Speculative Grace. Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology.

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“To be charged with the odious title of atheism one must have the notion of God and reject it”. To consider oneself a devotee to the principle of irreduction one must have the notion of reduction and reject it. As Michael Buckley noted in *Denying and Disclosing God* (Yale University Press, 2004), atheism is produced by the (perceived or real) internal contradictions of theism, and thus takes its shape in response to theistic claims. In order to understand atheism, then, one must examine the theism it denies and one must also wonder to what extent that theism becomes shaped by the existence of its contrary. Theism and atheism, like religion and the secular, are often considered opposites that mutually define each other. One can wonder if Miller’s proposal to ‘port’ Christian grace onto a new platform of experimental metaphysics shaped by a rejection of reductionism, of which the all-knowing, omniscient God is the template, brings much renewal. Is the switch from a reductionist God, as ultimate cause behind everything, to an object oriented metaphysics in which objects are no longer explained by the Big Designer behind the scenes a good switch to refresh our understanding of Christian grace? In such a metaphysics everything, including God if he exists, is considered to be actants existing in a network of actants, each with its ‘resistant availability’ and explainable as resulting from a history of trials of strength in networks in which mastery is not pooled in one special object but spread around. It certainly will take many, whether in philosophy or theology or religious studies or anthropology, who are unfamiliar with this experimental metaphysics but interested in Christianity, out of their

comfort zone, as it will those, like Levi Bryant who wrote the foreword, familiar with object oriented philosophy but convinced theology could never be a conversation partner. And for this alone the book is to be commended. Bring together what is assumed incompatible and attention levels as well as the production of new thoughts will increase.

The book is presented as an exercise in 'porting grace', that is, 'to modify it for use on a different platform', to experimentally port the Christian concept of grace out of a traditional, theistic ontology into a non-theistic, object-oriented ontology. Miller presents a theology without an omniscient and omnipotent theos but with the objects back in, by weaving grace into the very fabric of being (p. xvi). He finds his tools to do so in science scholar Bruno Latour's toolbox. What he provides us with is a crash course in Latourian metaphysics, given in the shape of a concatenation, a chain of short chapters built up around the key words and the nodal points in the new vocabulary. Its trajectory is from sorting out the reductionist God and presenting Latour's irreductionist metaphysics, then building up gradually towards an understanding of grace as the double bind of an object's resistant availability (p. 77) and religion as experimental attention to the close by.

The 'grace' that Miller attempts to port from a theocentric to an object oriented ontology is an explicitly Christian understanding of grace. Miller goes for a strong Christian common denominator by focusing on the Pauline account from which he distils a baseline definition. Grace is immanent, enabling, prodigal, suffered, absolute and sufficient, it is what is unconditionally given (p. 8). The key that allows Christian grace to be ported into an object-oriented ontology is strongly connected to the central Latourian principle of irreduction. Miller summarizes the two halves of this principle as resistance (objects are not completely reducible) and availability (objects are not completely irreducible). This allows him to

introduce the notion of 'resistant availability' that will function as the peg he hangs his coat on (p. 39). Everything is constituted by this double-bind of resistant availability (p. 39-40). Resistance is identified as transcendence retrofitted, multiplied and proliferating, like the loaves and fishes. Transcendence thus no longer has a contrary (p. 41-42). It comes to resemble fermentation in an always brewing world of objects, resistant and at the same time available to each other. This dislocation of transcendence "from its status as a founding and singular ontological exception to its dispersal as what characterizes the resistant availability of the multitude" (p. 45) is the definite step to port grace into an object oriented metaphysics. It results in a similar dislocation and distribution of grace. Grace is no longer the immanent expression of God's transcendence, but emerges from the fermentation of the multitude. Grace gets operationalized as objects at work. It is redescribed as a tangible micro-force flowing through the intimate detours that are required by the resistant availability of each object (p.77).

The main antihero in the book is, not surprisingly given the setup, the traditional, omnipotent, impassible, wholly transcendent God who created the world. He is the template for every brand of conspirational reductionism, religious or secular. To make the effort of 'porting' grace from one metaphysic into another one must be convinced that the new platform has great advantages to the old one. As a consequence, the old one is easily seen myopically through specific glasses, through its differences from what is considered new and positive. I wonder to what extent we get something like a contrast between two mutually constitutive categories. Latour's experimental metaphysics is shaped by the consistent wielding around of the principle of irreduction, a principle that claims modesty and humbleness. The old platform gets reduced to being the root source of boastful

conspirational reductionism. As Miller notes, the antithesis of Latour's project can be stated in one word: reductionism, that is, "the metaphysical imposition of any preliminary, a priori requirement of reduction, simplification or purification" (p. 10).. The new emphasizes plurality and proliferation in the pluriverse against the old that posits unity and attempts to purify. The new can 'operationalize' the world as capable of producing and explaining itself, the old kept the world mute and static to stand as a screen hiding from view the real arena of divine action (p. 2). The new remixes what the old pulled apart: heaven and earth, transcendence and immanence, ontology and epistemology, resistance and availability. It consistently recasts these terms such that they lack the contraries they had in the old. What the old took as signs of the fall, as signs of us humans being chased out of the paradise of the original and identical, are rehabilitated and celebrated as what helps us to get around in the world.

