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Werner Beierwaltes and the Yearning for Transcendence

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Abstract

In this paper we explore some of the key themes in the thought of Werner Beierwaltes. He established a reputation as a scholar of Neoplatonism during a period of great renewal of Neoplatonic studies in the last century, and that esteem was justly deserved. Yet his work was motivated by the faith in Platonism as a living tradition and a resolute conviction that metaphysics is an ineluctable part of the philosophical vocation; and indeed he was irritated by jejune or simplistic critiques of metaphysics. Plotinus was at the centre of his scholarship, which explored the great themes of Neoplatonism through medieval, Renaissance and Idealistic philosophy into the contemporary context. Theology, aesthetics and the question of selfhood or subjectivity were recurrent topics in his writing. The discussion of these problems was fueled by a keen sense of the abiding significance of the Platonic tradition for the most puzzling and urgent intellectual questions.

Keywords

metaphysics – theology – aesthetics – subjectivity

Werner Beierwaltes was undoubtedly an eminent historian of philosophy. His magnificent oeuvre is accessible in the beautiful editions of Vittorio Klostermann, from his early systematic exposition of Proclus and his commentaries on Plotinus to his monographs; these are meditations upon Neoplatonic themes throughout the history of philosophy: *Thinking the One, Identity and Difference, The True Self*. While one might be excused for thinking that this was merely an exercise in comprehensive history of ideas or a protocol of the

history of philosophy *sine ira et studio*, Beierwaltes had a philosophical agenda: he wrote as a Christian Platonist, for and within a living tradition of thought. In this essay I would like to explore the philosophy of Werner Beierwaltes. Unlike the Thomist division of labour between philosophy and religion, natural and revealed theology, Beierwaltes explored the dialectical relationship of revealed mystery and speculative truths. He was not so much concerned with the *compatibility* of Christianity with reason as with the metaphysical significance of some of the key tenets of Christian thought as developed in the wake of the Logos-theorizing and Trinitarian speculation of the Christian-Neoplatonic inheritance. This agenda was not, as it was for his eminent contemporary Kurt Flasch, an outmoded concept—‘ein verschollenes Konzept’,¹ but the driving principle and inspiration of his work.²

In this paper I will be presenting the philosophy of Beierwaltes ‘*Christianus simulque vere Platonicus*’.³ Not that one can sense any mawkish piety in his work, and there was an aversion to any dogmatism or irrational fanaticism in his thought. Religion was part of his heritage and central theme of his philosophizing. One might say that for Beierwaltes, religion without philosophy is blind; philosophy without religion empty. His funeral was held in the church in Klingenberg in 2019 in Franconia where he was baptized, and in the church where he once played the organ. Family members, friends and pupils gathered in this large Franconian church. The service was led by one of his students, the Revd Professor Marc-Aeilko Aris. I was struck by a photo at the front of the church, a portrait of Werner Beierwaltes. His face seemed all-seeing. It took me back to my student days in a seminar in Munich on Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei*. Cusa was a central influence on Beierwaltes. The icon of Christ in that work, dedicated to the monks of Tegernsee, is presented as a cipher for the providence of the Deity. In that seminar we explored Cusa’s familiar notion of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*: the breaching of Aristotelian categories through Neoplatonic negative theology. God is at once the *idem* as absolute identity; *possesit*, the ground of all reality actual and potential; and *non aliud*—the radically transcendent presence. The icon presented to the monks at Tegernsee is a token here of the unity of the soul’s vision and the vision of God: the opening up of thought and self-reflection to that incommensurable principle and source of Being, to the ineffable and un-sayable (ἄρρητον). This furnishes the fundamentally *religious* dimension in Beierwaltes’ philosophizing.

1 Flasch (2015), 31.

2 For Beierwaltes on Flasch, see Beierwaltes (2017), 243ff.

3 Beierwaltes (2001), 84.

Neoplatonism represents for Beierwaltes the culmination of antique thought. Eduard Zeller held a quasi-Romantic vision of Neoplatonism as the decline and degenerate phase of philosophy that, having long since seen its apex in Plato and Aristotle, entered into a period of relative decline in speculative power while maintaining conceptual force in the Hellenistic period, before finally collapsing into a farrago of superstition, mysticism and scholasticism in Plotinus and Proclus. Beierwaltes by contrast saw Neoplatonism, and especially the thought of Plotinus and Proclus, as the continuation of genuine aspects of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic thought and as a *speculum veritatis*. He was not, however, interested in presenting Platonism as the *sole* legitimate philosophical strand in Western culture. Beierwaltes was acutely aware of the alternatives to Platonism which were frequently more influential or prominent, whether in the guise of the philosophy of Aristotle in the Aristotelianism of late antiquity or in the Christian and Arab-Jewish Middle Ages and the early modern period, or indeed the long-lasting influence of the ethics of Stoicism and Epicureanism.⁴ Then there was Christianity itself. Philosophy was not, for Beierwaltes, necessarily opposed to faith, but nor did he see Christianity as compatible with just *any* philosophical system. Beierwaltes was espousing the argument of the Alexandrian Christians throughout the ages that the faith required its 'old loving Nurse, the *Platonick Philosophie*'. He presents Platonism *as* the yearning for rational transcendence in contemplation of the *Divine*: and to *become* what one *beholds*.

