

On “the Substance of Things Hoped For”:
Faith and Reason within the Limits of Penultimacy Alone

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I. Introduction

I borrow the title of my paper from the *Epistle to the Hebrews* where faith is defined as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (*Heb.* 11:1). What I find interesting in this verse is a certain antinomy between, on the one hand, substance and evidence, both terms with some strong philosophical currency and, on the other, the things that are hoped for and invisible. Simply put, it is as if the author of our text defined faith as reason (substance and evidence) but a reason that exceeds itself inasmuch as it is a knowledge of what cannot be known. After all, both substance (*hypostasis* in the Greek, a term with a certain Aristotelian fragrance) and evidence (*elenchos* in the Greek, as in the Socratic method of examination found in the Platonic dialogues) are things of the here and now, of the things-themselves. Yet, *this* hypostasis and *this* elenchos are of what exceeds the now in expectancy and the here through invisibility. Faith, it seems we are told, is not antagonistic or exclusive of reason for it includes reason as much as it also includes what is more or other than reason. Therefore, one cannot speak any more of “faith *and* reason” as if they were two equal and isomorphic qualities. Under the light of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* it makes little sense to maintain a mutual exclusion of faith and reason (*aut fides aut ratio*), or to simply affirm faith’s autonomy over reason (*credo quia absurdum*) or, conversely, to emphasize reason’s instrumentality for faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Similarly, the imposition on the thinker—the thinker who might happen to write a paper on this very subject—the imposition to clarify where his allegiance lie—with faith or with reason?—vanishes. It is not a question of either/or, nor of what it might appear as the case of a dual citizenship. For faith is, to return to our definition, a philosophy, a metaphysics even, for it has in its disposal both the substance and the evidence—the difference is made only by its object, for whereas philosophy is concerned with the things-themselves, faith’s object is the things-to-come.

Nevertheless, what science is there—if there can be a science at all—of the things-to come? What is the substance of expectancy or anticipation (“the things hoped for”) and what kind of phenomenology can describe the phenomenon of the unapparent (“the things not seen”)? Where is one to look to, should one wish to see these things-to-come? My answer is: not far from here.

We celebrate birthdays and remember anniversaries; we keep diaries and update our facebook profiles in an effort to give our ephemeral lives a little of eternity’s permanence. Behind such rites and rituals of the everyday does not hide, as it may seem, a vain Egyptianism. Such practices, and many other similar to these, reveal our trust in the value of the “little things,” of what is seemingly insignificant; today it might seem so and it is insofar as it belongs to today, later, however, through the distance that time affords us one begins to discern the gestures of the eternal.

It is only through the things-themselves, sometimes in their most mundane and ordinary manifestation, that the things-to-come show themselves. For what other reason might someone like the bishop of Hippo decide to leave us an account of his personal life?

What I propose is a simple task: to think the relationship between faith and reason, philosophy and religion in terms of an *eschatological relationship*: the emphasis here lies not on some beyond-this-world, end-of-times apocalypse, but on the quiet and unnoticeable unfolding of the eschaton through the ephemeral and the everyday. Thus we are to find “the ‘supernatural’ only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational.”¹

This novel understanding of eschatology requires a new concept: the term that I borrow from Dietrich Bonhoeffer is that of the *penultimate*. Its purpose is not so much to indicate the sequential precedence of the temporary world over the kingdom—in other words, the penultimate is *not* a *temporal* indicator but rather a *relational* one: it does not express the arrangement between the world and the kingdom (in terms of a before and an after), but rather it exposes the inner relation—a relation of *interdependence* and *reciprocity*—between God’s creation and God’s kingdom. Etymologically as well as conceptually, the penultimate presupposes the concept of the ultimate. Penultimacy is not simply prior to the ultimate—as if in succession—but as impregnated by the ultimate things-to-come, which, since they are already to be found in the penultimate, that is, in the things-themselves, are not only to-come but also *already* here. It is precisely this Johannine tension between the *not-yet* and the *already* (John 4:23, 5:25) that we are interested in preserving and uplifting by our discussion of the eschatological.

