution," O'Regan notes "a tension within the Neoplatonic world … between an identity- and an analogical metaphysics." He is right that, while emphasizing Cusa's commitment to a metaphysics of *analogia*, I give little attention (quite possibly less than I should have) to "the identity strain of Neoplatonic metaphysics" that lingers on in Cusa's writings. The key question here surely is whether Cusa ever resolves that tension? In my view, he does—in favor of *analogia*—though admittedly much depends on one's approach to Cusa. Stupendously learned in Neoplatonism, Beierwaltes understandably places greater emphasis on Cusa's debt to the Plotinian position (obliquely revived in Hegel's "Preface" to the *Phenomenology*), according to which all temporal processes are but the incremental, dialectical working-out of an identity between the dependent many and an unconditional One that ontologically grounds and providentially guides the peregrinations of *nous* or "spirit" (*Geist*). In passing, we note that this divide between a metaphysics of identity and analogy, respectively, has particular bearing on any discussion of images. For where preference is given to the former, charges of idolatry are sure to follow—that is, charges that the image *qua* idol lays claim to an identity with its object, in effect substituting itself for what it depicts (cf. *IC* 20-27 and 176-84).

O'Regan goes on to ask how my book positions itself in relation to narratives of modernity. In this context, he observes my account's apparent "allergy to a decline narrative and [to] genealogical accounts of modernity," both of which suggest that truth can only appear "in a distorted way" or indeed not at all. Instead, O'Regan notes, my understanding of images pointedly eschews reducing them to default products of "social and historical context," let alone to "jaded or powered-down effigies of their fresher and vital originals." Instead, what defines the true image, and what accounts for the ineffable yet often irresistible charism and power of images, is their sheer excess and presence, their "ontological vehemence." With good reason, O'Regan views *Incomprehensible Certainty* as diametrically opposed to the "rupturalist" line of argument pursued by Hans Blumenberg, particularly in *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Still, it bears pointing out that my stance is not idiosyncratically preferential but a direct and, I would argue, necessary consequence of the metaphysical implications that define my book's central topic: the image. For to insist on rupture and endless (quasi-nominalist) dissimilarities in history, as Blumenberg for one does, is *eo ipso* to argue *from* a set of anti- or post-metaphysical assumptions even as such an approach signally fails or, perhaps, refuses to consider whether those assumptions are justified. Against such self-privileging accounts of modernity as a break from what is henceforth defined (and dismissed) as premodern, and against

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the inherently reactive ethos fueling accounts of modernity as rupture, I would urge that true insight and argument will always originate in a moment of "real assent" (as Newman defines it) rather than with a gesture of dissent, just as the proper beginning of systematic theology is found in God and Creation, rather than in the Fall. For all dissent, be it in the form of focalized critique or as a general hermeneutic of suspicion, is *eo ipso* secondary, indeed parasitical on the persistent reality (or Husserlian *Evidenz*) of those very phenomena which it calls into question.

It was this latter consideration that had prompted me, in my previous book, to redescribe the post- and anti-Scholastic reappraisal of human agency as a case of "progressive amnesia," a self-induced forgetting and elision of key concepts such as will, person, and judgment brought about by an unexamined, doctrinaire deployment of naturalistic, mechanistic, and reductionistic methods. In musing on "the relation between *Incomprehensible Certainty* … and *Minding the Modern*," O'Regan is right to observe "a greater emphasis on discontinuity" in the earlier book. One of his tentative explanations for why this might be the case is that my new book attends more fully to "the image in its premodern deployment." There is some truth in that, though chapters in *Minding the Modern*, on Aristotle, Stoicism, Augustine, and Aquinas, certainly had also sought to flesh out premodern conceptions of human agency in some detail. Still, O'Regan understandably asks how my earlier book's seemingly greater comfort with a narrative of rupture, if not of decline, might be squared with the strong emphasis on transhistorical continuity in *Incomprehensible Certainty*.

Fundamentally, I see this disparity to stem from my new book's substantially different focus. Central to *Minding the Modern* were concepts associated with the "self"—i.e., judgment, will, person, action—all of which on their modern construal (beginning with Hobbes) point to the self's postlapsarian, damaged and disordered condition, what in a fine Augustinian turn of phrase Coleridge calls "the mysterious diversity between the injunctions of the mind and the elections of the will." Simply put, the central term of *Minding the Modern*, human agency or the so-called self, appears constitutively divided and damaged, indeed nowhere more so than where modern thought presses its claims to complete, instantaneous, and (crucially) unmediated self-ownership. By contrast, to focus on the image is to take up something at once ontologically real while also intrinsically mediated. Belonging to the order of forms rather than agents, however, the image is not *per se* divided or damaged, though admittedly always liable to idolatrous misappropriation and distortion by postlapsarian human subjects. Not by accident, Byzantine iconodules saw the image concept supremely realized in the *acheiropoieton*, a visible presence not made by, and hence untainted by, human hands and precisely for that reason a *vera icon* imbued with the power of mediating between self and God.

At this point, prompted by my readings of Goethe and Rilke, O'Regan presses another, broader question concerning how I understand the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics and, subsidiary to it, what my "operative understanding of Romanticism" might be. These are big questions, to be sure, and I take the bait with due caution, even as I must demur at O'Regan's claim that, outside Goethe's botanical writings, "the subjective element is copiously on display everywhere." Surely, some further qualification is called for here. Might we not, instead, conclude that subjectivity, while nearly omnipresent as a *dilemma* throughout Goethe's writings, is rarely ever presented as a solution. Thus, while initially celebrated (in the 1772 Sesenheim lyrics), subjectivity will soon be dramatized as affective excess and self-destroying (in *Werther*, 1774); next the Cartesian fantasy of self-possession is subtly ironized (in *Wilhelm Meister*, 1796); following that Goethe imagines

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subjectivity being submerged into a naturalistic and determinist plot beyond its ken or, alternatively, dramatized as a metaphysical *monstrum per defectum* (in *Elective Affinities* and *Faust I*, respectively, both 1809). As regards Rilke's equivocal allegiance to Romanticism, however, O'Regan is right to find Heidegger's critique of Rilke at least partly convincing (indeed, to me, it is far more convincing than the philosopher's tone-deaf appropriation of Hölderlin). Yet it is with good reason that *Incomprehensible Certainty* focuses on the middle period of Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* (1907/1908) rather than the late elegies, whose far more pronounced neo-Romanticism is the principal target of Heidegger's critique.[1]

As for my overall conception of Romanticism, I regard the period fundamentally as a prolonged struggle with the Enlightenment's strictly immanent view of the world as susceptible of exhaustive causal determination and anthropomorphic description and its rejection of transcendence as lacking all epistemic and moral relevance, save for what the period's reigning skeptical and naturalistic methods of inquiry are prepared to concede. It is during the Romantic era that the existentially absurd and practically unendurable consequences of such a stance are felt to call for a comprehensive response that, for the most part, comes in the form of various, highly speculative "solutions," not all of them of equal cogency. Schlegelian irony is one; Schelling's and Coleridge's attempted retrieval and rearticulation of Christian-Platonist metaphysics and trinitarian ontology is another; Godwin's fusion of a mechanist epistemology with an anarchist ethic adds another facet, as does the Romantic notion of a new, proto-nihilist self, foreshadowed by Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and farcically reimagined in Byron's *Don Juan*. Fending off the specter of a rising irrationalism is Hegelian dialectics with its encyclopedic and institutional conception of a *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, amplified by W. v. Humboldt, Schleiermacher, and Comte.