One basic line is drawn: things are rehabilitated by getting the reductive drive in check (p. 91,95). Negative in the old is turned positive in the new, what is ignored becomes centre-stage. As long as this mirror-thinking is a theoretical exercise, this should not be too worrying. It can, as a black frame around a drawing, help to sharpen the new image one wants to bring forward. The word 'speculative' in the title seems to tell us that such is the case. 'Grace' is experimentally ported onto another platform, itself an experimental metaphysics. It is a try-out, possibly speculative also in the sense of 'involving a high risk of loss'. In other words, the 'availability' of Christian grace to an object-oriented metaphysic is tested out.

Readers of Miller's book should keep in mind though that in some sense Latour's work finds its roots in an intra-theological debate. In 'Coming out as a Philosopher' (*Social Studies of*

Science, 2010), Latour narrates how during his studies he discovered biblical exegesis, under the guidance of André Malet, a Catholic priest turned Protestant pastor and translator of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann is known for his modern demythologizing theology that emphasizes the hiddenness and transcendence of God and rejects any reference to supernatural acts interrupting the law of cause and effect. The discovery, however, puts Latour “in contact with what came to be called a network of translations – something that was to have decisive influence on my thinking”(p. 600). Bultmann, champion of clearing out what he took to be successive additions invented by generations of Christians to arrive at a few ‘genuine’ Aramaic sentences uttered by a certain ‘Joshua of Nazareth’, instilled in Latour a love for what Bultmann wanted to get rid of: he came to see that the truth conditions of the Gospel resided in the long chain of continuous inventions, if done in the right key. In his own PhD thesis he looked for a way in between two opposite types of betrayal: betrayal by mere repetition and the absence of innovation, and betrayal by too many innovations and the loss of the initial intent. The long chain of inventions and mediations made religious truth available, if each link renewed the message in the right way, if, as Latour learned through his reading of Charles Péguy’s *Clio*, the repetitions were ‘good’. His dealings with Bultmann and Péguy primed him to detect, while doing his fieldwork in the biology lab, the exegetic dimension in the immense complexity of scientific practices. But what followed was not simply a laying bare of the complexity of science-in-the-making. As Miller notes, it primed him to see that ontology is semiology, that existence is a weave of references (p. 99). Latour’s recent discussion of different regimes of truth or ‘modes of existence’ that include religion and science shows that this exegetical dimension becomes generalized.

Those familiar with Latour's work will find the conclusion, based on a reading of Miller's book, that in building itself up through a contrast with conspirational reductionism it must itself somehow be reductionist and thus uninteresting rightfully unfair. If there is one thing Latour tries to do it is to get away from abstract contrastive reasoning precisely by following and listening to the objects themselves rather than jump quickly to a big hidden force. Latour's axiomatic commitment to "slowing things down" will characterize the gist of his approach to religious objects and practices as well: his approach opens the door to a kind of "experimental religion", grounded in certain minimal instruments and practices rather than in prefabricated answers (p. 14). In Miller's hands, wielding Latourian tools, religion gathers and assembles because "it is what breaks our will to go away" (p. xvii, p. 145). Science concerns the far away, religion the close at hand, both involve practices and instruments, translations and constructions.

Theologians, who like Bultmann are influenced by Karl Barth's rejection of classical theism as well as by his critique of Protestant liberalism that ties God too closely to the deepest expressions and experiences of cultured human beings, but who nevertheless argue for the importance of practices for the Christian faith will find material here that will feed their thinking. But, since Latour's work found its origin in an intratheological debate – though it is of course not reducible to it – Miller and others who take up his project of exploring and mapping 'experimental religion' might do well to go into conversation with such theologians. Christian grace might also have its resistances to the Latourian experimental metaphysics, which nevertheless might be available to the theology that in answer to Barth and Bultmann emphasize practices and being in the world. The most interesting idea in Latour's and Miller's take on religion, given in the last chapters of the book after weeding

out a whole series of misunderstandings, is that it is a “first person phenomenology of the obvious” (p.119). Religion does not refer to an invisible world of belief but, as one type of truth generator amongst others, it engages in the work of making objects visible. In distinction with science, what becomes visible is the close by, the objects that are too available, too near (p. 118). Religion helps us to pay attention, it practices attending (p. 146). Religious practices break our habitual gaze and reveal the ordinary as “a grace already given, as a life already being lived” (p. 145). They break up what we take for granted and reveal how we live by the grace of the cooperation of a multitude of objects while we contribute to the fermentation by our own resistance and availability, our own work and suffering. What were indifferent by-standers, both human and non-human, are turned into neighbours (p. 157). Like transcendence and grace, religion is redistributed in this new understanding. This brings to the surface the work of repeating, copying, translating, aligning, processing and negotiating done by religious objects in order to reveal to us that we are ourselves a composite of fragile, interdependent, open-ended processes. They reveal to us that this is good news (p. 134, 150).

To conclude, the book is shaped throughout in a ‘not this but this’ language and that makes one wonder if the new understanding of grace and religion is not directed too much by this work of contrasting. One thing is certain though, reading Miller’s book will stimulate further thought. In a way it could be considered religious, opening its readers up to the work of religious objects and practices, giving us a Latourian vocabulary that will certainly redirect attention and feed the exploration of new exciting ways of understanding religion.

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