

HOLINESS IN EXCESS: BETWEEN HOLINESS AND METAPHYSICS IN THE WAKE OF ROWAN WILLIAMS

JONATHAN M. PLATTER
University of Cambridge

Rowan Williams has consistently given expression to Christian faith in surprising and generative ways, especially through the language of ‘excess’ and through contemplating the excess in the narrative and identity of Christ. By attending to the grammar of excess, this essay draws out elements of the metaphysics of holiness in dialogue with Williams. I ask how creaturely being can be sustained by the holiness which generates all things without leaving holiness so ubiquitous as to be either trivial or hidden. I respond to this problem by arguing that holy lives and communities make visible the ontological dependence of all things on God. Finally, this provides a way of recognizing the value of the metaphysical imagination in the pursuit of holiness.

To see a glorious fountain and an end,
To see all creatures tend
To thy advancement, and so sweetly close
In thy repose: to see them shine
In use, in worth, in service, and even foes
Among the rest made thine:
To see all these unite at once in thee
Is to behold felicity.

–Thomas Traherne¹

Metaphysics, we have been told, begins in wonder. It is consequently basic to the task of metaphysics—to thinking the real—that we are attentive to the wonders around us. And if this is the case, then perhaps the ordinary stuff of the Christian life is more relevant to metaphysics than we might otherwise assume. For what could incite more wonder than the possibility that humans could become holy? That the uncontainable and unimaginable God could be imaged through simple human lives?

In his *Phaedo*, Plato invites us to imagine ourselves as small frogs peering into a pond, as if the whole of our sensory experience is but a puddle on the surface of the real.² The world we inhabit is simply surface, a rippling and refracting interplay of appearances—shimmering with a depth not its own. One way of taking this image is consonant with a Christian vision of creation in which creation is on one plane of existence that is inherently dependent on a being ontologically other, from whom it receives existence.³ Through the created play of surfaces, we encounter a generative depth wholly present to, though not exhausted by, finite exteriority.

The task of metaphysics draws one to contemplate surfaces in thinking the real. One fundamental aspect, then, concerns how to negotiate this movement from surface to ‘real’. Does the

movement involve a progression from one discrete grade of reality to another ‘higher’ grade, as in a strong dualism between the sensible and the intelligible? Or is the movement a judgment—already noetic and ontic⁴—by which one discerns the reality in and of the surface itself—in Erich Przywara’s phrase, the ‘essence in-and-beyond existence’?⁵ Any activity of metaphysics requires some judgment concerning the reality of the surface or sensible appearances we navigate and what the most general categories are for such judgments.⁶ This does not mean an epistemological foundation is needed for metaphysics; rather the judgment is simultaneously both noetic and ontic, as the ‘duality ... between the act of knowledge and the object of knowledge ... leaves open no possibility of a retreat on the part of either into the enclosure of its own “purity”. The meta-noetic transcends itself, in a forward intentionality, towards the meta-ontic. The meta-ontic moves backward in self-critique, reflexively, towards the meta-noetic.’⁷ There is no privileging of one’s own intellectual act over-against encountering the other, for our knowing is consistently unsettled and revised in traversing the real.

To say that we are always involved in judgments concerning the reality of things is to implicate all human activity in metaphysics. Rowan Williams expresses the relationship of the process of forming judgments and the task of metaphysics this way:

The authentically political, the project of continually challenging localised and incommunicable discourses about human interest, arises out of a commitment to thought in a certain mode, thought aware of its own production, its own vulnerability and its own commitment to risk. This carries an account of reality-as-such, not in the sense of talk of unreal objects or invisible but discussable entities, but in the sense that it uncovers what we cannot but do if we are concerned with truthfulness. A negative metaphysic, comparable to a negative theology? Perhaps ... But a metaphysic undoubtedly, and so too an ethic for both thinking and acting.⁸

Because thinking requires vulnerability to error and revision, and so holding tentative all judgments concerning the other, so too our thinking is involved in ‘an account of reality-as-such’—a reality not wholly subject to the individual will—the recognition of which further requires consideration of how one *ought* to think and act, and, hence, it also involves an ethic.