However, the very poles of this fragile balance exercise an irresistible attraction that threatens to dissolve their harmony as either the *already* takes over and thus compromise is the order of the day, or one surrenders to the enthusiasm of the *not-yet* and its ensuing radicalism. Put otherwise: the world is pregnant with the kingdom (cf., creation’s “birth pangs” in Rom. 8:22) but neither “abortion” nor “premature birth” can be the solution. One could identify the former with a stance of compromise that rejects the ultimate for the sake of the penultimate and the latter with the radical or enthusiastic tendencies that reject the penultimate for the sake of the ultimate. Both positions are equally monistic and thus culpable of the same crime, that is, of attempting to manipulate the kingdom either by delaying or by hastening its coming. “Both solutions are extreme in the same respect. . . . One absolutizes the end, the other absolutizes what exists” (*E* 154). Only their chiasmic intertwining can bring about and maintain their accord: the ultimate *in* the penultimate and the penultimate *for* the ultimate.

Our understanding of eschatology creates a certain ethos of expectancy and patience that can be viewed both in negative as well as in positive terms.

Negatively: The disclosure of the world as penultimate keeps at bay our possessive desires while it reveals that the worldly elements of our lives lack validity in themselves, that they are but transient schemes that should not be despised but recognized for what they are: precursors of the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 6, edited by Clifford J. Green, translated by Reinhart Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas D. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 59. Hereafter abbreviated as *E*. The notion of an eschatology of the everyday (or, as he called it, of a micro-eschatology) was put forward by Richard Kearney in his “Epiphanies of the Everyday” in *After God* (John Panteleimon Manoussakis, ed., Fordham University Press, 2005).

ultimate. In other words, the goodness of the world is not to be found in itself, in self-isolation, in independence, in autonomy, but in relation to the ultimate (in all these cases, where the world is cut off from the ultimate and becomes its own value, goal and purpose, the world becomes demonic and sinful because it sets itself up against the ultimate and its coming—in the traditional language of the New Testament we could say that that world becomes the anti-Christ). The goodness of the world then is precisely drawn from this relationship to the ultimate. The more explicit their relation the more joyous the sojourn in the world. Under this light, sin can be redefined as the forgetfulness of this relationship, sin is nothing more than treating the penultimate as ultimate, as what is *not*. To take what-is-not as something that is—better yet, to mistake the non-being as being, this is sin. It should make sense now why some early Fathers defined sin not simply as an ethical category but also as an ontological deficiency, a lack of being, a “death” much more “essential” than our biological death (cf. Kierkegaard’s concept of sin as “sickness unto death”).

Positively: the positive relation between the penultimate and the ultimate is that of the particular to the universal. The reference of the particular to its universal is manifold and not all of the ways are helpful or even appropriate to serve as an analogy for the correspondence between the penultimate to the ultimate. Nevertheless, and in a certain way, the particular belongs to the penultimate: it is in its realm that we encounter the concreteness of the everyday. On the other hand, the eschaton could be envisioned as the realm from where the manifoldness of the everyday world draws its unity and therefore its intelligibility. This analogy, however, is not applicable to eschatology insofar as it comes from the logical or cognitive schema. In other words, the eschaton cannot be made the “universal” of the penultimate in the same way that a concept is the universal of a particular object (although this tendency is indeed to be found, no matter how implicit, in the eschatologies influenced by Neoplatonism, such as those of Dionysius, Maximus, and, later on, Hegel). The eschaton can only be an *indeterminable* “universal,” to which the penultimate refers (otherwise it would not be possible to recognize the penultimate as such) but its reference remains open-ended. Indeed, there is such a category where the particular refers to a universal that one cannot determine it but needs somehow to provide it. Let me offer an example: Galileo’s law of acceleration of falling bodies is a particular law of physics which, at the time of its proposition, was lacking its universal—that came about a hundred years later with Newton’s law of universal gravitation. This relation, of a particular to an indeterminable universal, is employed by Kant in the analysis of aesthetic judgments. The object of an aesthetic judgment (e.g., this rose) is a particular that refers to a universal that cannot be determined² (it is not, for example, the concept of the “rose,” or that of a flower and so on, as in the case of understanding). On the other hand, the particular rose in its aesthetic manifestation (i.e., as a *beautiful* rose) needs to be recognized, that is, to be subsumed under a universal. Could the beautiful itself be that concept? Kant’s answer might come as a surprise: the beautiful is not a concept and therefore cannot serve as the universal of the