Such are but some of the cultural, philosophical, and institutional projects whereby Romanticism sought to let the dilemmas it had inherited from the Enlightenment pay forward procedurally, as it were. The main legacy, however, may well be that Romanticism's diagnostic powers and utopian aspirations ultimately outpaced its ability to generate viable solutions. Hence much of Romantic writing exhibits a characteristic vacillation between epistemic hubris and metaphysical despair, with the latter expressing itself in eschatological and apocalyptic visions or, alternatively, in esoteric, symbolist and pseudo-theological dreamworlds extending from Blake to Mallarmé, Huysmans, Maeterlinck, Wilde, Hofmannsthal, George, and the early Rilke. The latter's work, both in his early, symbolist *Stundenbuch* and *Buch der Bilder* and again in his late, existentialist *Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus* ought to be read as one more, perhaps the last, metastasis of Romanticism's century-long struggle with a modernity which it recognized as alternately enthralling and terrifying, though in any event as irreversible. In between, however, stands Rilke's *sui generis* project of a *neue Sachlichkeit*—a concise, even ascetic, and pointedly visual idiom consummately realized in his *Neue Gedichte*. Though it still unfolds in Romanticism's long shadow, Rilke here attains a formal clarity and phenomenological discipline rarely found elsewhere in his oeuvre and in no small part due to what Rodin and Cézanne had modeled for him in the medium of sculpture and painting, respectively.

[1] For a more detailed, and partly critical account of Heidegger's view of Rilke, see Thomas Pfau, "'Superabundant Being': Disambiguating Rilke and Heidegger," *Modern Theology* 35, no. 1 (January 2019): 23-42.

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Finally, let me respond to O'Regan's trenchant observation that most of the figures in Part 2 of my book, "while they do not like their forbears, nevertheless, are their distant progeny." This is spot-on, and it leads O'Regan to ask how a wider cast of voices might be mapped onto my book's division of image functions (symbolic, forensic, sacramental, epiphanic). A figure as multi-faceted as Coleridge would put significant strain on my organizational scheme, while others—C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Newman, Yeats (and I could adduce many more) might well deepen or challenge my book's conceptual framework. Nothing would better honor my book's guiding intention than such an exploration of other voices, ancient and modern, either to amplify my argument's relevance or, alternatively, expose its inevitable limitations. It is in this context that O'Regan wonders whether the sacramental image, as exemplified by Hopkins, may not be the only one to count as genuinely theological and, thus, be immune to "the prospect of backsliding." Whether the latter is true depends not least on how we read Hopkins's late, often despondent sonnets written in Dublin, works in which the visual splendor and acuity of his earlier poetry is notably muted, if not altogether absent. Still, I take O'Regan's point that even in those sonnets central to my reading of Hopkins, also in "transhistorical" conjunction with pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, theological meaning is present only in the medium of a (conspicuously image-centered) poetry. As it happens, I now find myself embarked on a project, centered on Hölderlin, Hopkins, Claudel, and Miłosz, that explores the relationship between "apophatic and argumentative [theological] discourse" (O'Regan) and poetic speech, the hypothesis being that the latter's imaginative and sensuous concreteness idioms may often prove far better, if not uniquely equipped to realize theological meanings that, when presented in discursive theological argument, risk coming across as either obscure or formulaic.

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Ben Quash's response begins with an extended meditation on the severe limitations imposed by the positivistic and rationalist principles undergirding modern academic disciplines and the modern research university as conceived by Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hegel and their heirs. As Quash notes, "the long-term effects of this reach for a positivist toolkit still manifest themselves in the discipline of Religious Studies," and also in Art History, the result being not just a "privileging of descriptive analysis over normative judgement" but, more often than not, an entrenched resistance to the very possibility of norms and ultimate, metaphysical claims. I have little to add here other than to say that I wish I could have put the matter so well. Like Quash, I have long witnessed in my own discipline of literary studies a "retreat from questions of public truth, common good, and shared delight," and his surmise that "the problem of positivism in academia seems … closely connected with the problem of the 'privatisation of values' in public debate" entirely comports with some reflections in my previous book.[2] I fully agree, then, that the methodological hubris and complacent secularity of

[2] See Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), esp. my discussion of a series of axioms tacitly organizing, and constraining, modern humanistic inquiry (424-27). Paradoxically, as Adorno and Horkheimer had shown long ago, a wholesale embrace of contextualist, historicizing, skeptical and/or reductionist methods ends up vitiating the very notion of "progress" said to legitimate the project of modern *Wissenschaft*. For it leaves inquiry mired in "a principle of immanence" that, by treating "every event as repetition … holds there is nothing new under the sun," thereby relapsing into precisely "the mythical indifference that the Enlightenment purports to overcome" (ibid., 459).

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modern *Wissenschaft* have long been in need of a robust check. That said, *Incomprehensible Certainty* does not offer that check in overt, let alone polemical form. Instead, by rethinking the concept of the image in all theological and philosophical seriousness I have sought to model an implicit alternative to the positivistic, historicizing, and always relativizing ethos of contemporary humanistic inquiry.

Quash is right to note the strong Platonizing drift in my argument, though I should reiterate that Christianity's concept of *analogia*, in my view, significantly deepens our understanding of what I refer to as the "ontological bond between a visible thing and its invisible form" (*IC* 519) and what had been partially anticipated by Plato's notion of "participation" (*methexis*). More surprising to me was to find Quash suspecting that "this Christian-Platonism seems to put some pressure on [my] commitment to the abiding value of the materiality of visual experience." From the outset (cf. *IC* 40-47), I stress the complementarity of image and word, and I maintain that articulate "interpretation is positively 'called for' by the phenomenon's distinctive mode of self-manifestation" (*IC* 41) and unfolds in accordance with and in constant response to the visible image. Such a view, it seems to me, clearly avoids the (in origin Protestant) separation of form from content and its extended Hegelian narration as the progressive emancipation of the conceptual from the material. As for Quash's question whether in my account "images come to fruition in the delivery of some sort of cognitive 'content' (and, if so, what sort of content that is)"—two things ought to be stressed.

