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Transcendence and Intertwining

Abstract: In this article, we address the paradox that Hume first raised regarding the transcendence of God: If we admit that God infinitely transcends our understanding, then, as Hume writes, »we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration.« Yet, if we understand God in human terms, we slip very easily into what can become an absurd anthropomorphism. Hume's argument works by radically opposing transcendence and immanence. It makes God totally other. Against this, we argue that transcendence is inherent in the world. Its immanence, however, does not mean the absorption of what is transcendent. Rather, it signifies the intertwining of categories that are mutually transcendent. It is such intertwining, we argue, that explains the Incarnation – i.e., the fact that Jesus is both man and God. It shows how he can assert that »I am in the Father and the Father is in me.«

Key words: Hume, Merleau-Ponty, transcendence, intertwining, incarnation, perception, consciousness

Povzetek: **Transcendenca in prepletenost**

V članku se ukvarjamo s paradoksom, ki ga je prvi obravnaval Hume v povezavi s transcendenco Boga. Če priznavamo, da Bog neskončno presega naše razumevanje, potem po Humeovih besedah »zapustimo vsakršno religijo in nam ne ostane nikakršno pojmovanje velikega predmeta našega čaščenja«. Če po drugi strani Boga razumemo s človeškimi pojmi, lahko zdrsnemo v stanje nesmiselnega antropomorfizma. Humeovo sklepanje je osnovano na radikalnem nasprotju med transcendenco in imanenco. V nasprotju s Humeom zagovarjamo, da je transcendenca inherentna svetu. Toda njena imanenca ne pomeni, da se je transcendentno povsem absorbiralo, temveč gre za prepletanje kategorij, ki sta vzajemno transcendentni. Pokazati želimo, da šele takšna prepletenost razloži učlovečenje, to je dejstvo, da je Jezus hkrati človek in Bog, in omogoča trditev, da »sem jaz v Očetu in Oče v meni«.

Ključne besede: Hume, Merleau-Ponty, transcendenca, prepletenost, učlovečenje, zaznava, zavest

1. Introduction

The most basic sense of transcendence is that of »surpassing« or »going beyond«. It comes from the Latin, *transcendere*, which combines the senses of »beyond« (*trans*) and *scandere*, »to climb«. The sense here is that of »surmounting« or »overstepping«. As such, it involves both limits and their surpassing. This rather modest definition has been appropriated by theology and its conception of a transcendent God. The world, it has been argued, cannot be explained in its own terms. Recourse must be had to a transcendent principle, both moral and ontological.

While pantheism asserts the immanence of this principle, the religions that accept the account of Genesis believe in a God who created the world out of nothing and, who, thus, existed before creation. Accordingly, they distinguish themselves from pantheism by asserting the transcendence of the divinity. Having existed prior to the world, God, they claim, cannot be accounted for in its terms.

David Hume in his *Dialogues* has pointed to the downside of this view. If we cannot say what God is, i.e., what the object of our belief is, then can we say that we believe in anything at all? He has his protagonist, Philo, ask how those »who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who [also] assert that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?« (1966, 32). We are, here, according to Hume, caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, »if we abandon all human analogy /… /, we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration« (71).

On the other, if we embrace such analogy, we slip very easily into an absurd anthropomorphism (40-42). We assert that God has a gender, gets angry, has to be reminded of his promises, and so on.

Hume's argument works by radically opposing transcendence and immanence. Transcendence, in his argument, makes the transcendent, what Derrida calls, the *tout autre* – the totally other. Immanence, however, signifies the absorption of the divine into the human context.

In order to counter this view, we are going to argue that transcendence, as such, is part and parcel of our experience of the world. It is an ontological feature of our being-alive. As such, the transcendence that characterizes the divine does not point to what is beyond the world, but rather to what is immanent. Immanence, however, does not mean absorption. It signifies, rather, the intertwining of incompatible categories, categories that are mutually transcendent.