² “Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative*. . . . But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 18-19 (emphasis in the original). All aesthetic and teleological judgments are reflective.

particular beautiful rose.³ In the words of Henri Gouhier “Il n’ y a de science que du général et de norme qu’ à travers une idée dite « idéal. » Or le beau est toujours individuel et jamais idée...”⁴

Similarly, the penultimate is a particular that refers to an indeterminable universal, i.e., the ultimate. The latter cannot be determined or known but it can only be awaited and anticipated. It is not that the ultimate lacks reality, intelligibility, or content. Its indeterminability—its unknowableness as we would say in theological language—is not due to its emptiness nor to its transcendence but because of its mode of manifestation, which is none other than *surprise* (Matt. 24:27, 50, Mark 13:36, Luke 12:40, 17:24).

II. Eschatology and Philosophy

Eschatology, we would like to argue, follows a similar logic (indeed, it is not an accident that Kant pairs aesthetic judgments with teleology). The universal *a priori* idea of aesthetic judgments is for Kant purposiveness. Of course, for Kant purposiveness is inscribed within teleology alone, that is, an eschatology without recourse beyond the creaturely character of nature within which it exhausts itself. Regardless, however, of such a Kantian gesture that hails towards transcendence while at the very same time finds itself obliged to deny it, Kant’s basic insight should be allowed to stand. In the beautiful, indeed, we recognize a purpose—by means of purpose we see *now* an aspect that the thing will come to have only *at the end*. Purpose foresees, it previews the future and affords us a view that no here and now could furnish, not even at the final state of things. Naturally, if we understand beauty as symmetry or proportion, as harmony of color or sound it would be difficult, indeed impossible, to explain the catholicity of the beautiful as the call that calls through the visible, even when it is not a question of harmony or symmetry. These “scientific” explanations, as Socrates somewhat scornfully calls them in the *Phaedo*, are descriptive at best of the ways in which beauty is perceived, that is, they explain only the “mechanics” of the aesthetical phenomenon, but fail to answer why we call something beautiful or, worse, what beauty is in itself.

For Plato “what is beautiful is beautiful by the beautiful” (100d, 7-8). Of course, such a statement is heavily in need of interpretation. One has learned to see in this answer Plato’s so-called theory of forms. The beautiful, then, by which anything becomes beautiful is taken to be the form of beauty. This already implies that what makes something beautiful is not itself, i.e., it is not to be found in the thing itself, but rather comes from beyond, it is other than the thing that one perceives as beautiful. As we have seen, Kant gives a very similar answer when he refuses to assign beauty as the property of a thing. For him, too, beauty is external and a sign of exteriority. Both Plato and Kant seem to converge on another point: that beauty is teleological. Plato’s treatment of the beautiful takes place within a certain, historical and semi-biographical context: it is the famous episode where Socrates gives a brief account of his philosophical autobiography and of his

³ “*Beautiful* is what, without a concept, is liked universally (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 64, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, “...beauty is not a characteristic of the object [as, say, the redness of the rose] when taken in its own right” (221). That means that a thing is never beautiful *in itself*, as if beauty was a quality, but its beauty lies with the feeling aroused in the subject. So, “...apart from a reference to the subject’s feeling, beauty is nothing by itself” (63). The whole purpose of the third Critique is to establish the universality of aesthetic judgments.

