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Thinking Now Occurring and the God Who May Be: David Leahy and Richard Kearney

Alina Feld, PhD

Long Island University Global

20 Maple Street

Farmingdale, NY 11735 USA

alinanfeld@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The essay will introduce uninitiated readers to D. G. Leahy's theory of thinking now occurring as apocalyptic being itself, and elucidate the claim, "Matter itself is the absolute actuality of form itself/the actuality of spirit itself: matter itself spirit itself" (*Foundation* 98).

I will first relate it to both Thomas J. J. Altizer's death of God theology and Richard Kearney's atheism of the possible God. Indeed, God made possible and actualized by human individual and collective choice follows an unprecedented self-awareness or enhanced being. Last, I will connect Leahy's notion to Teilhard de Chardin's omega point. Since de Chardin has recently inspired the notion of singularity, the phenomena of technologically-enabled transcendence could be viewed as symptoms and actualizations of Leahy's apocalyptic neo-pneumatology. Leahy's thinking now occurring and Kearney's possible God, as universal or global thinking alternatives, are thus understood as viable hermeneutic visions of our ontological destiny.

Introduction

D.G. Leahy arduously constructs his argument introducing the TNO (Thinking Now Occurring) in *Novitas Mundi, Foundation: Matter the Body Itself, Faith and Philosophy*.

What does D.G. Leahy mean by TNO? The phrase TNO denotes the “thinking,” no longer classified as theology or philosophy, that represents the radical transformation in the very being of intellectual activity as well as of Being itself, that the work proclaims to be occurring in the present epoch “for the first time in history.”

I will briefly introduce the major doctrines of TNO.

TNO means the end of self-consciousness. TNO is existence itself as embedded in time, yet possessing a transcendental essence. There is no eternal reference that authorizes or justifies the sacrality of concrete existence in detail, no Platonic sacred archetypes of which the concrete things are copies. The things themselves, and we ourselves, in our immediacy and materiality, are the sacred. The mantle of divinity has been passed all the way over to us, and to that which is here and that which is coming into being precisely now through our creative auspices. The transcendental essence of existence is the God who entered the world. The consequence of accepting or even entertaining TNO can be experienced. But one might wonder as to whether it can be *thought*. Yes, it can, because the nature of thought itself has been radically changed so that this question loses its sense. If the transcendental essence of existence has entered the world, thought no longer separates itself from that of which it is the thought. The new Faith thinks the transcendental essence of existence as inseparable from existence itself. God is the world.

The Way to TNO

D.G. Leahy reads the history of thought as a continuous development whose outcome is the fulfillment of an ancient spiritual promise: that faith will be reconciled with an exalted form of intelligence – philosophy and its natural product, natural science—that faith itself had brought into being.

His seminal work, *Novitas Mundi*, traces the history (from Thomas Aquinas to the recent past) of a progressive occluding of the “transcendental essence of existence” —the essence of existence as proclaimed in what Aquinas calls Sacred Doctrine—and also announces and celebrates a shift in the substance of that history, through which this occlusion clears and the promise is fulfilled.

Novitas commences with an account of the absence of the notion of *existence* in the ancient world. The ancients, Aristotle included, had no explicit knowledge of existence as a completed totality. Aristotle’s highest deity keeps the universe revolving but does not bring it into being for the first time. It is only with Christianity that the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* situates the idea of existence within a transcendental horizon and confers it a transcendental essence. Existence as a whole is now comprehended as God’s Creation. Thomas Aquinas, through his formulation of the Christian Faith as Sacred Doctrine, finds in *natural reason* an adequate instrument for pursuing the investigation of created existence and at the same time gives to it a place within Creation. Natural reason possesses the dignity of being the finite analog of an infinite, Divine intelligence. Science itself is established as pertaining to nature, that is, to Creation, and the instrument for carrying it out, natural reason, is provided to man. There is a limit to human capacity, and where

that limit is reached, Sacred Doctrine itself rounds out the picture of the totality of Being. But with the *certainty* of Sacred Doctrine, the *possibility* of doubt also emerges. With the appearance of existence itself, the possibility that it might lack its transcendental essence becomes capable of being conceived.