As both Williams and Erich Przywara recognize, this kind of metaphysic requires analogy. Analogy, in the form of the *analogia entis*, is the metaphysic insofar as it regulates the noetic and the ontic. In an essay discussing the relation of Barth and Hegel, Williams concludes with a brief presentation of Przywara as a way forward, and it is precisely because in Przywara analogy moves beyond dialectic. Dialectic, as it is in different ways present in both Barth and Hegel, presents a tension within difference—whether between one and the other, thought and its other, or God and creation—a tension that ‘threatens to collapse into an ultimate self-identity (however drawing on Gillian Rose and Andrew Shanks, Williams argues that this is ultimately a flawed reading of Hegel).⁹ Analogy, by contrast, draws us into the ‘between’ that is suspended within the tension, so that thought and the negotiation of difference happens within the *excess* of being, within the interval between being and otherness, being and non-being, God and creation, and so without any collapse into identity or contradiction:

God is never exhaustively the other of creation. God is God, the identity of essence and existence, ... in a mode of being radically inaccessible to finite conceptuality, defined by the internal differentiation of the Trinity. His being is thus outside any process of measurement or proportion; by the sheer gift simultaneously of existence and intelligible form to the finite, God establishes a world in which tension is inbuilt in our apprehension and thus ‘analogical’ thinking becomes of central importance. It is both a connecting mode of thought and one that connects to the infinite source, tracing the critical reality of unity in difference between finite things and between all finitude and God.¹⁰

Analogy, then, is linguistic—allowing for the stretching of words across differences without univocity or equivocity—and metaphysical. Przywara argues that analogy occurs between immanent differences—*ἀνά-λογον*—and between the Creator-creature difference—*ἄνω-λογον*.¹¹ Analogy is a ‘coordinated relation’ rather than pure identity or pure contradiction; so while analogy acknowledges the tension-in-difference found in dialectic, it also avoids a dialectical collapse by being suspended within or between the tension.¹²

Communities committed to the memory and formation of holy lives have a special stake in this analogical apprehension of being; for not only are they involved in particular patterns of negotiation, with attendant vulnerabilities and risks, they are also directly concerned with the depth which suspends all finite surfaces in existence and the possibility that human persons might uniquely come to recognize and make visible this transcendent depth. In other words, for Christian holiness, both the *ἀνά* and the *ἄνω* of Przywara’s analogy are of explicit concern—the church exists within the analogical intersection of the horizontal and vertical analogies. Consequently, thinking holiness entails reflecting on (I) the patterns of negotiation according to which the Holy is apprehended (goodness), (II) the recognition of the Holy as the transcendent depth sustaining all finite being (truth), and (III) the concrete vocations by which holiness is made visible in human lives and communities (beauty). However, this basic framing of the question of holiness may seem to be involved in a problem: if all finite reality is always-already suspended by its transcendent origin and end—by Holiness-itself—it seems holiness is ubiquitous and so either a trivial given or an ineffable mystery of existence. In other words, either holiness is so visible as to be unremarkable, or it is so invisible as to be irrelevant. In one sense this falls within the question of nature and grace, though it merits attention on its own insofar as it is not solely concerned with how grace fulfils nature but with the visibility and recognition of the grace of divine holiness within creaturely being—i.e., with what visible difference grace makes in nature. I will argue that by thinking holiness with Rowan Williams, it is possible to sustain a robust metaphysic in the broad Christian-Platonist tradition and understand holiness as (analogically) present in all things yet still eliciting visible witness in particular lives.¹³ Finally, I argue that this provides a way of recognizing the value of the metaphysical imagination in the pursuit of holiness. By ‘metaphysical imagination’ I do not refer only or primarily to the explicit academic study of metaphysics, but rather to the contemplation of all things through the ‘transcendentals’, the most general categories of being—namely goodness, truth, and beauty.

I. THE GOODNESS OF HOLINESS

As my concern here is the negotiation, recognition, and visibility of holiness in *Christian* communities, the pattern of this negotiation is determined by a particular narrative, for the central confession of Christianity is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the church receives its form of life. The church is ‘a distinctive social body given coherence by the action of God in Jesus’.¹⁴ In Alasdair MacIntyre’s sense of tradition as a temporally extended argument,¹⁵ the church is a traditioned community—or a community of memory¹⁶—whose argument is that creaturely being is fulfilled and made intelligible by the narrative and identity of Christ. Consequently, the first-order business of the church is to learn to recognize Christ and the ways in which he, on the one hand, is a disruption of the patterns of being typical of this world and, on the other, is in fact identified with God—‘the radical creative energy that generates all things’.¹⁷ Insofar as Christ is a disruption of our typical patterns, he exposes that which occludes the holiness in all things; insofar as Christ is identified with the generative source of

all, he opens a way of being—not destroying but fulfilling nature—by which holiness might be made visible.