⁴ “There is no science but that of the general, and no rule but by means of an idea that is called ‘ideal.’ However, the beautiful is always particular and never an idea...” From the “Introduction à une Philosophie du Beau,” *Revue des Cours et Conférences* (Paris- Boivin, I, 1936), 150.

encounter with Anaxagoras' teleology in particular. Socrates believes that in Anaxagoras he has found the only tenable answer as to the cause of things, that is, perfection ("for if one wished to know the cause of each thing...one had only to find what was best for it" – 97c). His later disillusionment with Anaxagoras leads Socrates to the famous "second sailing" that consists of an investigation to the *logoi* of things, the latter being, as it is made clear in the dialogue, a *final* causality.⁵ For the remaining pages of the dialogue, Plato singles out one particular form, that of beauty, which, by calling everything to itself, makes every that heeds its call—and everything to some degree is—beautiful. Indeed, what else can the beautiful be than what calls? And, how else is one to understand the ability of the call to call if not by means of beauty? Language tells us that much when it indicates that the derivation of "the beautiful" (τό καλό) comes from the verb "to call" (καλέω, καλεῖν).

Dionysius is situated in the middle of the distance between Plato and Kant. His beautiful is no longer as impersonal as Plato's form, nor has it yet been depersonalized as Kant's a priori idea of purposiveness. For Dionysius the beautiful is a person, God Himself:

The beautiful [καλόν] that is beyond all being is called beautiful [κάλλος] on account of its own beauty that it transmits to each and every thing and for being accountable for the harmony and brilliance of all as the light that shines to every thing its radiating rays and for calling [καλοῦν] everything to itself and gathering everything and in every respect, for which reason it has been called beautiful [κάλλος].⁶

Therefore, if the beautiful is recognized as beautiful it is because it renders itself visible (i.e., it "calls" to itself) and, by the same token, what is visible, what appears and by appearing "calls" to itself, is only the beautiful. Dionysius's passage distinguishes between these two (simultaneous) movements clearly: the beautiful radiates "like the light"—thus it renders everything visible, indeed it is the condition of visibility—but also recollects everything to itself, now strictly in its capacity as the "beautiful"—that is, as a call from the future.⁷ It is not, therefore, that through the dioptra of beauty we can get a glimpse of what lies ahead but rather that the finality of perfection "opens" the present

⁵ Here we have another idea that would come to play a decisive role in Christian philosophy: the Platonic idea of the *logoi* of beings is inherited by Dionysius (as *proorismoi* or exempla), amended according to a Christian metaphysics (since the *logoi* are now "in God," DN V.8 842C), and via Dionysius, received by St. Maximus the Confessor (*Ambigua in Patrologia Graeca* 91, 1081A-1085A; a particular reference to Dionysian *logoi* as *proorismoi* is made at 1085A, 5). It was this Dionysian exemplarism that helped the Medieval West navigate away from the rock of crude realism (incompatible with Christian doctrine) and the whirlpool of nominalism.

⁶ Dionysius (the Aeropagite), *De Divinis Nominibus* IV 7, 701C. In *Corpus Dionysiacum*, vol. I (edited by Beate Regina Suchla), Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990). The translation is mine.

⁷ The teleological character of the beautiful (and, for Dionysius, its eschatological character as well) do not allow us to imagine the attraction that the Beautiful itself exercises as vertical (contemporaneous) but rather as horizontal (diachronic), that is, as coming from the future (*telos*) in order to gradually perfect the present (*teleiosis*). Jean-Louis Chrétien, commenting on the very passage from the Divine Names that we have quoted, writes: "God's call gathers beauty back, the origin calls insofar as it also constitutes itself as the end. This luminous dispensation does not communicate beauty as an inert property but as a power of radiation rekindled from being to being. What it sends out the extremity of diastole and effusion is the same as what makes the creature turn around toward the source. Creation is here inseparable from a vocation for beauty; the call takes on its biblical meaning of election, which is what distinguishes Dionysus [sic] from Platonism. To call is to create, to bestow being and beauty, but also to save" (*The Call and the Response*, translated by Anne Davenport; New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 15-6.

by adding along with the incomplete state of the present thing the image of its completion, that is, of its perfection.