Thus, beginning with Descartes, a two-fold transformation takes place that, while blocking Sacred Doctrine to science and reason, removes the limits placed upon the latter. Thinking can and must now expand its researches to include fundamental questions that had belonged exclusively to Sacred Doctrine. Sacred Doctrine now falls under a kind of interdict, and serious thought from Descartes through Heidegger and beyond situates both human reason and existence without recourse to it.

D.G. Leahy's task in the main chapters of *Novitas Mundi* is to trace the history of the interdiction of Sacred Doctrine and to show, for each of the thinkers considered, how, while the very possibility of the thinking in each case is provided ultimately by articulations first made available by Sacred Doctrine, still, faith and Deity are held under the interdict. With a few exceptions, any intellectual transparency of Being to God is completely obscured.

At the end of modernity, however (that is to say, during the course of the twentieth century), a series of inversions and reversals in thinking occurs, such that the very rationale for the interdiction of faith unravels. Today, and for some time now, owing both to developments within philosophic thinking and advances within the natural sciences, the question of the *essence of existence* has become an inescapable *preoccupation* for serious thought. However, this preoccupation does not imply a return to Sacred Doctrine. TNO notes, rather, the extreme objectification of existence that is *science's* preoccupation. It embraces the enormous wealth of

detail, for instance, with which science has been able to specify the nature of material reality; it finds no difficulty in situating human sentience within the provenance of the material world; it allows experience, perception, conceptual activity, logic, mathematics, language, all to appear on the same footing as matter, and it allows all to appear within the unfolding of a completely external historicity. But in the midst of all this, faith finds itself no longer on the other side of a barrier, excluded from serious participation in the preoccupations of thinking. The very *inclusive character of existence* itself forces the questioning of the essence of existence, and in this questioning, the matter of faith can no longer be seriously left aside. It appears that the very direction of thinking that led to this *inclusive character of existence* was there, not “all along,” but precisely since the advent of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the appearance of the transcendental essence of existence in revelation and Sacred Doctrine. Now “for the first time in history,” the sense of that revelation can be truly seen by the eye of faith and, at the same time, the pertinence of faith as providing the missing element for the comprehension of existence as a whole comes to appearance. The two truths of faith and reason are no longer held apart from one another, and the ancient promise is fulfilled.

Incarnation Fulfilled

It is a commonplace of the cultural historiography of the West to see a massive reorientation of spiritual attention occurring at about the time of the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Whereas the Middle Ages valorized the eternal, the other-worldly, the incorporeal, with the Renaissance, conscientious thought and cultural production begin increasingly to lavish attention on the this-worldly, the historical, the radically particular and

concrete character of experience, objects, and events.

D.G. Leahy's Incarnationist ontology attributes the very possibility of an orientation towards the historical, the material, the radically particular, to a transformation of and within Being that is the progressive fulfillment of the Incarnation event. The work of the Incarnation does not occur all at once. It develops historically through a series of phases that can be traced in the thinking of the major Western philosophers, in particular, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Peirce, James, Dewey, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, McDermot, Altizer. TNO is the current historical mode of this progressive Incarnation and involves an assertion that the resistance to Sacred Doctrine that seems to infect the substance of philosophy since Descartes has been once and for all overcome by the God's fully entering into existence. Whatever exists is now His Body, and the oppositions that animate all previous thinking: matter/spirit; thought/reality; mathematics/physics; perception/thought; imagination/matter are all dissolved into the single reality of the Incarnation qua existence: Ray Kurzweil's Singularity is another instance and actualization of this truth event.

Reality itself has become intrinsic to our own act of thinking, our own perception, our own imagination. All categorical distinctions have dissolved, faith needs no longer concern itself with the particular form of the Christian narrative. There is no re-presentation anywhere, no gap between thought and its object, no ontological difference between signifier and signified, between code and codified. The last barrier between the phenomenology of existence and existence itself, the last impediments to Sacred Doctrine, have fallen away; the sacred character of immediate existence and our own act as the production of it are both self-evident. The Promise is fulfilled.