1 Defence of Metaphysics

Given his conviction that Christian thought had poor prospects without the buttress of metaphysics, Beierwaltes was at odds with many of the major concerns of contemporaries. While some of his colleagues at the University of Munich shared his enthusiasm for metaphysics—influential writers like Dieter Henrich, Robert Spaemann and Wolfhart Pannenberg—the second half of the twentieth century was shaped by a widespread critique of metaphysics. Existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ordinary language philosophy and neo-Marxist social constructionism all disavowed unashamed metaphysics, which seemed the stubborn preserve of Neo-Scholasticism with the exception of the odd brilliant maverick such as Wolfgang Cramer or Vittorio Hösle. Beierwaltes was either impatient or irritated by these dismissals of

⁴ Beierwaltes (2011a), viii.

metaphysics.⁵ Yet neither was he impressed by attempts to ignore the history of philosophy. In that respect he was within the general and respectful orbit of Gadamer, and the idea of philosophy as hermeneutical.⁶ Yet one might say that the purpose of the history of philosophy was to explore the key questions of philosophy that tend to be obscured in any age by the ephemeral interests and obsessions of the *Zeitgeist*, the exigencies of economy and the execration of the worldly-wise. The neglect of the great abiding concerns of philosophy meant the denigration of the soul for the interests of the body, self or society. If Gadamer presents a vision of philosophy as essentially hermeneutical, the learned and nuanced re-negotiation of ancient texts, Beierwaltes was always passionately summoning the perennial metaphysical questions lying behind these texts: Thinking the One, Identity *and* Difference, Self-knowledge and the experience of the One—that is, the theory of the absolute, truth and the vocation the soul.

There are two modern critics of Platonism who play a significant role in the shape of Beierwaltes' oeuvre. Heidegger's densely poetic and obscure summoning of a return to Being rather than beings, and indeed, the endeavour to think 'the difference between Being and beings' was of particular significance for Beierwaltes as a crypto-Neoplatonic endeavour. Beierwaltes was acutely aware of the genius of Heidegger and there was an elective affinity. It was the opposite of the enthusiasm of the French poststructuralists for the end of metaphysics. It was in conscious opposition to the procrustean 'End of Metaphysics' narrative and in a sense because of the persistence of aspects of Eckhart or Schelling in Heidegger's thought that Heidegger remained a presence for Beierwaltes. The Heideggerian critique of metaphysics served only to reinforce the need for metaphysics. It was not the early Heidegger but the later critic of Plato that drew his fire: the philosopher who introduced the concept of the 'onto-theological' and held that metaphysics, on account of its onto-theological character, i.e., that it allegedly has always thought of being as 'something' and this 'something' as God, has never been able to think BEING.⁷ As a result, it succumbed to 'forgetfulness of being'. Beierwaltes subjects this thesis to withering and trenchant critique. As long as Heidegger himself, Beierwaltes notes, is unable to shed more light upon about what BEING is, one must consider the possibility that Neoplatonism and thinkers in its wake, such as Meister Eckhart or Cusa, were able to free themselves from the 'forgetfulness of being' through their concept of the 'beyond being'. Plotinus refers to

5 Beierwaltes (1985), 436ff.

6 Beierwaltes (1985), 437; (2001), 17.

7 Cf. Heidegger (1957).

the One explicitly as not ‘something’ in any categorical sense of a thing,⁸ just as BEING, as Heidegger insists, cannot be ‘something’. Or indeed are we supposed to consider the *unum* and the *non aliud* or *idem*, which, for Eckhart and Cusanus, is the designation of God, as ‘something’?

The influence of Heidegger on Beierwaltes, however, is deeper than one might assume on the basis of the largely critical perspective of his commentary on the Meister from Meßkirch. The critique of Heidegger in Beierwaltes is often a radical and remorseless onslaught upon Heidegger’s capacity to eclipse brilliant Attic light with Black Forest tenebrosity! Beierwaltes investigates Heidegger’s return to the pre-Socratics with a ruthless exposure of Heidegger’s philological limitations, often attributable to his use of Wilhelm Pape’s *Griechisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch*; sometimes critiquing Heidegger’s quasi-Romantic fantasies about archaic Greek thought, or simply his procrustean tendency to project his own ideas and obsessions into his favoured texts. While sensitive to the ethical ambivalence of Heidegger’s desire to overcome technical rationality, Beierwaltes was affected by the desire of the *Schwarzwald* sage to awaken the sense of wonder as the very engine of philosophy; and the attunement to the logos, as the speech of Being, and the awareness of the ineffable source of meaning, was a deep aspect of the philosophical program of Beierwaltes.⁹ In that respect, Beierwaltes—despite the profound misgivings and criticisms—shared a kindred vision of philosophy to that of Heidegger, one opposed to the varieties of positivism, existentialism or sociological-*marxisant* that were ubiquitous in German academia in the latter part of the last century.