These two moments, of disruption and divine identification, coalesce in Christ's appearance as the victim who is vindicated. In the victimization of Christ, the distorting practices of oppression are revealed by the reversal Christ effects: 'grace is released when the judges *turn* to their victim [Jesus] and recognize him as their hope and their saviour'.¹⁸ So Christ, by disrupting destructive practices of violence and victimization *as* the particular victim of these practices, at the same time discloses the goal of human life from and beyond these distortions. In this way, the narrative of Christ shows nature to be not only permeated by the holiness that sustains it but also as antagonizing and obscuring that holiness. Consequently, finite being is recognized as at an analogical distance from God, so that its intimacy to God as creator does not entail a direct correspondence or identical repetition.

The Christian community negotiates this analogical distance in a trusting instability: for faithfully drawing towards divine goodness involves trust in God and ongoing vulnerability to the judgment of Christ. It involves a moral vulnerability by which we learn to remember rightly the failures of this community, attending to the victims of our failings through whom Christ utters judgment and hope.¹⁹ So the church practices repentance in order to acknowledge guilt in the creation of victims and to pursue life beyond the patterns of oppressive relations, to be made open to new patterns. The church consists in one moral perception: that God's life is faithfully enacted in Jesus of Nazareth, who cannot be known apart from continued acts of trust and dis-possession. Here is the center of the church's 'negative metaphysic', summed in its orientation to the good embodied in Jesus. It consists in a commitment to surrendering to a being outside our grasp yet available to our continued pursuit; Christ cannot be reduced to surface data, as if he were simply a set of givens at our disposal, and in this sense his life and story evince an excess—his life is a *signum*—through which we are drawn into the generativity of the God who is source of all.²⁰ In Jesus we see the good to which all creation finds proper orientation: 'the Jesus who is here preached as sole source of salvation is the particular victim of that court. If any insight may be generalized out of this saying, it is that salvation does not bypass the history and memory of guilt, but rather builds upon and from it'.²¹ Williams might be taken here as glossing the Thomistic adage: grace (salvation) does not destroy nature (bypass the history and memory of guilt), but presupposes (builds from) and perfects (builds upon) it. Sanctification, then, takes time, as it is suspended within the analogical tension between trusting pursuit of Christ and vulnerability to the judgment of Christ in the other, between the history and memory of guilt and the salvation Christ offers from and upon it. And so, to reformulate Williams, in Christ we are confronted with 'what we cannot but do if we are concerned with [goodness]'.²²

II. THE TRUTH OF HOLINESS

To carry on in such a way about the destabilizing role of Christ in the metaphysical apprehension of goodness is, of course, already to be involved in a judgment about the *truthfulness* of Christ in relation to God as goodness. While this might seem circular, the judgment is not *viciously* circular insofar as it is primarily negative; it is to recognize Christ not as a metaphysical posit which then provides the foundation for moral claims but rather as the personal centre of ongoing confrontation eliciting revisions and adjustments in moral judgments—as something 'real' but not a bounded item among the series of finite particulars. So, to recognize the moral centrality of Christ is to be *involved* in a judgment about truth but not necessarily to *presuppose* a truth-claim as the foundation for the moral development of Christian sanctity. For

to pursue the goodness revealed in Christ is just as much (or more) to pursue the truth to which he calls as it is to presume Christ truthfully mediates goodness.

This is in part just to concede that recognizing the truth of holiness is already a moral task, one which explicitly involves the subject in a process of dispossession and transformation—or a process of prayer. And this is, once again, rooted in Jesus, who ‘is active as bestower of the “spirit” that enables us to relate to God as he did; he is the cause of the fact that we can pray as we do (as he did)... Attention to or openness to his presence (faith?) makes possible the receiving of new kinds of prayer and awareness of, or confidence in, God as a *gift*.’²³ A little later Williams continues, ‘[Jesus] continues to give shape and definition to the act of God initiated in the history of Israel and in his ministry. He is, so to speak, “held” in the divine action, his identity and human priorities ... becoming the channel for God’s work of reconciliation.’²⁴ It is fitting, then, that Williams characterizes the life of discipleship as ‘letting Christ’s action come through us as the Father’s act comes through him. ... our discipleship in the company of Jesus is a trinitarian mode of life, embedded in the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: that is, it is a contemplative mode of life.’²⁵ Discipleship—life committed to the memory and formation of holiness—is constituted by disponibility to God’s action and by attention to God and God’s involvement with creation.