First, the writers considered in my book exhibit enormous verbal and formal creativity as they seek to respond to, and thus honor, the gift and charism of the image in all its abundance and excess. This holds true not just for Rilke, Hopkins, Ruskin, or Goethe but, I would maintain, also accounts for the creative tropes and richly imagistic phrasing found in the works of Plato, Pseudo-Dionysius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Julian of Norwich, and Cusanus. If properly honored, the image not only elicits the word but positively transforms its nature and expands its scope. What the writers central to my project thus perform, in their respective medium and genre, is precisely "an evaluation of phenomenality itself," to recall Quash's pithy formulation. All this is to say that we can, and I would maintain *should*, think of the "content" or "cognitive content" of an image as something that can only arise from, and can only be grasped by way of sustained and attentive responsiveness to the visible phenomenon *as it gives itself* to the beholder. "Content" is not an afterthought, and more often than not its realization pivots on the enduring presence of the image phenomenon that captivates us. At its best, thinking is a thinking-with and according-to the visible, rather than a detached and abstractive ruminating *about* it. It is the creative, inspired, and generative dimension of the word, rather than its purely descriptive or analytic uses, that an encounter with images asks us to cultivate. It is often our considered encounter with the visible that lets us discover the word's previously unfathomed potential. Thus, regarding Quash's poignant call to action ("Art needs a philosophical/theological treatment that will result in a more adequate theory of its communicative possibilities than historical-positivist methods can produce in their own terms"), I would merely add that such a more daringly speculative approach will also, and rightly, be of a more creative and poetic kind. We honor images most fully if, when responding to them, we think of ourselves as witnessing an event rather than determining an object; and to do so, we must inhabit the medium of our response, the word, in ever more capacious, deeper, and more richly creative ways.

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My second response to the question regarding the relation between phenomenality and conceptuality in my book both follows from and also qualifies my first. Quash observes, and gently demurs at, a slippage of sorts when I contend that "the very fact that we wish for the deliverances of intuition to be fulfilled in articulate speech also tells us that the act of seeing *is latently conceptual*" (*IC* 67; italics mine). That last phrase may understandably be read as portending a relapse of some kind into a Protestant-Hegelian ideal of *Wissenschaft*. Yet I don't think it has to be read that way, and throughout my book I often push back against just this kind of regression. At the same time, it bears pondering what exactly it is about images that so often seems to cause their beholder to retreat into the putatively "safer" zone of formal and conceptual thought. There is a saturation to images (e.g., of human suffering, cruelty, physical malformations, destruction, desolation; or, alternatively, of stunning beauty, clarity, intimacy, etc.), a strange convergence of wonderment and bewilderment that arrests, overwhelms, and not infrequently also exhausts us. At least in part, this ambivalent response to the image stems from its constitutive mix of reticence and excess, the silent but implacable ways in which it places us under some kind of hermeneutic obligation which we feel we cannot meet and, finally, its unsettling self-sufficiency and indifference vis-à-vis our (often vain) struggles at discerning its import. Such a struggle is hardly limited to "theo-phobic" spectators awkwardly loitering in front of an icon in the National Gallery, or theologically untrained readers mystified by Hopkins's recreation of visual "inscapes" in highly compressed poetic form. Indeed, virtually all the writers discussed in my book effectively both find *and* lose their voice to the extent that they either endure this wrestling with the sheer presence of images or, in time, retreat from that challenge into a more intellectualized and apophatic idiom. As I try to show in my readings of Goethe, Darwin, Hopkins, and Rilke no less than Cusa's *De Visione Dei* or Plato, their literary production invests visible phenomena with a kind of "eschatological expectancy" (*IC* 260), which in turn issues in the gradual eclipse of the visual and in what I call "the image's implacable drive toward its self-suspension" (*IC* 131; s.a. 348, 396, 688, 712, 715). In this context, I am grateful to Quash for recalling Collingwood's aesthetic philosophy with its lucid sequencing of attention and imagination as they serve to stabilize an initially fluid, often volatile emotive response without thereby relegating emotion to an inferior, pre-conceptual plateau.

Quash's second set of queries concerns how the image's distinctive presence and the type of participatory knowledge it enables can be reconciled with Christian apophaticism. As he puts it so well, my "book's case stands or falls by how well it is able to reconcile its arguments for a participative (and thus mediating) ontology with an undiluted respect for the apophatic tradition." Given my adherence to apophaticism, he writes, "I would have expected a lower threshold of tolerance for spatialized language when discussing the divine-creaturely distinction, which is qualitative (and infinite) rather than quantitative." Quash is right, of course, that apophatic theology precludes any possibility of knowing God "in measurable portions." Yet it is a further step (and, I submit, a step too far) to conclude from this that "apophaticism teaches the failure of *all* speech in respect of God" and that there is simply no affective or cognitive way for us "to 'close a gap' between intellect and God through contemplation." Fortunately, the scenario is not quite as binary as to limit us, where speaking of God is concerned, to a simple choice between illicit predication and

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abject silence. In fact, as Rowan Williams reminds us, there has always been a third way, involving language pushed "to metaphorical 'extremes'" so as to bring into focus what eludes "formally exact subject-predicate" speech. Figural speech does not "attempt … to replace or sideline truth claims but to extend the territory of what we are claiming truthfulness for."[3] It allows us "to see more than our initial account delivers." This is well put, I think, and it allows me to clarify that my use of spatial terminology, which Quash finds *literally* unsettling, in fact signifies *figurally* or, again, *per analogiam*. In my book I try to make that very point when remarking that Aquinas's "principle of analogy … allows us to distinguish between the purely *lexical* reach of names, steeped in past usage (*modus*) and their moral or *aspirational* dimension" (*IC* 353). Likewise, to consider that there may be a spectrum or, as Maritain analyzed it, "degrees" of knowledge is not to dispute the qualitative and absolute divide between God and finite beings. Yet it holds out—as the theological virtue of hope enjoins us to do—for the possibility of a meaningful "movement towards God," not in any "literal" sense (whatever that would mean) but in the sense of an inward, longed-for transformation that writers from Dante's *Commedia* and Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* all the way to Bulgakov's and Florovsky's accounts of *theosis* have explored in richly figurative language.