It is this double movement of the beautiful/visible that the phenomenology of saturation retrieves (Marion). What phenomena are saturated with is the excess of givenness of the phenomenon itself—it is an excess of intuition, a surplus of information we would say, that saturates them. This, however, does not mean that we have to look for saturated phenomena far, not, for sure, among the exotic, the extraordinary and perhaps the bizarre. Saturated phenomena are not a special group of phenomena but every phenomenon when seen without the protective glasses of regulatory concepts and preconceived intentionalities. Every phenomenon is inexhaustible—there is no viewing of a painting that is ever final, as there is no performance of a composition that is definitive; there is no event that can be transfixed into a single interpretation and, above all, there is no Other that would fit comfortably in one of my categories. We, now, understand that saturation is complemented by and, indeed, results to some kind of negation (negative theology). The task of the phenomenologist of the abundant givenness is similar to the theologian of the divine names: never-ending, or, as one could say, *expectatic*. Everything gives always more than one can receive—it is this generosity of phenomenality that necessitates revision, repetition, interpretation and finally, what gives rise to philosophy itself, wonder. This fecundity of intuition surrounds every phenomenon as if it were a halo of excessive visibility, a mandorla of light, that transforms phenomena—better yet, it renders them visible. For, phenomenologically speaking, in order to see what is seen one must also “see” what one cannot see (“the things not seen”), what remains unseen and as such shows the visible.

If, indeed, only the end (in the double sense of *telos* as finality and purposiveness) makes things perfect (*teleia*), then purpose keeps reminding us of such perfection amidst incompleteness and imperfection. It is as if the human mind were indeed made in such a way as to understand only the perfect and the complete. For even if this is lacking in the present state of things, *and it can only be lacking*, then it feels compelled to supply it by itself. Memory and anticipation are both mediums of “idealization”, that is, of bestowing a perfection upon the thing remembered or expected that, once present, the thing lacks. Hence the disenchantment that follows every realized expectation.

How are we to understand this ability of the mind? It is precisely at this point that we need to turn to a phenomenological inquiry of the eschatological. It would seem that the first (that is, the most fundamental and the most readily available) intuition of eschatology is that of awaiting or expecting (“the things hoped for”). But what would such an intuition have been without the idea of purpose, that is, of fulfillment of one’s anticipation, even if we were to know not what or whom we are waiting for? More fundamental than waiting is this waiting-for, that is, the structure of a purpose. Whence can we phenomenologically derive such a structure? First of all, from the very character of intending. Intentionality, even prior to intending this or that, always intends a purpose; in fact, it *is* purposive.⁸ In every fulfillment, in every filled intention, one can observe the structure of

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction of Pure Phenomenology*, (W. Gibson, trans., New York: Collier, 1962), section 23. Husserl’s discussion of imagination is indebted to Kant’s, as certain terms in the relative passages in Husserl’s work such as *telos*, purposiveness, free variation and spontaneity seem to suggest. On Husserl and imagination, see Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1998, especially pp. 13-45.

the eschatological. Kant spoke of pleasure precisely on these terms⁹ and we believe that it is the joy of the kingdom to come that is foreshadowed in the feeling of *satisfaction* that every filled anticipation yields (a *Befriedigung contra* Hegel). The very passage from an empty intention to a filled one (that is, the passage from absence to presence) is such an eschatological indication for in all these common structures of anticipation the absolute anticipation, i.e., the anticipation of the absolute, is reflected.¹⁰

But by speaking of anticipation we have already entered the realm of imagination of which anticipation is one of its modes. The association of imagination with the eschatological deserves a more attentive study that exceeds the limitations of the present talk. We could, however, say that such a connection is indeed to be discovered in imagination's ability to posit things otherwise without allowing presence to fully collapse into the present. One should, however, distinguish between *imagination* (as our sole capacity to envision the eschata) and *fantasy* (as what hinders our vision of the eschaton by "binding" us down to the things-themselves). What fantasy does is to present things as our only possibility precisely by presenting us with the phantasmagoria of their (infinite as it would seem) possible transformations.

