‘The Mother of God – the Damp Earth’: A Sophic Phenomenology of Invariant Vitalism

Our contemporary climate, in both the literal and metaphoric senses, is determined by three forces: the capitalist victory that demands everything reduce its value to the quantitative measure of money, the ideology of scientism which says all truth is reducible to the mechanics that science can alone elucidate, and the resurgence of ‘fundamentalist’ religion unmoored by theological or religious metaphysics. In the humanities these determinations go unchecked by an apolitical and aneconomic antimeetaphysical Anglo-American philosophy, both the reaction in “Continental philosophy” threatening to solidify into a narrow neo-rationalism against the anti-science occultism of Heideggerian philosophy and its kin, the continued naïve idealism of English department appropriations of deconstruction, and the self-perpetuated captivity of theology both to positivist scientism and the ghettos of identity politics. What unites all of this is a certain refusal of the perversity of nature. Nature appears to be purposely deviating from what is accepted as good, proper, or reasonable in democratic societies. Nature itself appears to be refusing to go away, to separate itself off from ‘culture’ and the human person, and insists on inhering to every part of culture and in every human person.

This paper is an attempt to think differently from within the humanities; to think a strange economic ecology of life, or invariant vitalism, which lies at the heart of a religious philosophy of nature. Rather than rejecting nature or attempting to cordon nature away from the world and our households this paper takes to heart the words of an old woman: ‘the mother of God is the great mother – the damp earth, and therein lies great joy for men.’ What would it mean to think of nature not merely as a set of brute mechanical laws that regulate death, but to think of nature, the damp earth, as that what gives birth to God? That is to say, what if nature has at its very heart the resistance of

death as the principle of an invariant vitalism? Is there anything that supports such a thought?

The Scottish philosopher of science Ray Brassier is extremely hostile to vitalism.\(^2\) For him there is an arche-fossil that challenges the very notion of life because it tells that there was a reality prior to the emergence of life.\(^3\) That there is an ancestry to what we know as nature within the universe itself is not as surprising or challenging to some forms of vitalist philosophy as Brassier would us like to believe. Sergei Bulgakov says that, ‘Life is more immediate than, and prior to, any philosophical reflection or self-reflection. Life is ultimately undefinable, though constantly in the process of identification; it fills our judgment with content, but is never exhausted by them.’\(^4\) For the invariant vitalist the life that comes after the arche-fossil is an outgrowth of a cosmic life prior to the arche-fossil. Of course this may sound suspiciously like New Age pseudo-science to neo-rationalists, but this is only a call for more explanation rather than the jettison of life from philosophy. Brassier and other neo-rationalists are confusing the way life is expressed in our empirical world, where life only exists as a struggle against death with life itself.\(^5\) A better understanding of life itself is found in thinking production; the very production of reality is an act of life, where even resistance must come to be understood as a productive act.\(^6\)

\(^2\) At the ‘Deleuze and Rationalism’ conference, held at Middlesex University, London March 15th & 16\(^{th}\) 2007 he challenged the audience to name one biologist who is a vitalist. The implication of this statement was that if there were no biologists who ascribed to vitalist views then vitalism was an illegitimate philosophical position.


\(^4\) Bulgakov, 46.

\(^5\) Bulgakov, 68.

\(^6\) ‘Thus every living being, including man, must defend its existence, protect life from death. But this defensive does not exhaust the struggle for life, or it; it seizes the first possible opportunity to become an offensive battle, striving to confirm and broaden life, to tame the antagonistic elements of nature and to subjugate nature’s forces to its aims (Bulgakov, 71).’ While this language is problematic, it is important to note that Bulgakov’s intention is to say that nature, or the ‘dead things in nature’, must be transformed into living things. In this way humanity’s subjugation of nature is the freeing of life in nature, quite the opposite of our contemporary understanding of nature and technology.
is something rather than nothing or why there is life at all – or what amounts to making the principle of sufficient reason the main determination of thought and existence.\(^7\)