2. Transcendence and metabolism

Transcendence is built into living beings by virtue of the metabolic process that distinguishes them from inorganic entities. Organisms live by exchanging materials with their environment. In contrast to the inorganic, an organism's material state can never be the same. Were it the same, were its metabolism to cease al-

together, it would become inorganic, it would die. Since it is organic, it needs the influx of new material. It must reach out beyond itself to the material world that surrounds it. There is, here, both a limit – for example, the cell membrane – and that which surpasses it: the reaching out to the external world that the organism lives from. This transcendence is not just spatial, it is also temporal. It involves the futurity that surpasses the present. This can be put in terms of the need the organism constantly has for new material. As Hans Jonas describes this:

> »This necessity (for exchange) we call ›need‹, which has a place only where existence is unassured and [is] its own continual task.«

Such need, he adds, expresses the organism's relation to the future. Thus, a living entity has a future insofar as its being is a result of its doing. As such doing, it stretches beyond the now of its organic state to what comes next. Here, its »will be« – the intake of new material – determines the »is« as represented by its present activity. Insofar as it exists by directing itself beyond its present condition, it is ahead of itself: it has a future. (1996, 86–89)

Several points follow from this analysis. The first is that futurity is built into organic life. Such life is always »ahead of itself« and, thus, is temporally self-transcendent. Unlike an inorganic being, which exists completely in the now, a living being is stretched out in time. To grasp it as alive – as engaging in metabolism – we must go beyond its present state.

The second point is that a living being has a teleological structure, one that involves a future-directed self-affirmation. Its motion, as corresponding to this, is also self-directed. Thus, the underlying goal of such movement is not just the material that it needs to take in; it is the continued existence of the organism itself as engaging in this movement. This is what is meant by saying that its being depends on its doing.

A third point concerns the relation between metabolism and intertwining. By »intertwining« we mean the double relation of being in – the relation in which we have to say, with Merleau-Ponty, »I am in the world and the world is in me« (1968, 8).

Every living being can make this assertion. As embodied, it exists in the world. It has its environment. Engaging in metabolism, it selectively internalizes this environment. The world it is in becomes through metabolism its physical, spatial-temporal structure.

To see how extensive this internalization is, we can turn to Darwin's description of the »the web of complex relations« binding different species together. This web, he writes, is such

> »that the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential and yet often hidden manner, to that of all the other organic beings with which it comes into competition for food or residence or from which it has to escape or on which it preys« (1967, 62).

According to Darwin, the individual features that make up a living being's structure, from the shape of its legs to the type of eyes it has, are actually a set of indices. Each points to the specific features of the environment in which it functions, and which, for the purposes of survival, its evolutionary history has internalized as part of its structure. (62) This holds, not just for its sense organs and mental apparatus, but also for the world it brings to presence through these.

3. Transcendence and consciousness

The term most used for this bringing into presence is »consciousness«. Although we cannot ascribe self-awareness to all sentient beings, to the point that they are aware of the external world, such awareness involves the intentionality that characterizes consciousness. Consciousness, as Husserl emphasized, is consciousness of the world. The relation indicated by the word »of« involves transcendence since the world is other than consciousness. Thus, the three-dimensional object we perceive cannot be reduced to our perceptions of it. The series of such perceptions is necessarily finite, but the object distinguishes itself in constantly affording us more perceptions.

Transcendence, in other words, is built into the perceptual series through which the object shows itself since the series offers us no final view, no perspective that somehow could internally distinguish itself as the last possible view. The object's transcendence, however, does not prevent us from internalizing it by bringing it to presence. The same holds for all the objects composing our world. We internalize that which transcends us – this being the very world that we are in as embodied perceivers.

Once again we have the relation of intertwining and transcendence. In the examples we have given, the two are naturally paired. The world of predator and prey that the organism internalizes through its bodily structures surpasses the organism. The same holds for the world that we internalize through perception. Internalization is not identification with what transcends one. It signifies here the relation of being in that which we internalize and disclose. Now, the surpassing that characterizes the relation of intertwining is actually mutual. Thus, the perceiving surpasses the perceived. It is not, as we shall see, to be derived from it. The same holds in reverse order.

This mutual transcendence also characterizes the relation of the living to the non-living. Neither offers a sufficient explanation for the other. One reason for this is their distinct temporalities. Thus, living beings have a future. Their temporality is teleological. To assert that their being is the result of their doing is not just to assert that their actions are self-directed. It is also to take their being as a goal, that is, as something future. This signifies that they are, ontologically, ahead of themselves. We cannot pin them down to the present, since their present existence is dependent on a doing that directs itself to a future state.

This future state is an animating goal; but, as future, it does not yet exist. The most we can say is that it exists in the process of continuous realization and yet is, itself, always future, always outstanding. The case is quite different with non-living entities. The laws of physics that describe their relations are incapable of capturing the teleologically, self-directed nature of life.This follows, not just because the entities that they deal with are all present and actual. It is also because the laws of physics are temporally reversible. Since they hold, whether we run the time process forward or backward, the directedness of living time is inexplicable in their terms.