Sanctification as knowing the truth of God is not simply mediated by Christ, if that entails a transfer from one entity to another by means of a third; rather, the holy, contemplative life by which one comes to know God *is* Jesus’ life (his life being fully divine and fully human), made available to creaturely participation.²⁶ This helps to qualify the sense in which Christ is a disruption in our ways of being: Christ disrupts through intimate involvement with the object of God’s delight, *not* because creation is so averse to the divine that it requires an overhaul. It is because God delights in creation—and so because something in creation gives faithful (truthful) expression to God’s own goodness and beauty—that God is deeply involved in the brokenness and hurt.²⁷

Attending to the truth requires the practice and recovery of memory, because the self is made; the self *is* ‘what the past is doing now, it is the process in which a particular set of “given” events and processes and options crystalizes now in a new set of particular options, responses and determinations, providing a resource of given past-ness out of which the next decision and action can flow.’²⁸ In turn, ‘God is the agency that gives us back our memories, because God is the “presence” to which all reality is present.’²⁹ Becoming truthful selves, then, is to be related to the truth itself. Such a relation to God as truth does not secure for oneself a stable and secured status, free of potential error and misunderstanding. On the contrary, it is to be made vulnerable to the strangeness of all surfaces and to the excess generativity that sustains and unsettles them, to become, in Charles Taylor’s terms, a ‘porous’ rather than ‘buffered’ self.³⁰ It is to recognize the surface of one’s own very self and to perceive God as the unsettling centre—who is more interior to me than I am to myself—who directs me outside myself—as more ‘superior’ and beyond myself.³¹ Being related to God as truth draws one into a rhythm, a surface oscillating between God interior to God beyond. In the task of seeking the God of truth, one is constantly being made strange to oneself, and yet it is this very strangeness which opens oneself to a deeper involvement and appreciation of the world of which we are members. In other words, it is the strangeness of temporal being, the possibility of *becoming* by encountering the strange excess of finitude as potentiality.³² And so ‘knowing God’ is not a matter of grasping with a closed and sealed hand, as Gregory of Nyssa rejected in the Stoics and Eunomius, but rather the vulnerability of being grasped by God.³³

The memory and formation of holiness entails a commitment to a particular way of being in and perceiving the world. Holy vision resists an epistemological closure, but not because

all judgments are invalid. For to take this view would be to assume a strict divide between the knower and the known, or between language and reality, which would involve the problematic and question-begging premise that one knows *both* that there is such an absolute divide ‘in reality’ *and* that all language and knowledge necessarily fails to refer beyond this divide. By contrast, the holy resistance of closure is an apophatic posture, attending to the excess in all surfaces—it is the acknowledgement that all judgments are provisional because incomplete, not erroneous by necessity.³⁴ And it is, further, the acknowledgement that truth is not a point of stasis but a relation of intimacy between creature and creator, a relation marked on the creaturely side by the ongoing temporal openness of finitude³⁵ and marked on the divine side by infinite plenitude and generativity.³⁶ Holiness in this perspective is learning to speak and live truthfully in response to the divine excess by whom all things remain in being—to know how to ‘go on’ faithfully in the wake of the brokenness in the world.³⁷ While never able to attain closure on the infinite holiness of God, holiness nevertheless continually hazards a wording and performing of the divine, for to do otherwise would simply be to resist responding to the call of divine beauty. The apophatic search for the apprehension of holiness is ‘what we cannot but do if we are concerned with truthfulness’.³⁸

III. THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS

This discussion has already hinted now at that which precedes any acting and knowing—precedes, in a sense, goodness and truth—as that which elicits and calls forth response. Hence, I could have led with beauty, rather than culminating with it, for, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has expressed it, goodness and reason are always-already involved in *being enraptured* and *seeing the form*, insofar as they are tasks pursued in *response* to the call of beauty.³⁹ And yet, beauty is also the culmination of sanctification, for only through the moral and rational transformation of discipleship can one’s vision be properly attuned to the beauty of creation and of God’s own holiness.