Invariant vitalism gives no aid or comfort to this position for vitalism in this invariant mode is ultimately the decision against the principle of sufficient reason and its tyrannical rule over thinking thought and existence, for ‘Thought is born in life and of life; it is a necessary hypostasis of life.’\(^8\) This means that thought, and the illuminating reason of thought, cease to endure for they are as nothing without the life prior to them. This becomes clear in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and that of his pupil Renaud Barbaras as it follows on the work of the late Husserl. Whereas the early Husserl tended to conceive a hard opposition between the natural attitude and the transcendental attitude, to the point where one could mistake the one for illusion and the other for the true, the later Husserl of *The Crisis in the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* relativized this opposition. It is Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and not the philosophies of Sartre, Levinas, or Derrida, that is the true French inheritor of Husserl’s phenomenology preciously because his philosophy takes up this relativization and thinks it to its ontological limit. Merleau-Ponty’s suturing of philosophy to the human sciences (primarily psychology and linguistics) is necessary because the human sciences reveal a dimension of brute expression in contrast to the idealist temptation of reflective philosophy. Phenomenology in this mode thus has this double relationship with the human sciences: 1) Phenomenology informs human sciences by clarifying the transcendental dimension at work (the uncovering of essences) while denouncing the naturalism and positivism upon which they are still dependent and 2) psychology and linguistics correct phenomenology by showing that the “constituting subject” (the ego) is dependent on its factual rootedness.\(^9\) It is this double relationship fostered in Merleau-

\(^7\) It should be noted that Brassier understands Meillassoux’s project as an attempt to re-legitimate the possibility of thinking the thing-in-itself without following into the correlationist tendency to absolutize ‘relation’ or resorting to the principle of sufficient reason (Brassier, 35). However, insofar as they posit a nothing from which being emerged (as proper Badiouians must), both Brassier and Meillassoux, in my view, remain trapped within the kind of thinking fostered by the principle of sufficient reason.

\(^8\) Bulgakov, 48.

Ponty’s philosophy that allows him to practice phenomenology in its authentic sense as ‘the vigilance which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge’.

Turning again to Brassier’s explication of the arche-fossil we see that for him “Life” cannot provide the condition for manifestation, because ‘the arche-fossil indexes a reality which does not fall between these poles [transcendental subject and transcendental object] and which refuses to be integrated into the web of possible experience linking all cognizable objects to one another, because it occurred in a time anterior to the possibility of experience.’ Brassier’s point, following Meillassoux, is that correlationism is illegitimate philosophically on the basis of a non-human past. Such a criticism is, as John Milbank remarks, ‘entirely doubtful’ for one only need to assert that this non-human past ‘[establishes] (approximately) how the pre-human natural world would have appeared to human being had they been present to observe it’. Though this appears in fact to be the case, despite Brassier and Meillassoux’s attempted responses to such a position, they are right to point to the post-Kantian obsession with the conditions of manifestation at the expense of that very manifestation and, though they seem to have the wrong tools to finish the job, the project of overcoming correlationism may indeed open up anew the task of metaphysics in philosophy. Our main contention is not with the object of their attack, but the explicit scientism, and the principle of sufficient reason behind it, which comprise their blunted weapons of attack. Following that of their philosophical master