With approval ("far more promising"), Quash quotes my passing observation that the "first and last objective of theology […] will be praise, not knowledge, of God" (*IC* 602). Here, too, I should note that to put it thus does not mean that "knowledge of God" is impossible in every respect. Rather, the juxtaposition implies that "praise" gives rise to a different, and arguably superior, order of knowledge, just as my knowing and loving my wife are not two distinct activities but, on the contrary, I know her *by* loving her. Epistemic humility, in other words, does not categorically disavow *all* knowledge but, instead, recognizes discursive and ratiocinative modes of knowledge as fundamentally insufficient for understanding God. This still leaves open, and indeed desirable, the prospect of a categorically different knowledge, grounded in the cultivation of the virtues and in a gradual and praiseful understanding of one's existence as teleologically and providentially ordered towards the *visio beatifica*. To the extent that Quash's objection hints at a complete disconnect between God and creature, as asserted by various strands of Reformation theology, he and I would indeed be fundamentally at odds. For our encounter with the inexhaustible richness of the visible world, and the forms (*logoi*) disclosed by our experience of it, is part of a dynamic and graced "movement towards" God, with the spatial figure here intimating an asymmetrical yet nevertheless cooperative *relation* between two ontologically distinct and unequal orders of being.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Quash's criticism that my book risks "conflating 'all things visible and invisible' with the invisibility of their divine source." Specifically, as regards my use of *logos*, Quash would have preferred a sharper, formal-analytic division between the second person of the Trinity and other "structures of meaning" (*IC* 619). Such a critique appears directed not just at my argument but also at the theology of Maximus, whose claims concerning the ontological

[3] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129; see also Janet Soskice, *Naming God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). For a nuanced discussion of spatiality in its multiple senses (geometrical, liturgical, anagogical et al.), see Christina Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), esp. 57-79.

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relatedness of *logos* and *logoi* I do indeed view sympathetically. Here again, Quash's queries reflect a disjunctive rather than integrative approach to theological argument. As he remarks: "there seems no good reason why a fully-fledged and theologically warranted, participative metaphysics needs to compromise the radical 'otherness' of God, which (as the apophatic tradition affirms) is 'other' even than the 'otherness' that governs the distinctions between creatures." This is crisply put, though much depends on how we understand "compromise" here. I for one would resist Calvin's schematic, literalizing stipulation "that heaven and earth may not be mixed together" and, more in the spirit of St. Bernard's kiss and St. Catherine of Siena's bridge, would maintain that to affirm God's "relatedness" to creatures nowise compromises his otherness.[4]

Conversely, I am unconvinced that the only conceivable alternative to strict apophaticism would be a univocal theology according to which God is merely "greater" (in a comparative sense) than his Creation, as it were presiding in CEO-style over the Great Chain of Being. To begin with, if "God's knowledge is the cause of things" (*Scientia Dei est causa rerum* – *ST* 14.8), all things visible and invisible are *already* ontologically related to their divine source, being manifestations, or images (*eikones*), of it. To say as much is not to conflate forms (*logoi*) with their source (*logos*), as my elaboration of the concept of *analogia* and of the image as medium/mediation should in any event have made clear. Yet I do indeed maintain that such metaphysical and theological knowledge as human beings are capable of, while being *eo ipso* mediated and sustained by the presence and coherence of forms (in speech no less than images), always operates *per analogiam*. What this means is that apophaticism is not adequately understood when construed in exclusively disjunctive and negative fashion. Less an absolute barrier than an ontological qualification, apophaticism does not consign human intelligence to a state of terminal abjection. Rather, it posits that reflective and creative thought is ordered—both naturally (i.e., teleologically) and supernaturally (i.e., providentially)—*toward* God; which is to say that it rests on a both-and logic according to which hope-infused human beings will, figuratively speaking, seek to draw closer to God without thereby challenging or relativizing God's ontological otherness but, instead, honoring it in the practice of epistemic humility.

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With good reason and in helpfully exacting terms, **Kevin Hart** probes my book's understanding of phenomenology, its relation to hermeneutics, and the extent to which my approach can accommodate a range of theological questions and concerns. Drawing on Maurice Blanchot's writings, Hart then outlines a robust counter-proposal to my overarching thesis. In a way, Blanchot presents us with an extreme apophaticism where (similar to Levinas's "Reality and its Shadow") the image stands for the consummately "unreal, the impossible," fully accomplished only in death when the "I" of the *imago dei* "is unmade." I shall venture some reflections on both of these areas flagged by Hart, hopefully in ways that do justice to the learned and probing nature of his comments.

Hart's initial remarks on phenomenology not only remind us of that approach's innate complexity but also recall its many shifts of emphasis and argumentation over the

[4] John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:6.

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long arc of Husserl's career. Indeed, as his gifted assistant Edith Stein was to remark, Husserl's attempt to work out an all-encompassing theory of how "objects" crystallize in experience, a *Gegenstandstheorie*, while scrupulous and lucid in his step-by-step execution ultimately proved interminable and, as Stein for one felt, dissolved into an unending cascade of further specifications, discriminations, and particularizations. Hence my admittedly pragmatic decision to limit my exposure to the perils of an exhaustively descriptive phenomenology by focusing on Husserl's relatively early 1905 lectures on image-consciousness and, occasionally, on his elaboration of a phenomenology of visual experience in *Ding und Raum* (1907) and *Ideas I* (1913). Regrettably, much of what Husserl had to say about the link between phenomenology and hermeneutics, including his theory of intersubjectivity, his extensive writings on language, and on our preconceptual embeddedness in a *Lebenswelt* (also *Umwelt*, *Heimwelt*) would only gradually emerge in his monumental *Nachlass*, thus exercising little influence on his immediate successors and still awaiting full appreciation within contemporary phenomenology. Instead, as Hart reminds us, the hermeneutic implications of Husserl's project would be drawn gradually, and for the most part independent of his unpublished writings, by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricœur.

Figuring prominently among those drawing on Husserl's posthumously published writings is Marion, whose account of saturated phenomena Hart juxtaposes to Heidegger's and Fink's "idea of construction aiding intuition." By contrast, Marion finds the constructive work of hermeneutics being performed by the saturated phenomenon itself, which as Hart puts it "will yield in its own way the solutions to problems that Husserl found in limit-situations." While this may indeed be how Marion understands his own project, I admit to having my doubts and, for that reason alone, have remained "selective" (Hart), though for the most part appreciatively so, in my use of Marion's phenomenology. In fact, the Heideggerian formula of "construction aiding intuition" captures rather well what in my book I mean by hermeneutics and, more specifically, by "*writing* the image" (*IC* 1-59) or "transcribing" how visual experience registers in intuition (*IC* 280, 599, 682, 699). Construction in aid of intuition is the hermeneutic act *par excellence*, that is, a necessarily partial and continuous drawing-out and articulate rendering (in the Gadamerian sense of *Darstellung*) of what is so immeasurably given in intuition. For by dint of their charismatic presence and excess, images received in intuition beg to be transposed into creative and articulate forms such as we find them in Goethe's aphorisms and drawings, Hopkins's journals and poetry, Rilke's prose, letters, and sonnets of the middle years, or the paintings of Turner and Cézanne, to mention but a few.