Beauty, in this light, forms two poles between which finite being is once again suspended, responding to and culminating in the divine *claritas*, and this suspension might once again be seen as pointing to the temporality of creaturely being. Art, as Williams argues in *Grace and Necessity*, involves us in a way of reading the world as if ‘things are not only what they are’ and ‘give more than they have’,⁴⁰ and so it involves us in a way of taking time with creation in order to recognize and develop linguistic re-presentations of the excesses in the world. Art is consequently analogous to and compatible with the theologian’s task of articulating all things *sub specie aeternitatis*. And further this understanding of art permits a metaphysic according to which ‘the agency or energy of this particular bit of the environment’ can be fused ‘with my own agency, allowing the external stimulus to shape my action, yet also shaping the stimulus in particular ways as I make it my own’.⁴¹ So all things exhibit a communicative excess, which permits and elicits representations and responses, linguistic and otherwise. It is this excess that opens the possibility of re-presenting holiness—making divine generativity visible in concrete speech and actions.⁴² Representing holiness, in this manner, is to attempt *love*, self-dispossessing and disinterested love—a love that, by virtue of its self-dispossessing character, is productive, ‘making other’ through *giving more than it has*.⁴³

This is to say that being holy is to participate in divine generativity—a generativity that *gives* in a way that enables unique, though unnecessary, response; a generativity oriented to the triune abundance; a generativity so inexhaustible it can risk otherness and vulnerability, risk undergoing the victimizing structures of human life, risk the ‘weakness’ of forgiveness, and finally

risk being repeated and re-presented diversely. Consequently, a holy person ‘enlarges the world rather than shrinking it’,⁴⁴ and so holiness is not first about *becoming* holy but about pursuing habits and practices that enable one to attend to the holiness visible in all things. Which finally allows us to see that the visible beauty of holiness is also involved in a certain instability insofar as holiness is made visible in lives which seek not to *be* the visibility of holiness but to *recognize* and *delight* in it,⁴⁵ and so *becoming* holy is sought through deferral—pursuing holiness is to turn one’s attention away from one’s own status and instead attend to holiness in others. Consequently, making holiness visible is a kind of ‘making other’—in analogy to the production of art—through which the surfaces of finite being are made strange—other than familiar—so that the excess of divine generativity, by which all things are sustained and pervaded, shines forth. Becoming holy by attending to the holiness in all things is ‘what we cannot but do if we are concerned with [beauty]’.⁴⁶

IV. HOLINESS IN EXCESS

Goodness, truth, and beauty condition our finite, temporal life in such a way that they direct our finitude toward the holy source of all things. These transcendentals do not function as abstract qualities, or as purely immanent principles, but coalesce in the concrete life of Jesus Christ, who makes visible, uniquely and unsubstitutably, the holiness that suspends all things in being—which is, then, the holiness made open to all human situations.⁴⁷ The above discussion permits several considerations, pertaining to the involvement of holiness with metaphysics and to the problematic of holiness’s visibility, which will lead, finally, to the excess of holiness.

To consider the involvement of holiness with metaphysics is to move into a more speculative mode than Williams’ himself generally ventures. However, this speculative mode does not abandon the primarily apophatic approach followed above. In attending to the holy, we are in a preparatory and tentative position, directed to but never exhausting God’s being. The speculative task, then, draws out aspects of the nature of finite being in its analogical suspension within the infinite creative act, but never speculatively encloses the infinite act within which it thinks and moves.

One recurring theme has been that finite being bears an inherent instability, particularly pertaining to its relation to God’s holiness. In one sense, especially concerning being’s goodness and the evident patterns of evil, the instability of finite being is a result of humanity’s sinfulness. In another sense, though, the instability is simply a condition of finitude, especially as *temporal*. Forming and remembering holiness is a way of taking time with concrete others, the particularities with which and within which one is situated; further, it is to take time with the otherness and particularities of one’s own self as the concreteness of this web of particularities acting in the present. Consequently, it is not primarily concerned with positing Lockean inert substances, discrete and incommunicable. Rather, it involves one in the ongoing, temporal negotiation and recognition of essences in-and-beyond existence—or, the excesses of finite surfaces (hence, one may allow for a Thomistic understanding of essence as ‘substantial form’, and thereby not entirely reject the category of substance through an anachronistic Lockean/Humean reading of the metaphysical tradition).⁴⁸

Forming and sustaining the memory of holy lives is to exist within an analogical tension, from and to the holy, transcendent source of all things. It is to receive holiness as a gift to finite being, the gift of an ever-greater presence and openness within finite being *to* infinite being. So the instability of existence within the analogical tension from and to holiness is the vulnerability of radical dependence, having been granted the time to freely represent and repeat the given

excess of being. That creatures are capable of holiness suggests a porosity within finite being; for holiness is a leaning into the excess of being, the wild sublime-and-beautiful forms by which God calls us to become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).⁴⁹ To be made holy, then, is to fulfil one's nature through anagogically following the (horizontal) in-and-beyond of essence into the ever-greater (vertical) in-and-beyond of God's creative self-bestowal.⁵⁰ So holiness involves one in a *reading* (anagoge) of the world (attending to the interplay of finite surfaces), by which one is addressed by and drawn into the mystery of God.