12 Milbank, John, Only Theology Saves Metaphysics: On the Modalities of Terror, November 28, 2006, Available online: http://www.theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/papers/Milbank_OnlyTheologySavesMetaphysics_final.doc. See also Trotta, Roberto, Robin Mackay and Damien Veal, "Dark Matter: Probing the Arche-Fossil (Interview with Roberto Trotta)," Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development II (2007): 152-153. Here, Roberto Trotta compares our knowledge of these anestrial events as brought about by a kind of “time-travel”.
13 ‘To reduce the arche-fossil to an example of the un-witnessed or un-perceived occurrence is to beg the question because it is to continue to assume that there is always correlation in terms of which to measure gaps or lacunae within manifestation. But the arche-fossil is not merely a non-manifest gap or lacuna in manifestation; it is the lacuna of manifestation tout court. For the anteriority indexed by the ancestral phenomenon does not point to an earlier time within manifestation; it indexes a time anterior to the time of manifestation in its entirety; and it does so according to a sense of ‘anteriority’ which cannot be reduced to the past of manifestation because it indicates a time wherein manifestation – along with its past, present, and future dimension – originally emerged (Brassier, 25).’ Though Brassier has here deployed much italics, the defence still falls short of convincing me for the very reason that it posits illegitimately, in both the scientific and metaphysical realms, an absolute or pure nothing from which manifestation (being) emerges, along with the spatialization of time called for in such a naive materialism.
Badiou they go about handing “the event” of ontology to science, not in this case mathematics but physics, and hold for philosophy merely the task of explicating this event in philosophical terms. There is a stark contrast here between the performative position of Brassier and that of the actual scientist Roberto Trotta’s understanding of what the task of science is. After being told by the two philosophers interviewing him, Robin Mackay and Damien Veal, that the explicit aim of science is ‘tell us what the structure of reality it’ he remarks, ‘I disagree that this is the goal of science – to tell us about the structure of reality itself. I think we can only describe it as a logically-consistent narrative of the structure of our models, models that conform to the observed inputs of the world, and in those terms the most we can of it is for it to be consistent.\(^\text{14}\) The relationship of science and philosophy outlined by Merleau-Ponty and Barbaras is far more promising, in that it doesn’t let us forget the human nor does it allow us to unmoor human consciousness from its relative contingency. Here we move from a neo-rationalist ontology reveling in so-called dead matter and mathematical abstractions to an understanding of ‘Being as “world of life”’.\(^\text{15}\) That is, as Bulgakov says, social science (including theological anthropology and social and political philosophy) must listen, with the help of the other sciences, to “life’s voice”. This is all to say that, ‘True science is here the synonym of living realism.’\(^\text{16}\)

At this point we must finally lay out the principles for invariant vitalism. To this end we employ, in an admittedly idiosyncratic mix of radical phenomenology and sophiology, the “cosmobiology” laid out by Renaud Barbaras in his *Desire and Distance* and the “panzoism” of Sergei Bulgakov’s philosophical masterpiece *Philosophy of Economy*.\(^\text{17}\) Barbaras’ argues that the phenomenological reduction is a critique of nothingness. Indeed works like Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* are fundamentally an incomplete and conservative reduction, for the point of the reduction is not that there is a “merely” raw materiality (nothingness) beneath imaginary labels. The point of the

---

\(^\text{14}\) Trotta, 168-169

\(^\text{15}\) Barbaras, 313.

\(^\text{16}\) Bulgakov, 244.

\(^\text{17}\) Bulgakov’s thought is powerful in part because it never fully is philosophical or theological in the ways these disciplines have been delineated in the Western tradition. However, it is safe to say that this work represents one of his more philosophical works, in so far as we can delineate the two periods by way of dogmatics. His later works remain philosophical but do so in the genre of dogmatic theology, while this work is a piece of mystic theology in the genre of a philosophical investigation of political economy.
reduction is to make everything vibrant, for nothing is pre-given – not even nothingness. Renaud Barbaras shows that this incomplete reduction is a nascent problem within Husserl’s own philosophy.\(^{18}\) Barbaras points us to the work of Merleau-Ponty and his properly French appropriation of Bergson for phenomenology. Bergson’s philosophy is well known to have critiqued “false problems”, perhaps the most famous of which is encapsulated in the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” This question is the basis of the principle of sufficient reason: what reason is there for there to be something rather than nothing? Now, already this presupposes that nothingness can precede something, which confuses the ontological order of being and nothingness given in experience.\(^{19}\) Barbaras tells us that Merleau-Ponty takes up Bergson’s fundamental critique of metaphysics and applies it to Husserl’s “objectivism”, the separation of an eidetic essence from its manifestation.\(^{20}\) Merleau-Ponty’s emendation to the reduction actually moves further from the natural attitude than Husserl in that it critiques the very nothingness that is the void between eidetic essence and manifestation. This is an attempt to stick more closely to experience, not as an act of the subject but as an event of the world.\(^{21}\) There is no absolute void in nature, for disappearance of one object signifies its replacement by another, and if the former leaves a determine void, a place, it is still something. The idea of nothingness does not come from direct experience, for in the flux of things, fullness follows upon fullness.\(^{22}\) Barbaras calls this “being-at-a-distance”, but we propose to name this primary modality of life as being-incomplete in stark contrast to Badiou’s assertion of an ontology that claims “the One is not”.