In saying this, we do not mean that we cannot give a physical, chemical account of metabolism. The living organism is, as embodied, part of the world. Its metabolic processes obey the world's causality. Such causality, however, is incapable of accounting for the goal-directed nature of such processes. To explicate this nature, we can turn to our pragmatic activities – i.e., those involving our projects. Suppose, for example, we wish to make a bookcase. Engaging in this project, we employ physical laws. We depend upon the laws of force and momentum, for example, when, gripping a hammer, we drive a nail into a board. Such laws of physical causality, however, do not suffice to describe our activity. They do not grasp its goal directed causality, which is that of the future determining the past to determine the present. Here, the goal determines the past by allowing us to take it as material for our projects.

Through this, it determines our present activity of employing this material to realize our goal. Thus, our present activity of building a bookcase makes use of the materials we have *already* gathered together with an eye to this goal. Now, the two different causalities – material-causal and teleological – cannot be reduced to each other. Yet, they are intertwined. Thus, when we start a project, our goal does not yet exist as something within the world. It exists only within us, that is, in the purpose we have in mind. The world that includes this purpose is within us. To realize what we have in mind, however, we must employ the causality that includes us in the world. The level of description that grasps our activity is, then, that which speaks of the intertwining of self and world.

The same point can be made about our perceptual life. It can be described in material causal terms as well as teleologically. Thus, we can speak of the physical and chemical processes of our senses and our brains. We can also describe the material processes that allow us to focus our eyes and physically approach an object to get a better look. But this is not sufficient. As embodying an interpretative intention, perception is an inherently teleological process. This intention expresses what we intend to see and guides our interpretation of what we actually do see. We can see it at work whenever we regard optical illusions – drawings cleverly designed to support different interpretations.

Take, for example, the illusion that seems to show us either a young girl or an old woman. As we shift between the two, what changes is not the data of the page but our interpretation of what they present. The shift of interpretations is a shift in what we intend to see. This determines our actual perception.

To take another example, suppose we see what seems to be a cat hiding under a bush. Moving closer, its features seem to become more clearly defined. One part appears to be its head, another its body, still another its tail. Based upon what we see, we anticipate that further features will be revealed as we approach: this shadow will be seen as part of the cat's ear; another will be its eye, and so forth. As in the case of the optical illusion, what we intend to see determines how we regard what we have seen. It makes us take it as material for our »project« of seeing a specific object. As such, it determines our present act of seeing with its horizon of anticipations. Given that what we intend to see as we move to get a better look is not yet fully there, it stands as a goal of the perceptual process. As such, it is something to be realized, that is, something future. What we have seen and retain is something past, while the present act of seeing is, of course, now. Once again, then, we have a teleological pattern of the future determining the past and, thereby, determining the present. This pattern is distinct from that of material causality, which, despite the temporal reversibility of the laws of physics, is generally taken to be that of the past determining the present, which determines the future. An adequate description of the perceptual process must embrace both patterns without reducing one to the other.

The description, then, must be that of their intertwining. We have to say that insofar as the world is perceptually present in us, teleological temporality and causality must obtain. But insofar as we are embodied perceivers within the world, physical causality and temporality must also hold. The double relation of being in also characterizes these different accounts. Each transcends the other; and yet, in actual perception, each is implicit in the other.

4. The transcendence of intersubjective relations

Transcendence also characterizes our relations to other persons. As Sartre has remarked, to truly grasp the Other, I would have to grasp him »as he obtains knowledge of himself«. My goal would be to grasp how the world appears to him, that is, to apprehend what he sees, feels and thinks. As part of this, it would include his memories and the anticipations that are based on his past experiences. As is obvious, were this intention fulfilled, our two consciousnesses would merge. A consciousness that was fully present would not be other, but would rather be part of my own. In Sartre's words, it »would in fact suppose the internal identification of myself and the Other«. (1968, 317)

This means that the very success of my intention in finding a corresponding fulfillment would rob it of its intended object, which is, after all, not myself but rather someone else. Given this, I cannot say that such self-presence is the object of my intention. Rather, the Other that I intend is someone who escapes the intentions directed to his self-presence. The Other is the person whose consciousness I can never bring into presence. This does not mean that, as Sartre has argued, to intend the Other as other is to intend »a full intuition of an absence«. (318)

Were the Other truly absent, he could neither be intended nor known. The result would be a complete solipsism. Once again, transcendence signifies a limit and its surpassing. The limit is the evidence I do have for the Other as a self-conscious individual. The surpassing manifests itself in my sense that the Other in his self-presence exceeds such evidence.