Which returns to the fore the problematic of the visibility of holiness I introduced initially, already suggesting a way of responding. The problem is that if holiness is a name for the being who sustains all things and is also communicable to finite being, how do we avoid conceiving holiness as so ubiquitous as to be either unremarkable or, on the other hand, absolutely ineffable in a way that shuts down any attempt to speak of God? Metaphysically, this can be avoided simply by affirming, on the one hand, that finite being is not an identical repetition of the divine but is rather temporally suspended within a free play of re-presentation and, on the other hand, that God is not a discrete entity at a (univocal) distance from the finite being God creates but rather is the non-competitive energy permeating and sustaining all. Consequently, given being is variously repeated, and so able to bear or occlude divine holiness; and finite being is itself a participating mode of re-presenting holiness, and so can give visible expression to holiness without pretending to exhaust or even define the divine nature.

And yet more can be said in order to attend to the concrete representation of holiness—and here I return explicitly to Rowan Williams—for the Christian commitment to holiness is constituted by the memory and repetition of the story of Jesus as the unsubstitutable visibility of holiness, on the one hand, and to continued confrontation with Jesus risen and embodied in his church, on the other. As Williams put it recently:

the Christological claim is not that once there was a unique departure from the created norm by which God broke through to us, but that once there was a set of historical events, once there was an historical body, which fully realised the symbolic vocation of human—and finite—being. By being supremely itself as a finite life it embodied the meaning, the form of intelligible connectedness, which pervades everything.⁵¹

Jesus' life and death is holiness made concretely visible, and as risen Jesus is the continual recasting of creation within the transfiguring light of his holiness, which connects the metaphysical discussion of 'excess' together with God's involvement in the pain and brokenness of creation through Jesus and the church. Because God's life is an inexhaustible excess, non-competitively shared with the created other, God can risk the cross—becoming vulnerable and present to the depths of human suffering and evil—and so God can choose the pained and broken for companions:

So our attentiveness is not just ... an appreciation of beauty. It is also a willingness to bring an active and transfiguring love into this situation of expectancy, to keep company so that an action and a relationship may come into being. Being disciples means being in [Jesus'] company; learning stillness, attentiveness, expectancy; being willing to go where Jesus is going and to be in the company of those he's in company with.⁵²

The contemplative life of holiness is not an 'inactive' life characterized by removal from the world, rather it is a life drawn into Christ's self-dispossessing love; it is life lived in a way that is only intelligible when seen in the light of Christ.

So, the life of holiness is superfluous, and as such the holy person/community lives in the wake of the abundant superfluity of all being. Holy excess is not the superfluity of irrelevance and inconsequence—on the contrary, this is a way of living beyond reduction to utility and consumption and so free to be attentive and active beyond necessity. In this light, it is not surprising, even if not predictable beforehand, that denominations emerging from the nineteenth century holiness revivals—like my own Church of the Nazarene—exhibited an energetic engagement with the poor and marginalized.⁵³ To be made holy is to be swept up in a narrative movement not in one's own control, a movement constituted by disposability to the Spirit and confrontation with Christ, especially as Christ addresses us from the excess of the vulnerable and victimized.⁵⁴ And so, finally, to pursue holiness is to pursue the superfluity of unreserved giving and eschatologically infinite delight.

The value of Williams' 'negative metaphysic' is that it does not require the speculative move of formalizing a metaphysic according to categories and first principles—though neither, I would argue, does it exclude this speculative move. If a negative metaphysic is what we cannot but do if we are concerned with goodness, truthfulness, and beauty, then *any* attempt to overcome Taylor's buffered self—the self that is isolated in its own interiority and consequently attempts to give 'its own autonomous order to its life'⁵⁵ (a kind of self that, as we have seen, Williams also seeks to problematize)—might be taken as implying a negative metaphysic, even if it is only tacit. For overcoming the buffered self cannot be achieved by a simple return to a premodern enchanted world but, instead, by a revitalization of the 'porous self', a self that recognizes its vulnerability and interconnectedness; and it is this porous self that is narrated by Williams and discussed above as the kind of self holy communities seek to cultivate and remember. Which means that becoming holy, or seeking to recognize and delight in the holiness pervading reality, is to become porous to an other outside one's control, a task that carries with it an account or sense of reality-as-such (even when unthematized). So, to pursue holiness is also to cultivate the metaphysical imagination, a way of seeing the world as calling for ongoing renegotiation and response, eliciting multiple re-presentations, and as confronting one with an excess by which more is given than might at first seem.

