

Paul J. DeHart, *Creation and Transcendence: Theological Essays on the Divine Sublime*

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Readers familiar with Paul DeHart's thought will know him as a critical postliberal, and as an independently minded thinker with an ecumenical vision of classical theology. After reading this collection, I would classify him as a Kierkegaardian Thomist. This is, as I will say below, the source of both the potential and the problems in the text.

Though the collection is wide-ranging, there are some through lines, most importantly the theme of 'creational monotheism' (p. 4). I might summarise the central issue like this: what does it mean to stand, as finite creatures, before our infinite Creator? There are moments of failure in theology when we lose track of our own complex finitude, as he thinks Schleiermacher, Kathryn Tanner and John Milbank do in variant ways. Kierkegaard is our ultimate ally here. There are also moments of failure when we lose track of God's infinity. The long arm of Platonism, DeHart tells us, is at work in this failure. Thomas is our great antidote, though Descartes – and in particular Jean-Luc Marion's interpretation of Descartes – gets us off on the right foot.

The chapters on Kierkegaard frame DeHart's theology, even more than his engagements with Thomas. We encounter the infinite not in speculation (with Hegel), nor in an awareness of what is (Schleiermacher); rather, finite agents discover a connection to the infinite God in the pressured contingencies of lived history. Specifically, we stand at a crossroads with the infinite in the countless ways that the incarnate life of God meets us in the midst of our existence as repeated moments of decision.

DeHart then takes us into an account of repetition through the side door of Kierkegaard's interpretation of Leibniz. The self I am is an ever-renewed set of decisions that I make as I think the passionate idea of my finitude lived toward God, again and again. I do not collect myself from an idea behind or above me, I live it by becoming the passionate idea I never stop manifesting.

A chapter on Kathryn Tanner reveals the risks of forgoing the freedom that DeHart's Kierkegaardian theology centres. Deeply appreciative of Tanner's writings, he challenges the way that her trinitarian pattern hollows out her anthropology. I find the point compelling: she offers – ironically, given Tanner's efforts at structuring a non-competitive ontology – a competitive relation between nature and grace. At the same time, his own argument is too sketchily rendered to avoid problems. He suggests that a Godhead composed of a pattern of self-effacing relationships cannot involve distinct persons; if that pattern holds, then our involvement in the divine perichoresis erodes our freedom to be distinct persons. Both, I think, are unwarranted assumptions.

A short chapter on Jüngel allows DeHart to process some of his own theological biography. Here we see his close reading of Thomas bearing fruit, and allowing him to return to his earlier appraisal of Jüngel and find gaps in the theological vision. In particular, he names here the way that a rejection of analogy results in a relation of God and creation in which the former can only ever intrude upon the latter. Jüngel's

God can only confront, never gather us into an ontological home. This is, perhaps, the opposite problem DeHart names in Tanner.

A long chapter on John Milbank's theology bears some important insights, but wanders around too much to read as more than a first draft of loosely related critiques. One of the points that needs refinement here is a reading of Thomas's ontology as relying on a bifurcation of structure and event. Created being (structure) is 'indifferent', and only tends Godward as a result of the agencies and activities (events) within it. Again, we see DeHart reacting against a perceived threat to human freedom. His key worry about Milbank seems to be that the latter's 'un-Thomistic' ontology, for which all being is always already charged with divine gift and call, will make God the only free agent there is. DeHart's constructive proposal relies on a flattened account of grace more at home in the late medieval Franciscans and Dominicans than in Thomas. More importantly, it fights back against the deep connections of nature and grace that he has been arguing for.

The final section of the book consists in what appears to have been a separate book project at some point. In three interconnected essays on divine ideas, DeHart attempts to make the counter-intuitive case that the classical tradition of divine ideas cannot serve our theological epistemology, soteriology or doctrine of God.

The central argument of these final essays is that God does not relate to the ideas as an other (via God's 'eminent precontainment', p. 12), since that would be damaging to doctrines of divine simplicity and unity. God is not a Being eternally enamoured with concepts that are not divine. A voluntarism that has been emerging throughout the volume finally becomes explicit here. I cannot know the ideas because the ideas are ontologically one with God. But God wills the ideas to be informational, that is, to become the natural structure of creation. Assuming this is the indifferent structure of the earlier essay, it seems as though the old division between the absolute and ordained power of God now runs through the divine ideas. The willed informational existence in creation gives no access to their ontological source. When we know all we can know about the ideas, we do not know God.

Most telling here is what DeHart has to deny in order to make this case. The history of theology becomes for him a long nefarious influence of Plato, making everyone from Augustine and the Cappadocians to Maximus and Bonaventure suspect. After Thomas finally articulates an anti-Platonic ontology, the post-Thomistic tradition fails to sustain it. I suspect he is here over-reading Kierkegaard's (I would prefer to say Johannes Climacus') critique of Plato, and assuming that, first, Kierkegaard means it unironically, and, second, that it is an accurate reading of Plato. 'My transcendent truth does not float above my history, always available to my "recollecting" intelligence; it can only be pursued through it, volitionally' (p. 67). In order to contrast recollection and repetition in this way, DeHart has to assume that the movement 'forward' into will and freedom cannot also be a movement 'upward' into participation in a divine idea. I found myself flipping back to the chapter on Jüngel and wondering what had become of analogy.

All this reminds me of Barth's comment that a Kierkegaardian moment is important to theologians, so long as you do not remain stuck in it. DeHart is a skilled theologian with a trained eye for the details many others would miss. His account of 'the divine sublime' makes space for a thick account of created nature without dethroning the transcendent God. At the same time, he seems to have taken Kierkegaard a bit too seriously – a sin that surely Kierkegaard would discourage!