Marion's scrupulous sifting of how saturated phenomena accomplish themselves in intuition—supremely instanced by Revelation—amounts to a philosophico-theological construction in its own right, one that by seeking to clarify the ontological status of intuition effectively supplements it. If only in covert manner, his project is a type of constructive hermeneutics after all. For only Revelation truly accomplishes itself in a manner that exceeds all philosophical construction, whereas images bear but an analogical relation to that event and, consequently, remain in their very "being … inseparable from their appearing *to us*" (*IC* 605), with all the hermeneutic obligations that entails. What Hart observes about "the self-giving of phenomena" not only characterizes their ontological status but also their mode of action in intuition: "we quietly depart from any sense that being is inert, that it can be unreflectively

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pre-given, as naturalism would have it," or that it is but preliminary to, and thus to be superseded by, unilateral acts of conceptualization. Put differently, the gaze that seeks to fulfill what intuition gives thereby undergoes a conversion of its own; and the epiphanic, as Rilke and Cézanne seem to have grasped so well, involves both the "event" of an intuition responsive to the fullness of phenomena as they give themselves, as well as "a conversion of attitude" (Hart) thereby accomplished in the subject. Properly to see an image (*eikon*) is to experience one's gaze as not so much *in*formed as *trans*formed and, in time, to bear articulate witness to that very event. As for Hart's observation that my approach prevents me from indicating "how phenomena give themselves in each and every case," that seems entirely true. Then again, I cannot think that such an all-encompassing approach could ever be fashioned, just as Husserl's attempts at formulating a general *Gegenstandstheorie* steadily unraveled into interminable analyses of the myriad "attitudes" (*Einstellungen*) listed by Hart, not to mention the countless contingencies to be specified for each such modality. To Hart's question, whether "there can be art without ἐποχή and reduction of some sort and to some extent," the answer surely has to be no. Yet such a "no" is not privative, does not imply anything defective in art but, on the contrary, is a main source of its strength.

In the spirit of Thomist *disputatio*, Hart now introduces what may well be the strongest counter-proposal to my "affirmative" account of the image, namely that advanced by Maurice Blanchot, whose oeuvre is also the subject of trenchant analyses in a recent book by Hart.[5] Now, considering Blanchot's intense scrutiny of the image, it is important to understand the "nullity" (Husserl's *Nichtigkeit*) he imputes to the image as a case of Plato's "non-being" (*mē ōn*), rather than outright "nothingness" (*ouk ōn*; cf. *IC* 63-92). As for Blanchot's suggestion that to inhabit the image is to pass from prudential everyday practice "into that other region where" we are held by an ineffable "distance … [a] lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness, … something like the sovereign power behind all things," I read this more as a case of "minimal theology" (as Hent de Vries has called it) with strong apophatic overtones rather than as a purely existentialist and immanent credo.[6] To be sure, the image's ambivalent status, its oscillation between *eikon* and *eidolon*, is indisputable and remains always latently in play wherever intuition is objectively realized in pictorial form. In other words, an essential precarity will always haunt the image, simply by dint of its apparitional or phantasmagorical nature. Yet such is less a defect than a source of the image's essential power, seeing as it disembodies and thereby exposes "the unreal, the impossible," that is, the essential transience of the things that make up our so-called real world. Just how far apart, one wonders, are Blanchot's pronouncements from the drooping and decomposing forms found in the Baroque *vanitas mundi* genre, as for example in Adriæn van Utrecht's 1642 "Vanitas" or Abraham van Beijeren's "Banquet Still Life" (1667)?

Now, Blanchot's choice of the corpse as the paradigmatic *eikon*, the form wherein transient human existence takes "on the great beauty that is its own resemblance, the truth of itself in a reflection," thus becoming its own portrait, is strikingly à propos the meditation on Holbein's "Dead Christ" in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* with which my book opens. Yet for all that, I cannot follow Blanchot's conclusion that where "a dead person becomes an

[5] Kevin Hart, *Maurice Blanchot on Poetry and Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), see esp. 157-73.
[6] Hent De Vries, *Minimal Theologies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), esp. 409-42.

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image of himself or herself" it thereby "attunes us to the non-truth of the image," and that the image itself becomes "'a profound *reserve*' of non-truth." How are we to understand "non-truth" here, if not as the return of the *mē ōn* from Plato's *Sophist*, in which case "it cannot simply be written off as the sheer negation of Being … any more than it can be validated as an entity of wholly independent standing. … Instead, 'non-being' (*mē ōn*) is intelligible only within a dialectic of revelation and concealment" (*IC* 67). Still, Hart is right to find my account of the image "completely opposed" to Blanchot's, and he helpfully identifies the two, mostly incommensurable genealogies on which our respective accounts draw (Coleridge and Ruskin, rather than Mallarmé and Nietzsche), antinomies subsequently writ large in the bifurcated reception of Heidegger.

Even so, I cannot help but wonder whether the Blanchot who, as Hart's puts it, "evacuates intuition, meaning, and purpose in the name of an Outside that promises a justice beyond any positive law" isn't a kind of Barthian or Pauline theologian *manqué*. His notion of a radical otherness or "Outside" (*le Dehors*) effectively beyond dialectics and also "beyond the law"—an otherness that is no longer the other *of* positive being or its notion—certainly sounds familiar, even as St. Paul, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Karl Barth would have blushed at the suggestion that this ontological state of affairs should license "a literature that … recognizes no limits, cultural or moral." For me, the central question remains this: whether Blanchot's line of inquiry leads to conclusions fundamentally opposed to Christian apophaticism, or whether by proceeding from a different intellectual formation with its own genealogy he ultimately ends up reaching the same or very similar conclusions. After all, why should Blanchot place such stress on the intransitive, passive, and never "fully constituted" kind of knowledge mediated by the image? Against what error does his line of reasoning mean to safeguard if not a Pelagianism or, in secular terms, an idealism intent on claiming the absolute by dialectical means? Fundamentally, Blanchot's appeal to "a deficit in intuition" does not invalidate Marion's and my appraisal of images or other "saturated phenomena" as tokens of excess. It merely highlights the incompleteness or inadequacy of our response *to* such phenomena. As Hart observes, "a good poem is still thinking, even if the image already contains all that it can think." I entirely concur and would only add that—as my discussion of Hopkins and Rilke is meant to show—a good poem seeks to overcome this "deficit in intuition," that is, attempts to make partial amends for the essential incompleteness and inadequacy of the beholder's response to the abundant givenness of the image that calls forth poetic speech.