Holy lives and communities, in conclusion, are properly 'holy' as they are involved in a movement *to* God the creator, the transcendent depth whose self-donation is the act by which all finite surfaces move and have being. This movement is an oscillation from a disrupted self or community to the stranger, through whom Christ confronts us—an oscillation which takes up into itself the movements of self to its world and self to victims and marginalized. Holiness is made visible through making transparent the total dependency of created being on God. Which is to recognize that finite being is at the same time a play of superficiality *and* a valid re-presentation of the goodness, truth, and beauty of God. Holiness is not finally found in the securing of a place for oneself, but in a movement to the goodness, truth, and beauty in the other—i.e., to move in a manner that truthfully re-presents the generative call by which God brings all things to existence (*anamnesis*). Consequently, holiness is to give one's being to a movement by which the Creator-creature relationship is made visible and concrete, and in which the trinitarian movement of gift and love is enjoyed; it 'is growing in understanding of the truth that God is three and one, gift and movement in eternal simultaneity—a paradox to the mind that wants to own and control but a natural and joyful perception for the mind that through Christ is caught up into God's life.'⁵⁶

Notes

1 Thomas Traherne, 'The Vision', in *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, ed. D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), 67.

2 Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library 36 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 109a.

3 So John Wesley: 'The sea is an excellent figure of the fullness of God, and that of the blessed spirits. For as the rivers all return into the sea; so the bodies, the souls, and the good works of the righteous return unto God, to live there in his eternal repose;' John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, ed. Randy L. Maddox and Paul W. Chilcote (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2015), 146. And as John of Damascus says, 'He keeps all being in His own embrace, like a sea of essence infinite and unseen,' and 'the Father is ... source of goodness, fathomless sea of essence, reason, wisdom, power, light, divinity: the generating and productive source of good hidden in it;' John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. IX (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), I.9, I.12.

4 On the relation of the noetic and the ontic judgments in metaphysics, or 'meta-noetic' and 'meta-ontic,' see Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 119–24; Rowan Williams is also critical of the kind of distinction that would sustain the separation of 'noetic' from 'ontic,' though his own preferred idiom is 'internal' and 'external;' see Rowan Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM, 2007), 186–202; and Rowan Williams, 'Balthasar, Rahner and the Apprehension of Being', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), 96; as well as his discussion of 'representation,' which challenges the sense that our linguistic acts of representation presupposes discrete realms of the 'mental' and the 'objective' or 'external.' Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 42–45, 186–97; see, finally, his trenchant discussion of analogy—especially as formulated by Przywara—as the ultimate theological form of thought in Rowan Williams, 'Dialectic and analogy: a theological legacy', in *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, Volume IV: *Religion*, ed. Nicholas Boyle, Liz Disley, and Nicholas Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 285–89.

5 Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, §§3–4.

6 Cf. Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Metaphysics and its Task: The Search for the Categorical Foundation of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), which argues that the proper task of metaphysics concerns the most general categories and their relation to less general categories.

7 Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 121.

8 Rowan Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (London: SCM, 2007), 68.

9 Williams, 'Dialectic and analogy', 284–5, quote from 287; Gillian Rose, *Hegel: Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981); Andrew Shanks, *Hegel and Religious Faith: Divided Brain, Atoning Spirit* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011).

10 Williams, 'Dialectic and analogy', 287–88.

11 Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 238–9. The $\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\alpha}$ is the internal analogy within creaturely being, like the analogical differentiation within potentiality itself (active and passive potency), which, according to Przywara, is both 'actualization fruitfully conditioned by possibility and a possibility passively directed towards actualization' (239, 219–29), while the $\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ is the vertical back and forth of being from and to God as source and end. 'Consequently, the relation between the intra-creaturely analogy and the analogy between God and creature is itself an analogy' (219).

12 Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 219, see also §7. In this view, metaphysical categories like act and potency and form and matter, are not viewed as strictly differentiated terms that exist independently within a composite being; rather, they are poles of a relation that are, by virtue of being faithful *abstractions* from the relation, intrinsic to but not separable from the relation itself. For Przywara, finite being simply is the 'between' that spans the analogical difference between act and potency, form and matter, etc.