Poly-Ontology

In TNO each individual person becomes the Creator of existence itself, while existence is sustained in and by our experience. That is because the Creator has transferred His own creative capacity to each of us, whether or not we are aware of it. We each are the initiators of any ontology we might, in an earlier view, profess, and our thinking and our acting, each understood as aspects of the other, are thoroughly responsible to and for the world we separately and together create. This constitutes not a new ontology but a *poly*-ontology: there are as many ontologies, not only as there are individuals, but as there are acts of thought. The entire of existence is constituted new in every moment through, by, and as each of us. This creation of existence is not an internal affair of individual souls, isolated by an interior depth from each other and from the world that they create: creation is rather utterly external. The old interiority is understood in retrospect as the world of a self that is the correlate of a self-consciousness that has now been entirely overcome. There is no longer a self to be conscious of itself, instead there is awareness, which, even when it attends to its own somatic condition, does so in a matter of attention not different from that paid to the external world. The promise is fulfilled.

Richard Kearney: *The God Who May Be*

Richard Kearney commences *The God Who May Be* with a kerygmatic declaration as thesis, “God neither is nor is not but may be.” Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion explores two rival interpretations of the divine, the onto-theological and the eschatological. By privileging the

latter, he proposes “a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton.”¹ In order to retrieve the eschatological and challenge the classical metaphysical subordination of the possible to the actual, Kearney adduces four biblical texts, the burning bush, the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Shulamite’s song, and the Annunciation (MK 10).

He invites us to rethink God not as an actuality, but rather as a possibility. Inscribing his thesis in the contemporary philosophical debates—phenomenological, hermeneutic, deconstructive—he proffers the view that God’s potentiality-to-be is not a lack but in fact more divine than traditional divine actuality.²

The God who may be is neither the God as *actus purus*, the “disembodied cause devoid of dynamism and desire” of traditional metaphysics, nor the God of dark nature of German Idealism, but a “God of desire and promise who calls out of burning bushes, makes pledges and covenants, burns with longing in the song of songs, cries in the wilderness, whispers in caves, comforts those oppressed in darkness, and prefers orphans, widows and strangers to the mighty and the proud” [2]. The possible God who does not overwhelm us by sheer power represents a denial or reversal of the association of the divine with the triumphal God of theodicy, and reveals an otherness of a different order. This otherness of God brings him closer to us since we are called to acknowledge and respond to God’s powerlessness, from our own “powerlessness.” In is precisely in this “vulnerability, fragility, brokenness that we find ourselves empowered to respond to God’s own primordial powerlessness, to make the potential Word flesh” [2].

Both our brokenness and empowering correspond and mirror God’s own, since “God can be God only if *we* enable this to happen,” by receiving and responding to his call and promise.

The nature of God matters to us because “God depends on us,” his promise remains powerless unless we respond to it, thus if we say no to the kingdom, the kingdom will never come.

Theodicy is dissolved one more time since the evil in the world is our responsibility, it is the consequence of our refusal to remain open to the transfiguring call of the other persona (orphan, widow, or stranger) [5].

The possible God as the eschatological may-be who reaches us in our weakness and calls us forward toward the future into actualizing the promise is i. “radically transcendent,” ii. “calls and solicits us in a personal summons,” and is iii. possible only in so far as we have “faith in the promise of the advent,” iv. a “power of the powerless” [100]. As the “power of the powerless,” he invites us to remain open to the possible divinity whose gratuitous coming is always surprising and graceful.

Kearney names and defines his philosophy of God: dynamatology, metaxology, metaphorology [7]. Dynamatology since God is movement (from the future, toward us); metaxology refers to a theory of God situated in-between theories of God as being itself (onto-theologies); theories of God as other than being, such as beyond being (contemporary forms of mystical and apophatic discourse Marion, Levinas, Derrida) and beneath being, teratology (monstrous, Zizek; Sublime, Lyotard; abject, Kristeva; an-khorite, Caputo); metaphorology, in that the God the possible always traverses being and requires semantic intersecting and augmentation.

To prepare the grounds for a theology of the loving possible and a poetics of *deo posse et ludens*, Kearney reads selectively Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, Derrida; and retrieves hermeneutically Aristotle, Nicholas of Cusa, and Schelling. It is Heidegger’s “loving possible” (a play on *mögen*, love and *vermögen*, to make possible) that defines Being after “the turn” that is the closest

approximation to Kearney's intention and he adopts it while transferring it from a discourse on Being to one on God. Heidegger's Being as loving possible is the power that possibilizes the authentic being of things to which human beings may respond by love-possibilizing Being and thinking things and selves in their authentic essence [92].