The evidence I have for the Other as a self-conscious individual like myself comes from the Other's behavior and speech. Generally speaking, the Other behaves as I would in a similar situation. I thus ascribe to him a set of conscious intentions similar to my own. Thus, seeing his morning activities in the kitchen making coffee, boiling an egg, and so on, I take him as making his breakfast. I transfer to him the intentions that guide me when I engage in similar activities. This works well enough in everyday life, but were it to be totally successful, the Other would be entirely predictable. He would not be other, but simply myself as differently embodied. To grasp him as other, this limit must be surpassed.

The evidence that confirms him as a subject like myself, i.e., as having the same interpretative intentions and understanding of his world as I do, cannot be complete. The same point holds for the evidence we gain by talking with the Other. A conversation with someone who mirrored our every thought, who agreed with every interpretation of the world that we ventured, would not just be extremely boring. It would raise the question of whether we were talking to a person or to a machine designed to mimic our speech.

A genuine Other behaves as we do, but not entirely. There is an element of unpredictability, of the surprising in what he says and does. Concretely, this means that to intend a person is to expect that not all of our expectations will be confirmed. The intuitive confirmation of our intention must, then, be provided by an evidence that goes beyond the interpretation that is embodied in our own intentions. The excess consists of the Other's interpretation of the situation we share. This is always somewhat different from our own. Guided by it, the Other always behaves differently than we would. There is a margin of difference between us based on the difference of our apprehensions.

Thus, insofar as I intend the Other as like me but different than me, I must at a certain point suspend my interpretation till the Other gives the lead. His exceeding me is his interpretation, the very interpretation that, in motivating his behavior, meets mine and calls on me to respond. Thus, my intending the Other as other involves a responding to him and his interpretation of our common situation.

Levinas describes such exceeding in terms of the temporal diachrony of the Other. This diachrony exists within the teleological temporality that characterizes our conscious life. At its basis is the fact that, since we do not share the same past, the expectations that grow out of this, i.e., the future that we project, must also differ.

My encounter with the Other is, thus, Levinas writes, »without the future being given in the to-come [*ad-venir*], where the grasp of an anticipation – or a protention – would come to obscure the dia-chrony of time« (1994a, 112–113).

What I confront, then, is the alterity of the Other as a temporal field. This alterity introduces a novel sense of the future. It is not the future that I project from my experience of the past. It is the future that »is not grasped«, the future that contains the »surprising«. (1994b, 76) Facing the Other, then, I face a future that is not my own, one that grows out of a different perspective. Enacted, the anticipations that give content to this future introduce the new, the surprising into our common world.

The same points hold with regard to our conversation. There is, here, as Levinas remarks, a constant surplus of »the saying« over »the said«. Each time I attempt to grasp what the Other says from my perspective the Other adds something new or corrects me from his perspective. As Levinas describes this correction,

> »his speech consists in ›coming to the assistance‹ of his word – in being present. This present is not made of instants mysteriously immobilized in duration, but of an incessant recapture of instants that flow by – his by a presence that comes to their assistance, that answers for them.« (1969, 69)

Thus, the Other replies to my interpretation of what he said by amending it with a new saying. In this correction, the Other redoes the past. Doing so, it is as if »the presence of him who speaks inverted the inevitable movement that bears the spoken word [the said] to the past state«. This means, Levinas adds, that the »present« of the speaking Other »is produced in this struggle against the past«. (69)

The temporality of conversation thus contains both the new (the unforeseen saying as grounded in the Other's interpretation) and a reworking of the past – i.e., of the said. In response to my comments, he can say »this was not what I had in mind« and explain what he said. His explanation is part of the surplus of the saying over the said. This surplus is inevitable given the diachrony that characterizes our temporalities.

Once again the response to this transcendence is neither identification nor absorption, but rather intertwining. Thus, on the one hand, we can say that we are in society. As social political animals, we are always found with Others. Not only do we require an extended period of care until we reach maturity, even as adults we require their activities to fulfill our basic needs for food and shelter. On the other hand, such Others are brought to presence by our internalizing them. Given that the Other that we encounter transcends us, this internalization cannot be absorption. The result is rather the internalization of an alternate perspective, one that can call our own into question.