The poem is nothing if not an attempted, faithful realization of the kind of thinking that unfolds in response to and in accordance with the specific ways in which the world ceaselessly and abundantly communicates itself in intuition. As such, every poem or painted image is *prima facie* a hermeneutic act, not an expressive one. It seeks to respond to the abundance of what gives itself in intuition, though with the proviso that the resulting form will always be limited, indeed deficient for multiple reasons: the contingent nature of the beholder's/speaker's "attitude" (*Einstellung*); the instability of the "aspects" (*Abschattungen*) assumed by its object; and the material constraints of the medium in which the artwork unfolds. Fittingly, every good image and poem will pass on the hermeneutic task it could not fully meet to its beholder/reader. Hence, just as T. S. Eliot had identified "doubt" as a good inroad to belief (knowing that doubt presupposes faith in a truth yet to be attained), so Blanchot's professed atheism opens up, almost inexorably it would seem, a sense of mystery, as Hart also observes. The peculiar mystery of the word (*le mystère des lettres*) stems not from its apparent failure to name Being but from the way in which its felt inadequacy alerts us

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to a reserve of eschatological hope.[7] Very helpfully, Hart notes that my book identifies several distinct modalities that the image's "reserve of truth" can assume, and that the image's several dimensions (mystical, variously eschatological, sacramental, forensic, and epiphanic) all harken back to a Platonist tradition that not only informs Christian writers fully cognizant of that debt but also professed agnostics and anti-metaphysical writers, such as Goethe, Rilke or, for that matter, Blanchot.

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Unlike the other four responders, who sensibly start out by identifying some of my book's major themes and conceptual aims, and who do so in similar ways, **Anne Carpenter**'s essay seems more invested in developing concerns of her own that, as far as I can tell, are only tangentially related to the arguments developed by me. Considering furthermore that Carpenter's remarks draw mainly to my book's Introduction and its final chapter, I cannot help but wonder just how much of its conceptual architecture and focused interpretations truly inform her reflections. Complicating the matter further is her decision to focus on precisely that part of Rilke's oeuvre (his late *Sonnets to Orpheus*) which my book, for expressly stated reasons (cf. *IC* 713-23) does *not* engage. Likewise, as most readers will have noticed, my book is also not about Sappho's poetry or about Maurice Blondel (whose work I have engaged elsewhere), about whom Carpenter has some interesting things to say.[8] Here, as throughout much of Carpenter's response, I find myself perplexed by distinctions (image vs. fragment) and sometimes gnomic pronouncements introduced as seemingly self-evident. Thus, rather than first offering a considered summary of what she takes to be my book's argument, Carpenter, already in the second sentence of her response, declares herself to be "in tension with [my] distinction" between picture and image, albeit without having in any way stated her understanding of how she sees these terms operating in my book. An early case in point is her pronouncement that "I take metaphysics to be, for the most part, the science of contingence." Now, considering how for the past 2,500 years metaphysics or *prima philosophia* took itself to be concerned with fundamental concepts (being, knowing, substance, identity, causality, time, space), Carpenter's declaration seems hard to parse; and while her distinction between classical, Christian, and Neoplatonist metaphysics may, up to a point, be justified (cf. note 24 in Carpenter's essay), what it points to are not three different metaphysics but three distinct kinds of emphasis placed within a tradition of inquiry that exhibits a great deal of continuity as regards its main questions; moreover, it seems rather doubtful that Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Aquinas, Schelling, or Przywara (among many others) would have thought of metaphysics as "the science of contingence."

No less mystifying is Carpenter's assertion that my book "tells a very sad story about Western thought." Given how sharply at odds this characterization is with the

[7] At his most Pascalian, T. S. Eliot had arguably put the matter as well as can be done in his *Four Quartets*: "Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure / Because one has only learnt to get the better of words / For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which / One is no longer disposed to say it. / And so each venture Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,/ With shabby equipment always deteriorating …"; "East Coker" in *The Complete Poems*, edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 191 (Pt. V, lines 3-9).

[8] See Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, op. cit., 315-18.

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conclusions drawn by the other readers, I cannot but suspect that it is likely the result of highly selective reading, limited as it would seem mainly to the book's final chapter.[9] By contrast, O'Regan, who has clearly absorbed the book's full scope, notes that "there appears to be an allergy to decline narrative," just as Desmond, focusing on my book's Platonist undercurrent, notes that its aim is "not the depreciation of the image but," on the contrary, its unique capacity to "draw attention to a truth that is not self-derived." Likewise, Hart reads that "*Incomprehensible Certainty* is an affirmative work [that] offers a vibrant alternative to modern theories of the image," and Quash (quoting Romaine and Stratford) finds in my book "a genuine vision of what an 'Art Metaphysics' might look like" precisely because its treatment of images offers "an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology." For her part, Carpenter reads Part II of my book as presenting "a disintegrating artistic universe" (in Goethe, Ruskin, Hopkins, and Rilke—really!?) and, both implausibly and inexplicably, professes to find "sorrow everywhere, and always sorrow for the real." Again, I simply cannot discern in these counter-intuitive generalizations the main lineaments of the book I actually wrote. In fact, aside from occasional references to Christ as the "Man of Sorrows," the word "sorrow" does not appear a single time in my book. If anything, virtually all the major figures in my book, including all those central to Part II, exemplify how the phenomenology and hermeneutic of visual experience such as I trace it in nineteenth-century scientific, aesthetic, and poetic writing luminously defies narratives of decline and disintegration.

Given Carpenter's eccentric appraisal of my book as a declensionist, sorrowful narrative, it is not entirely surprising that she should also misconstrue my reading of Dostoevsky's dramatization of how Holbein's "Dead Christ" is viewed by several characters in *The Idiot*. Having quoted a passage from early in my introduction ("the true aim of iconic seeing is to guide its beholder toward heightened self-recognition, which begins with a humbling reminder concerning the utter fragility and vulnerability of the good and the true in us" [*IC* 7]), Carpenter abruptly reverses course. Rather than demurring at my book's allegedly sorrowful, declensionist account, she now appears to charge it with excessive faith, saying that I "envision a universe that we can trust. We see in this remarkable claim a trust that is not betrayed. A universe that brings us out of ourselves and into a goodness so good that it would be agony to lose. Which is the book's agony, almost. Or something like it." One reason why all this sounds rather confusing, both at the level of writing and ideation, is Carpenter's apparent failure to distinguish between my hermeneutics of Dostoevsky's narrative and Myshkin's and Rogozhin's contrasting responses to Holbein's painting. It is not Pfau who "denies that Holbein's *Dead Christ* could ever rob a person of faith" but Myshkin who concedes that such might "almost" (!) come to pass. More discerning readers, some of whose responses I have already addressed, have rightly seen my true concern (like Dostoevsky's) to lie with our ambivalent visual response to the

[9] Similarly, it is surprising to find Carpenter meditate on "the silent object-deaths of the women (the girls, *Mädchen*)" in Rilke's sonnets and remarking, correctly, that "never do Daphne or Eurydice get to articulate, with *their* mouths, the violence—the male violence—that catalyzes their transfigurations (into a laurel tree, into the dead)" without even mentioning my discussion of the Daphne myth and the concept of the image as "transfiguration" (*Verwandlung*) in Chapter 5 (*IC* 460-65). Was this discussion among the materials inadvertently skipped?