13 Williams says he is "content to be thought a Platonist to the extent that the holding-together of an analysis and education of the passions with the intellectual endeavour is part of what I see as essential to philosophy: we learn the truth about our universe by learning to recognise both the stories and the habits that distort what we see and by coming to identify what it is that doesn't depend on majority opinion or finite power to be solidly what it is;" Rowan Williams, 'Response to Kerr, Hedley, Pickstock, Ward and Soskice', *Modern Theology*

31, no. 4 (October 2015): 634. In this light, I am advancing a more explicitly Platonist reading with Williams, though only slightly—I take the stronger emphasis on participation evident in the ‘Platonism’ of this essay as compatible with Williams’ Thomistic sympathies, which is especially evident in his recent *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

14 Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 60.

15 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

16 Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), 22, 26.

17 Williams, *Resurrection*, 43; see also ‘Trinity and Ontology’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 154–61; ‘Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne’, in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 189–90; and ‘Response’, 633.

18 Williams, *Resurrection*, 3.

19 Williams, *Resurrection*, 4–6, 46–49, 60.

20 Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 33–34.

21 Williams, *Resurrection*, 6.

22 Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’, 68; see note 8 above for original quotation and context.

23 Williams, ‘Between the Cherubim’, 189; see also ‘Trinity and Ontology’, 158.

24 Williams, ‘Between the Cherubim’, 189–90.

25 Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2016), 16–17; see also *On Augustine*, 167.

26 Williams, ‘Apprehension of Being’, 96.

27 Williams, *Being Disciples*, chapter 4.

28 Williams, *Resurrection*, 23.

29 Williams, *Resurrection*, 23.

30 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 37–42.

31 Williams, *On Augustine*, 155–70.

32 Williams, ‘Suspicion of Suspicion’, 199.

33 Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. V (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), I.26, I.42, X.1; for discussion see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 91–95.

34 Williams, *Edge of Words*, esp 68–72.

35 Williams, ‘Suspicion of Suspicion’, 190.

36 See Przywara’s reflections on the analogy between time and eternity in terms of creaturely openness or emptiness and divine plenitude in Erich Przywara, ‘Time, Space, Eternity’, in *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 588–92.

37 Williams, *Edge of Words*, 171–78, 188; *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 158–59.

38 Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’, 68.

39 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), esp. 118, 121–2.

40 Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), 26; quoting Jacques Maritain (*Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 127).

41 Williams, *Edge of Words*, 188.

42 Here we might note a point of connection with Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of saturated phenomena, which similarly attends to the excess of divine love as an iconic movement that disrupts our idolatrous gaze. There are significant differences between Williams and Marion, most notably their interpretations of metaphysics and language, however their common focus on divine excess would provide an interesting point for further dialogue.

43 Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 161.

44 Williams, *Being Disciples*, 52.

45 See again the suggestive comments in Williams, *Being Disciples*, 51–56.

46 Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’, 68; see note 8 above for original quotation and context.

47 Williams, *Resurrection*, 44.

48 Cf. W. Norris Clarke, 'To Be is to Be Substance-in-Relation', in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 102–22.

49 For an elegant argument connecting the sublime and the beautiful in essence or form, see John R. Betz, 'The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination', in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Peter M. Candler and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM, 2007), 62–65.

50 Cf. Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 187–91.

51 Williams, 'Response', 633.

52 Williams, *Being Disciples*, 16.

53 Cf. Stan Ingersol, Harold E. Raser, and David P. Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of The Church of the Nazarene*, ed. Floyd T. Cunningham (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), esp. chapters 2, 9, and 10. While it is certainly the case that many of these groups were active in part based on a postmillennialist eschatology, and so one could read their engagement in social justice as an instrumentalizing tactic, there is no reason to cynically reduce all of this activity in this way. These actions gave expression to a complex of factors rooted, at least in part, in potent practices of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

54 "By [God's] love we are set free for trust and risk; and our love begins to reflect God's. The person who has by God's own charity come to live in charity to those who are strangers, who seem to threaten and oppose, such a person has become the living image of God he or she was made to be: a sign to all that there is at the centre of things a power that overcomes our terror and guilt and resentment towards each other. Only on this ground is true reconciliation possible ... not that we have suddenly become agreeable to each other, become *like* each other; but that the self-forgetting love of God sets us free to be vulnerable to those who are still strange and dangerous;" Williams, *On Augustine*, 210.

55 Taylor, *Secular Age*, 38–39.

56 Williams, *On Augustine*, 139–40.