Without imagination (in its broad, existential sense) there can be no freedom. Man is thus engulfed in the inertia of his nature, in the partiality of his history, unable to expect or wait for what comes beyond the natural. Eschatology in a very fundamental sense is counter-intuitive—by that we mean to say that that for which the Church waits cannot be given empirically as present-at-hand; if it were, her waiting would have been cancelled out. That for which the Church waits cannot be presented to us except by means of hope and expectation, that is, of imagination. At the same time, one needs to stop imagination before she completes her work, for the risk in that is cancelling out surprise as the mode of eschatological manifestation. This can be done by realizing that one's imagination would never succeed in representing the ultimate (lest it becomes an idol) and, therefore, the proliferation of images in which imagination takes comfort is nothing but the very indication of its inability in capturing the singular.

If, in other words, we leave ourselves only to perception and cognition we deprive ourselves of the possibility of the eschatological. If, on the other hand, we indulge in our imagination's infinite possibilities we have somehow already given ourselves the eschaton and, therefore, we need no more wait for its coming. Biblical language trod down the middle path between these two extremes by providing prophecy and parable. Imagination is indeed employed (e.g., "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto...") but also left undone by its very resources, that is, the Biblical imaginary of the kingdom is so imaginative that becomes prohibitive to imagination's own attempt to appropriate it.

III. Conclusion

⁹ "The very consciousness of a merely formal purposiveness in the play of the subject's cognitive powers, accompanying a presentation by which an object is given *is* that pleasure" (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 68, emphasis added). "For the basis of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of reflective judgments, namely, the purposive harmony of an object (whether a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relation of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding) that are required for every empirical cognition" (31).

¹⁰ Such, it seems to be, Husserl's insight of "a universal constitutive synthesis" that is enabled by the possible and the imaginary. See, *Cartesian Meditations* (Dorion Cairns trans., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 54 (section 22).

The penultimate is indispensable for our effort of reaching for the ultimate; even more, the penultimate is indispensable in order for the ultimate itself to reach us. Indeed through this reciprocal relationship we come to realize the indispensability of the created world for our salvation. We are not saved apart from this world or to the extent that we succeed in living by leaving the world behind us, by withdrawing from it or by denying it, but our salvation passes through and depends upon the world as well as our bodies with which we are bound to the world. It is by working through corporeality and worldliness that little by little the penultimate becomes more and more diaphanous and the ultimate shines through. Thus the invisible is glimpsed through the visible, the spiritual achieved by means of the material, the supersensible becomes experienced in the tangible and the concrete. It is in front of this scandal for our thought that we stand perplexed: how indeed can the eternal give itself through our daily routine, through our mundane concerns? The penultimate as the precursor of the ultimate, as ultimacy's vehicle appears before our eyes with a dignity that no philosophical system or thought had granted it before. There is no place here for Plato's world as prison, for the Gnostic world as punishment, for Plotinus's progressive degeneration, for Origen's necessity of evil. Indeed, "all shall be well, and/All manner of thing shall be well."¹¹ Philosophy has a great deal to learn from such a theologically informed vision of eschatology.

But what perhaps is more important than all of this is that this penultimate world will not be left behind when the ultimate arrives, that this insufficient and incomplete world will not be discarded like a ladder that one needs no more once the ultimate has been reached, that our efforts and our failures, our anticipations, empty or fulfilled, will not be lost, that our past will not be erased, that the ultimate will preserve and uplift every little moment of penultimacy, every passing thought and every fragment of feeling.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets*, 168-169, echoing Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*.