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phenomenal world.[10] It is this precarity that has me surmise the modern individual's perhaps most marked affinity, less with Rogozhin or Myshkin than with the moribund anarchist, Ippolit. For it is the latter who exemplifies a persistent vacillation, so characteristic of the modern gaze, between metaphysically inspired, iconic and naturalistically appropriative, idolatrous vision. Thus, Ippolit appears "reluctant to affirm any belief in a transcendent (noncontingent) reality, presumably for fear of being deemed wrong, naive, and biased" even as he finds his "defensive cocoon recurrently punctured by sights, such as Holbein's painting … experience[d] as profoundly, albeit ineffably, meaningful" (*IC* 12).

Readers as yet unfamiliar with my book and approaching it by way of Carpenter's remarks might well conclude that *Incomprehensible Certainty* is mainly a study of Rilke and von Balthasar. Quite evidently, this is not the case. To be sure, von Balthasar (along with Marion, Husserl, Gadamer, and a host of other thinkers) is a regular presence in my book; and that von Balthasar is wary of Neoplatonist metaphysics, as Carpenter reminds us, does, up to a point, indeed seem to be the case. Now, if my book had been intended as an exegesis of von Balthasar's oeuvre, my own, more positive appraisal of Plato (esp. his later work) might indeed have stood in productive tension with von Balthasar's Trinitarian thought. Yet those who have attentively read the Introduction and any one of its other chapters will quickly realize that the book's overall aim, conceptual architecture, and thematic scope cannot be reduced to the exegesis of one or two authors. What finally makes it so difficult, if not impossible, to respond to Carpenter in ways I have found so rewarding with the other commentators is the fact that for the most part her remarks are but tangentially related to my book and, as formulated, often do not (certainly not for me) come into clear focus. Let me conclude with just one more instance of how the task of responding to Carpenter is complicated by spurious distinctions and generalizations. At one point, just before abruptly switching from von Balthasar to Blondel, she remarks how the former "is worried about the reduction of the real, much like *Incomprehensible Certainty* is, but I think he is worried about a different reduction. It has less to do with image and more to do with our apprehension of intelligibility in act, which is the ground of our imagining." Now, in *Theo-Logic* 1 von Balthasar *does* offer (and I appreciatively draw on) a powerful account of the image; and what Carpenter calls "our apprehension of intelligibility in act" cannot, for von Balthasar any more than for me, be separated from the image but, instead, is uniquely brought into focus by its phenomenology.

Wholly perplexing and certainly unsubstantiated, then, is Carpenter's assertion that "in the narrative of [my] book, the reality of the intuited image (nearly?) vanishes." I admit to being at a loss as to what in my book could possibly give rise to such a sweeping and erroneous conclusion. Far more to the point, if hard to square with the assertion just quoted, is Carpenter's observation that "*Image* is always only ever participatory, mediatory of being; not because accident sits crudely atop substance, but because it is accident and not substance; not because phantasmata are not phantasmata 'of' being, but because they are not being's measure." Putting it thus comes reasonably close to Emmanuel Alloa's project of a medial phenomenology, on which I repeatedly and gratefully draw. Beyond that, Carpenter's phrasing also notably chimes with Plato's trope of "participation" (*methexis*). Yet once we take

[10] See also Matthew Milliner's thoughtful review of *Incomprehensible Certainty* in *The Hedgehog Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2022) at https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/hope-itself/articles/the-intractable-image.

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seriously the Platonic concept, and its subsequent development and deepening in a Christian metaphysic of *analogia*, we readily find that strapping the image (n.b., not the "picture") onto the Procrustean bed of substance/accident distinction shuts down possibilities that Plato's late writings work hard to open up. Rather more to the point is Carpenter's observation that the phantasmata are not those "'of' being … because they are not being's measure." Implicitly, she here raises a key issue that my book addresses in considerable detail in Chapter 1 (*IC* 81-85; 93-100), where I trace how, in the passage from late Plato to Aristotle the relation of image to prototype undergoes a crucial shift: from *pros alla* to *pros ti*. In the first case, the nexus between the image and what it depicts is metaphysical, whereas in the second (Aristotelian instance) it is merely one of definitional ascription and (social or aesthetic) convention. While more could be said, I cannot help but feel that the encounter of Carpenter and Pfau may be the intellectual equivalent of two ships passing each other in the night, each carrying different cargo and, it would seem, headed towards different ports. Perhaps it's wisest to accept, with a measure of bemusement and resignation, that such non-encounters will occasionally come to pass in the world of academia, just as in most other spheres of human endeavor.

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The persistence of a classical, Plato-inflected metaphysics is central to **William Desmond**'s remarks, which show him to be largely in agreement with my book's concerns and emphases. I thus take the opportunity to underscore some shared considerations and to offer a few concluding reflections on how they argue for a long-overdue rapprochement of theological and humanistic inquiry. However much a good deal of philosophy after Hobbes and Descartes might have wished it, "ultimate questions of being are not done away with," as Desmond notes. At various turns, both in classical and modern thought, my book points to the resurgence of metaphysics, less so within the methodologically restrictive and putatively autonomous domain of post-Cartesian epistemology than in art and literature, where stress is placed not on determinate "representation" (*Vorstellung*) of the ambient world but on *mimesis* or "presentation" (*Darstellung*) in the strong sense of capturing the self-constitution of the world *qua* appearance. Rightly considered, the image cannot be assimilated to the order of mundane objects continually fashioned, circulated, and consumed according to shifting aesthetic norms and social needs. On the contrary, like DNA wherein our inheritance, however distant, quietly exercises its influence, the image time and again reminds modernity of an ontology that, as Platonic and Patristic writers had so well understood, transcends our powers of conceptualization and confounds modern thought's attempts at definitional exclusion. Rather than being one more thing contingently "at hand" or pragmatically "to hand" (*vorhanden*, *zuhanden*), as Heidegger would put it, the image is more fittingly understood as a *Basisphänomen*, to borrow a term from Ernst Cassirer's posthumous writings; it does not exist *within* the world in the way that all manner of objects do but, instead, organizes and circumscribes whatever moral and epistemic relation finite human beings may enter into, precisely because (as Desmond rightly stresses) we are always already "in the midst of" the world.