If I am correct that there is an assurgent neo-rationalism then Badiou is the main figure that has inspired this move. Though Badiou is considered to be one of the most exciting philosophers at work in the contemporary scene, and his work is now becoming

\(^{18}\) “[…] it is because objective thought approaches being on the basis of nothingness and determines it by confronting it with the possibility of nonbeing that being is defined as a pure object. […] The natural attitude is situated on a deeper level than Husserl himself understood it to be; it consists not in the thesis of a ‘unique spatio-temporal reality’ so much as in the implicit positing of a positive nothingness that leads on inevitably to conceive of this unique reality as an ensemble of objects.” Barbaras, Renaud, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Paul B. Milan (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006) 48, 56.

\(^{19}\) Cf. Barbaras, 48-49.

\(^{20}\) Barbaras, 48, 46.

\(^{21}\) Barbaras, 5.

\(^{22}\) Barbaras, 52.
more and more important to Anglophone Continental philosophy and theology, his primary thesis of “mathematics = ontology” is essentially a capitulation to the Galilean thesis that nature is “written in the language of mathematics”. It is this ontological position, despite the nuances he adds and the political positions he takes, that is powerless to resist the current climate. Badiou claims that his philosophy, while desuturing philosophy from the poem (Heidegger’s philosophy), needs both the matheme and the poem one for an infinity of thought and the other as the infinity of language, it is this radical bifurcation which leads in part to an impotent philosophy. This impotence comes about through the confusion as Badiou also claims that mathematics is not a language as English or French is a language, but the language of Being. Set theory is the divine language, a kind of laicised tongue of the holy made banal. There is also a sense of scienticism in Badiou’s conditioned philosophy. While he claims that philosophy can only go forward, almost like a parasite, by way of the truth procedures formed by events in art (poetry), love (psychoanalysis), politics, and science (mathematics), there is a certain forgetting of the material and social conditions at work in any of these truth procedures. Science, even mathematics, is subject to the new queen of the sciences – neoliberal economic theory and the governmental policies they promote – and so any of the truth procedures that condition philosophy are also conditioned by money and the science that serves it. Though Badiou is right to claim that truths are created in science, there is no reason for us to think that the Good is sutured to this truth-procedure necessarily. One can create a truth that is, in practice, evil. Or, in the vein of a Spinozist or Nietzschean ethic, there is no reason to think that these truths promote vitality, which is to say, they do not resist death.

Badiou’s philosophy hypostasizes nothingness as ‘what names the unperceivable gap [...] between presentation as structure and presentation as structured-presentation,

25 This schema is most clearly laid out in Badiou, Alain, Manifesto for Philosophy, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999). The bracketed terms are those that are considered by Badiou to be ‘extraordinary points of suture’ between these conditions and philosophy.
between the one as result and one as operation, between presented consistency and inconsistency as what-will-have-been-presented.\textsuperscript{27} Despite its ontology of multiplicities all the way down it becomes a kind of \textit{analogia entis} of the void, where we know the void for our being participates, more perfectly, in the void. Yet in the reality of experience, there is no absolute nothing, no nothing distinct from being. While within experience we may not recognize life without there also being death, we see no reason to posit the perversion that the proper name of life is death. Correlatively we see no reason why the void should be the proper name of being, for this suggests that it is the void, and not life, that ultimately fills our judgment with content, but is never exhausted by them. Yet the void is actually perfectly given already in experience, falling as it does to the Bergsonian critique of false problems. The void is not an absolute for it is within thought as being with something added on to it, non-being.