What does the kingdom mean for us in the third millennium? Kearney maintains that God the loving possibility invites us to actualize the promised possibilities by our "poetical and ethical actions contributing to the transfiguration of the world." We refuse the call to this transfiguring task every time we do "evil or injustice or commit ourselves to non-being" [105]. According to the theology of the possible, together and individually we are called to participate actively, lucidly, and lovingly, in the creation of our own world and future. Moreover, the eschatological vision of the kingdom is articulated with the help of an ontological model of play which Kearney finds analogous to the eschatology of the possible. In the image and likeness of possible God as *deus ludens*, each individual is a *homo ludens* transfiguring the world. Kearney retrieves the notion of *perichoresis* (*peri*, around; *choros*, dance) *circumcession* in Latin, to refer to the Trinitarian play that includes humanity by the second person's entering history [109].

God the loving possible appears as *advent* (rather than *arche*), *eschaton* (rather than *principium*), promising fecundity, natality, fragility, powerlessness, making the impossible possible.

Leahy and Kearney. Although the visions proposed by Leahy and Kearney differ in significant ways, they share one important articulation. Leahy's TNO is already the *eschaton*, a fulfillment of the progressive Incarnation, the completion of *kenosis* into the world. Kearney's eschatological hermeneutics envisages humanity as always on the way, attending or refusing to attend to a radically transcendent call. However, for both, the individual is a fully responsible

creator of his or her world and together responsible for the destiny of the shared world. There is also a similar will or intention at work in their elaborate thinking: one of retrieval of a deeper meaning of existence, sacred texts, texts tout court, and a gesture toward comprehending more or the more (in both physical and intellectual senses), that reaches for both a vision of this our world in the third millennium made sacred. For both the skies have opened, humans and God are again as always conversing with one another, working together for the transfiguration of all. Cyborg included.

Leahy and Kurzweil. Leahy's ontology of being and thinking become one as the promise and fulfillment of the Incarnation shares this immanent oneness with Ray Kurzweil's transhumanist dream of singularity. What is Singularity? Lev Grossman (*Time Magazine*, February 2011) writes about Kurzweil's sci-fi obsession with blurring the distinction between organic intelligence and artificial intelligence that came to be known as Singularity.

“It's impossible to predict the behavior of these smarter-than-human intelligences with which (with whom?) we might one day share the planet, because if you could, you'd be as smart as they would be. But there are a lot of theories about it. Maybe we'll merge with them to become super-intelligent cyborgs, using computers to extend our intellectual abilities the same way that cars and planes extend our physical abilities. Maybe the artificial intelligences will help us treat the effects of old age and prolong our life spans indefinitely. Maybe we'll scan our consciousnesses into computers and live inside them as software, forever, virtually. Maybe the computers will turn on humanity and annihilate us. The one thing all these theories have in common is the transformation of our species into something that is no longer recognizable as such to humanity circa 2011. This

transformation has a name: the Singularity. The difficult thing to keep sight of when you're talking about the Singularity is that even though it sounds like science fiction, it isn't, no more than a weather forecast is science fiction. It's not a fringe idea; it's a serious hypothesis about the future of life on Earth. There's an intellectual gag reflex that kicks in anytime you try to swallow an idea that involves super-intelligent immortal cyborgs, but suppress it if you can, because while the Singularity appears to be, on the face of it, preposterous, it's an idea that rewards sober, careful evaluation.”³

There does not seem to be stranger bedfellows than Leahy and Kurzweil. And yet. Leahy discourages many humanists by his experiments in mathematics and scientific theories that are used and detailed throughout his works in support of his overarching argument. Stem cell potential is adduced to illustrate his claim of the sacralization of matter and nature. If that is the case, then frowning against artificial intelligence is both futile and meaningless. Teilhard de Chardin's Omega point is within sight. The promise is fulfilled.

¹ Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.

² Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 2, “Refusing to impose a kingdom and declare it already accomplished from the beginning, the God who may be offers us the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence.”

³ Lev Grossman, *Time Magazine*, February 2011.