Hence, if within "the subjectivity-oriented epistemology of … modernity" the classical image (*eikon*) is de-potentiated and trivialized into a mere "picture" or (often idolatrous) representation, such a development can never negate but only

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temporarily obscure the metaphysics of the image, which sooner or later are again brought to the fore by the intuitive force, presence, and excess of the visible. For us truly to *see* the image we must already have been "struck" by it, to recall Desmond's pithy phrase. It is the sheer givenness and abundance *qua* image—in contrast to the myriad pictures crafted and deployed for strictly anthropomorphic, immanent purposes—which prompts Desmond's observation that "an ontology of the image was inseparable from the ontotheologic of the manifesting source that offered itself for communication in the medium of the image itself." Logically and axiologically prior to contingently fashioned "pictures," the image startles us precisely by alerting us to the difference between contingent *logoi* and the transcendent *logos*. Or, as Desmond so helpfully notes, the image is inseparable from the classical and inherently metaphysical concept of *mimesis*. For built into it is an "essential reference to *originals*" as well as an understanding (and acceptance) that the *eikon* simultaneously bears a relation *to* and differs *from* the original.

The salient texts here are the *Timaeus* and the *Sophist*, rather than the *Republic*, for it is in these later works that Plato leaves behind his earlier, suspicious and declensionist concept of image and mimesis as "a falling *away*" from its original and, instead, acknowledges the image's unique capacity "to draw our attention to truth that is not self-derived," as Desmond puts it so well. As I argue throughout my book, it is in the phenomenology of the image—how it registers in experience: intuitively, incomprehensibly, and inexorably—which "bring[s] the original as other to immanent manifestation." Nowhere is what Michel Henry has called the "essence of manifestation" unfolded for us more poignantly than in the way that the image effects a suspension of all instrumental, pragmatic, and deliberate doing, inducing instead an ego-free state of Platonic "wonder" or what Desmond calls a "primal receptivity."[11] The phenomenology of beholding, of being *in* and submitting *to* the image's presence and charism is indeed something that cannot be willed. In Desmond's phrasing—obliquely echoing similar formulations found in Schopenhauer, arguably the most devoted reader of Plato in his time—"we cannot self-activate into wonder" but, instead, must be "*struck* into wonder." Such wonder, I would add, is not so much *in* us as autonomous subjects. Rather, it stems from recognizing our indelible *relatedness* to the world in all its otherness, our being always already "in the midst of" (*metaxu*) and "being towards" the world. It is this primal encounter with Being, what Plotinus calls "a reality met by 'marveling' (*thaumazein*)," that illustrates the metaphysics undergirding the image, a *Basisphänomen* that uniquely alerts us to a truth coded into the dramatic structure of appearance *per se*, rather than being a function of propositional and discursive reasoning. As I put it in my book, "what is truly wondrous is not that some things appear conspicuous and strange but that things appear at all" (*IC* 690).

Particularly intriguing about Desmond's "philosophy of the *metaxu*" with its prioritizing of "being in the midst" over the "being towards" of Husserlian intentionality is its equivocal relation to Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein* as "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*). Desmond is right to note that the latter conception "is not coincident with 'being in the

[11] For an excellent discussion of Platonic *thaumazein*, see D. C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), esp. 163-228.

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midst' understood … in light of 'beholding from'."[12] Yet wherein exactly lies the difference? Desmond's earlier work has helpfully pointed the way, and what little can be added to his arguments here fundamentally resonates with them, notwithstanding some difference in emphasis. Perhaps most revealing about Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* is the absence of any sense of wonder and its displacement by "care" (*Sorge*) and "anxiety" (*Angst*). The German term for such "thrownness" connotes an inescapable condition, with marked overtones of existential desolation and metaphysical abandonment; we detect faint echoes of Pascal's Augustinian trope of humankind's *délaissement* by a God whose presence to the *massa damnata* seems heavily attenuated, more notional than real. For Heidegger, the world is no longer a vivid and abundant presence, as it is for Plato, Plotinus, Maximus, St. Bernard, or indeed some of the "moderns" taken up in my book. It has become a generic, monochrome, vaguely menacing "there"—the *Da* in Heidegger's *Dasein*—denuded of all form and texture, *Dasein*'s home by default rather than the gift of Creation celebrated in the poetry of Hopkins and Claudel. The primal impulse of wonder and the hermeneutic quest triggered by its experience has been supplanted by existential resignation to a finitude, a *Sein-zum-Tode* bereft of all epiphanic fullness and, instead, characterized by anxiety, boredom, curiosity, ambiguity, and chit-chat (*Gerede*).

Instructive in this regard is the contrast between Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* and Merleau-Ponty's far more generative notion of "perceptual faith." The latter's contention that the world is not just *before* us but positively *surrounds* us and that we share one and the same phenomenological space with things and persons implies a primal sense of *relatedness* rather than Heideggerian estrangement. It also explains Merleau-Ponty's greater receptivity and sensitivity to the visible, and his consequent willingness to credit the image with mediating for us the world's invisible, metaphysical underpinnings. All this is to say that I entirely concur with Desmond's emphasis on the "between" (*metaxu*) as a valuable modification of Husserl's approach, not least because of the greater stress it places on the ethical implications of our encounters with the world. Notwithstanding differences in terminology and the philosophical genealogies from which Desmond proceeds, his approach seems overall congruent with the argument that *Incomprehensible Certainty* tries to develop; and his proposed rehabilitation of a metaphysics that no longer aspires to totalizing pronouncements but, instead, is brought into focus by our inexhaustible wonder and dialogic "in-betweenness" helps us rediscover, as my phenomenology of visual experience also means to do, a domain long eclipsed by modernity's peremptory fracturing of experience into subjective and objective poles, followed by either belated attempts at their dialectical reconciliation or by the pallid existentialist understanding of *Dasein* as terminally estranged *from* the world; from which it is but a small step toward the nihilism of our technological anthropocene that, prevented by epistemic hubris to honor Creation as gift in thought and practice, has instead hastened the decreation of a world, as we are now daily reminded in vivid and increasingly horrifying ways.

[12] As Desmond puts it, "Heidegger … is trying to move in this second direction; but his language shows him still entangled in the striving to be, that strives despite the *passio essendi*, itself poorly rendered in the language of *Geworfenheit*." *Art, Origins, Otherness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 261.

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