Bulgakov’s sophiology, connected to the sciences that constitute a “living realism”, is a panzoism. When faced with the question of what is more real, more primordial, and more ancestral – life or death – Bulgakov holds that life is more real. For the problem of what he terms the “panfanatism of materialists” is that they cannot account for any kind of self-consciousness, and to this we can add self-affectivity and every other sense of life.\textsuperscript{28} When life becomes an unattainable epiphenomenon of death there ceases to be any scientific or logical path to understanding all that is living.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, the panfanatists become correlationists, much in the same way that Badiou’s philosophy is one of correlationism between the void and the event. Bulgakov’s monism of life is far more convincing while appearing to both stand outside correlationism and suggest a realist metaphysics that is also vitalistic. Against the notion that entropy is the final state of the universe so often invoked by contemporary nihilists like Ray Brassier\textsuperscript{30}, we can counterpoise Bulgakov’s words: ‘There is no death, there is

\textsuperscript{27} Badiou, \textit{Being and Event}, 54.
\textsuperscript{28} See Bird, Robert, "Russian Philosophy as Ideology," \textit{The Slavic and East European Journal} 45.3 (2001): 535. Here we find that the translation choice of “panfanatism” comes from an orthography which confuses the difference between \textit{fanatics} and the Greek \textit{thanatos}. Of course, for those Anglophones coming to Bulgakov without any knowledge of Russian, it would have been more helpful if Bird had provided a more accurate translation of the original Russian word, or provided that Russian word, rather than pointing out what anyone reading the book already knew – that panfanatism is a strange word.
\textsuperscript{29} Bulgakov, 98.
only life, which occasionally freezes and practically disappears but always remains in potential [potency], exists as if in a faint, and the universe is only the development of the infinite potentials [/potencies] of life, a ladder made up of its rungs’. While I don’t pretend to have the expertise to argue amongst the cosmologists what the ultimate end of the universe will be (or if there will be anything like an ultimate end), it seems metaphysically valid in the light of our ignorance over the actual cause of the beginning of our ‘young universe’ to suggest that even if those who argue for heat death are reaching beyond the limits of scientific knowledge. The metaphysical reality of the situation is that entropy, as we understand it biologically, is a potency of life in so far as we may even know it. This should not be confused with the correlationist position, for it is the very fact that the human person is a part of the expansion of life that it knows life. The correlationist would posit a correlation between the life of the human person and the life of the universe. What is at stake her is a monistic realism of life, a self-affectivity of life. Such a self-affectivity comes about through labour. Through the labour of the human person the whole of the universe comes to know itself in itself.32

Such a view opens up immediately to attacks of anthropocentrism. Of course such a position follows naturally from those who hold positions similar to Badiou’s philosophy of anti-nature. When his philosophy states that nature is not and that there are only some natural things, he has no option but to think the globe as a mite in the eye of the universe, or that the human is but a parasite in the bowels of the earth. The position of invariant vitalism is radically divergent from this view. The human is fully natural, birthed from the damp earth, sharing in the very primordial and invariant something that constitutes this conception of vitalism. Vladimir Solovyov tells us that the striving for liberation from nature is a striving for self-annihilation: ‘If nature is all, what is not nature is nothing.’33 This effectively closes down any real division between nature and culture, for nature is reconstituted through culture and culture is constructed from nature.34

---

31 Bulgakov, 98. Following Bird’s review, where he tells us that Evtuhov’s chose to translate the Schellingian “potentsiia” as potential, I have added “potency” and “potencies” to show the Schellingian themes at work in Buglakov’s panzoism (Bird, 535). I find this necessary in part because the concept of potency avoids the ‘priority of the potential’ at work in post-Heideggerian philosophy.