This calling into question is a call for us to stand outside of ourselves, to confront ourselves, to ask ourselves, for example, »what are you doing«. In saying such, who speaks, who listens? There is here a split in our identity, one that allows us to be a »for-itself«, i.e., be an object for ourselves. Levinas expresses this in terms of the temporal diachrony of the Other. Internalizing the Other, a person experiences »a relationship in which diachrony is like the in of the other-in-the-same – without the Other ever entering into the Same« (2000, 19).

The result of such relations is »an awakening of the for-itself [éveil du pour-soi] /... / by the inabsorbable alterity of the other« (22). Awakening me, the Other »confers on me an identity«. He does so, Levinas writes, by »placing my I in question« (110). This is a »questioning where the conscious subject liberates himself from himself, where he is split by /... / transcendence« (110).

It is this transcendence that allows the subject to confront himself and, thus, be a for-itself. Here, his disclosure as a for-itself is through the Other. If the Other is, in fact, a subject like myself, the same must hold in reverse order. With this, we have a level of self-transcendence and self-disclosure that is built upon, and yet surpasses, that given by consciousness' being intentionally directed to the world. The mutual intertwining and disclosure of self and world is supplemented by the intertwining and disclosure brought about by its relation to the Other.

5. The transcendence of the Divine

We mentioned at the beginning of this paper that the religions that accept the account of Genesis believe in a God that transcends the world. The God that creates the world out of nothing cannot be bound by the world it creates. This means that we cannot impose on God's action the relations that we find in the world. Thus, in the world, nothing exists without a cause, which means that for every event that occurs, one will always find a prior event that brought it about. But there is nothing prior to God's causation of the world.

As the first cause, God cannot be in the before and after of worldly time. Thus, God escapes our conception of causality, which presupposes this temporal before and after. The same argument can be made with regard to each of our attempts to interpret God's creative actions in terms of the relations we find in the world. Yet, the same account of Genesis asserts three times that humans were created in God's image and likeness. This implies that God is in the world in terms of that which makes us his image and we, by virtue of the same aspect are in God. Christianity distinguishes itself in making this explicit. Thus, St. Anselm, in describing the Incarnation, writes:

> »The whole universe was created by God, and God was born of Mary. God created all things, and Mary gave birth to God. The God who made all things gives himself form through Mary, and thus he made his own creation.« (1862, 956)

Given that Mary gave birth to God, we have to say that God is in Mary. Mary, however, was created by God. She is in God's creation. God's being in Mary in the person of Jesus is thus his being in the world he creates, the very world that is within God as his creative conception. Anselm's description recalls the account that we find in the Gospel of John. To Philip's demand, »Show us the Father«, Jesus answers »Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father«. The claim is that

God is present in the world as Jesus himself.

We find the assertion of the intertwining when Jesus challenges Philip,

> »How can you say ›show us the Father‹? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?« (John 14:8-10)

This claim, which appears here as a question, is later repeated as a definite assertion (14:11). John extends it to ourselves when he has Jesus assert

> »I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you« (John 14:20).[1]

Once again we have the relation of intertwining and transcendence. The assertion that humans have a relation to God, if it is not to lead to the reduction of one side to the other, has to be expressed in terms of the intertwining. The alternatives are the modern reduction of God to us, i.e., to our fantasies or projections, or the rationalistic reduction of humans and all other realities to God. In the latter case, we assert with Spinoza,

> »individual things are nothing but modifications of the attributes of God, or modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a fixed and definite manner« (1951, 66).[2]

If we find these alternatives unacceptable, then the intertwining offers a possible way out. Its premise is that there is a radical alterity in the very nature of being – that being itself is composed of categories that cannot be combined. This premise rejects what Levinas calls »the ancient privilege of unity, which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel« (1969, 102).

The story of creation, at least in Levinas's account, also rejects this privilege. As Levinas expresses this:

> »The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is that /… / the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him.« (63)

There is, here, an alterity in the heart of being: the being of the creature is distinct from that of creator. It is the contention of this paper that this alterity also marks creation. From a religious perspective, transcendence and intertwining indicate the alterity that allows what Levinas calls the »paradox of creation /… /, the paradox of an Infinity admitting a being outside of itself which it does not encompass« (104).

From a non-religious perspective, it points to the fact that they are world-forms. Transcendence and intertwining follow from the nature of being. They allow it to relate to itself while differing from itself.

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1 These translations from John's Gospel are taken from *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha* (1989).

2 Leibniz comes up with a comparable position in the *Monadology* when he asserts that each monad is simply a perspective on the universe taken by God.

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