32 Bulgakov, 100.


34 Bulgakov, 147.
question is not one of humanity acting as an outside agent on nature, but of one part of nature labouring within another. We shouldn’t question if humanity is related to nature and we shouldn’t reject nature as beneath humanity, rather the question must be asked how is nature possible? Not, why is there something rather than nothing, but rather how is it that this invariant something is. The answer is labour. Life itself, whatever scheme we construct around its persistence, is known in itself through labour. This is why Dostoevsky can say that the damp earth is the mother of God, for the damp earth comes to be through its labouring to bring forth God into the world. Yet, such a labour remains incomplete within the *saeculum*, being by its very nature open to the coming of God to the earth.

Bulgakov tells us that the world as household is the world as the object and product of labour.\(^35\) In every act of labour, or economic act, the means and the ends fuse together confusing the philosophical problematic dividing mechanism and teleology. Within the economic act nature, without ceasing to be a mechanism, becomes anthromorphic: this is what “conquering nature” means for Bulgakov.\(^36\) But this anthromorphism is not an illegitimate celebration of the human; instead it names what life is in principle, freedom and consciousness. In this way humanity is not even truly anthromorphic and we can speculate that Bulgakov’s religious philosophy and later theology will hold that only Christ and the Virgin Mary are truly anthromorphic in that they embody the divine-humanity perfectly.\(^37\) The image of the damp earth does not normally conjure up images of freedom and consciousness, but we can witness with eyes to see that there is nothing but labour and production. The damp earth; filled with insects, bacteria, raw stuff from which higher animals will create their own worlds. If there is a language for nature it is certainly not mathematics, for this does not name the qualitative being of labour as nature, this language can and should only be the language of liturgy. Liturgical communities have a common life that extends beyond the limits of the human world, what we normally call culture, such that nature is the stuff of liturgy. This is the crucial mistake of pseudo-theologies of “religion without religion”; they seek only the

\(^{35}\) Bulgakov, 75.

\(^{36}\) Bulgakov, 78.

pseudo-depth of meaning found in ‘the symbols’ while leaving out the material depth of the real found in the nature of liturgy. What meaning is there to be found in the thurifer incensing the altar prior to Eucharist that isn’t material? Even if we are to say that it ‘symbolizes’ the Holy Spirit or the prayers the faithful rising to heaven, the fact is that this very symbolization by way of the natural element of the liturgy is an act within materiality. While the Anglo-American advocates of “religion without religion” seem to continue the confusion of reformed theology and posit a stark opposition between nature and spirit, an invariant vitalism leads us to Bulagkov’s conclusion that ‘Nature is not alien to the church; it belongs to it.’

This is the sophic phenomenological principle of invariant vitalism: because there is no experience of nothing there must be something and this something is life for the universe must ultimately be a panfanatism or a panzoism – either death must reign or be subject to life – and since absolute death must necessarily be absolute nothingness only life exists. Such a philosophy is both a realism and a radical departure from the current trajectory of thought. It rejects performatively the self-imposed captivity of theology in its challenge to the ersatz-metaphysics of positivist scientism. In the realm of the theologico-political it recovers the socialist heart obscured in identity politics by bringing attention to bear on common life of the world. Philosophically it shares a critique of non-realist metaphysics, while emphasizing the reality of a cosmic poetry. Invariant vitalism in this sophic phenomenological mode is an intensifying of all the variable stuff that share in life. Reductionism of any kind is nothing but a striving towards nothingness; whether it is the capitalist reduction of value to money, the scientistic reduction of truth to mechanics, or the fundamentalist reduction of religion to its pseudo-depth of “meaning”. An invariant vitalism harvested from the religious tradition of sophiology and the philosophical trajectory of radical phenomenology is a decision to resist the denigration of the material. It is thought with the various liturgies found throughout the globe, directing attention to the way, the truth, and the life.

Bibliography

---

38 Bulgakov, 141.