2 Speculative Theology

Speculative theology may look like an aberration of the nineteenth century, but in his work *Platonismus im Christentum*, Beierwaltes argues that the development of Christian theology is ‘unthinkable’ without the contribution of Platonism. That is an entirely defensible position. While religion is important for philosophy, philosophy is also crucial for theology. One need only think of the Alexandrians, Augustine or Boethius to recognize the significance of Platonism for these early Christian theologians. Yet can philosophy continue to sustain such a role? Has that element of the inherited synthesis become irritating or alienating for Christian theology? Has not the Kantian critique of dogmatic metaphysics brought the sterile glass bead game of speculative theology

⁸ See Plotinus, *Enn.*, v.3.12, 52: ἐν = πρὸ τοῦ ‘τι’.

⁹ Beierwaltes (2001), 205-227.

to an end? Has the ancient question of the relation of the One to the many been replaced by the interplay of subject and object? Beierwaltes refused to accept such a verdict. Nor could he accept that religious truth is *merely* poetic or imaginative in the sense that it expresses ideals with no correlate in reality. Post-Kantian thought, especially Schelling and Hegel, are pivotal for his own philosophical justification for theology. The Aristotelian *actus purus evolves* in Neo-Platonism, and finds powerful expression in Hegel's objective idealism and Schelling's philosophy of revelation.¹⁰

The question of God or the philosophical Absolute is, for Beierwaltes, the central philosophical question.¹¹ At the centre of Beierwaltes' immense oeuvre is his presentation of Plotinus' theme of self-transcendence of thought, prepared by, and grounded in, reflection on the One itself. As such, the highest philosophical activity of Plotinus has a religious dimension, as it did in thinkers in the later tradition such as Eckhart or Nicholas of Cusa. Beierwaltes was even prepared to use the term 'mysticism' in contrast to Kurt Flasch's polemic against placing Eckhart in the milieu of 'German mysticism'. Not that Beierwaltes would argue with the masterful presentation of Eckhart's debt to the Arabic-Aristotelian theory of intellect inherited from Albert the Great and Dietrich of Freiburg in the work of Kurt Flasch. But for Beierwaltes, the notion of religion, the spiritual dimension, as furnishing inspiration for a life well lived and providing consolation in the midst of suffering forms part of the hermeneutical task of philosophy. While Beierwaltes was not hostile to the legacy of the European Enlightenment, he was conscious of the spiritual sclerosis engendered by the cultured despisers of religion as well the dogmatic defences of Christianity.

Philosophy is, on this model, the initiation into the un-sayable (ἄρρητον). Yet this, for Beierwaltes, is in no way a denial of the various attempts to understand Being as λόγος, ἔν, ιδέα, πρώτη οὐσία or νοῦς. Platonism should be understood as the search for the first primordial principle (πρώτων) and in this sense philosophy is properly *protology*. While generally sympathetic to the concerns of the *Tübinger Platonschule*, Beierwaltes did not see the need to reconstruct the 'true' Plato from the reports of the ἄγραφα δόγματα in the manner of Krämer and Gaiser. Since Anaximander identified the first principle with θεῖον or θεός and thus protology was by definition 'theology', Beierwaltes thought that Plato's theology should be viewed as the bearer of a tradition of speculation that had pre-Socratic sources and which exhibited a natural development in the Neoplatonists and Christian Theology. In his crucial work *Identität und*

¹⁰ Beierwaltes (2011b), 204.

¹¹ Beierwaltes (2017), 243ff.

Differenz, composed in the fruitful middle period of his career, Beierwaltes explores the categories of Plato's μέγιστα γένη (*megista gene*) in his *Sophist* as a revision and correction of Parmenides' conception of being, whereby being corresponds to *identity* and non-being to *difference*. The Plotinian vision of the timeless intellect thinking itself furnishes a model of reflexive difference in unity. The ideas are different and yet form a translucent unity. As the second form of unity, the Intellect is other than the One, and still profoundly bound to its source. This relation of identity to difference finds a striking burgeoning in Trinitarian thought in relation to the question of unity. Beierwaltes viewed Plotinus's notion of the One as the ground of itself as the beginning of a development witnessed in Marius Victorinus, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart and Nicolas of Cusa: God as Trinitarian *self-constitution*. Theories of Being, Thought and the One, derived mainly from the Platonist tradition, were deployed to explicate the self-constitution of the divine First Principle. In Christianity, just as philosophy was a legitimate organ of articulation of historical revelation, so too philosophical reflection itself remains ineluctable.

One might note from the outset that Beierwaltes is opposed to both those who would attempt to separate and distinguish the genuinely Christian from 'Hellenic' accretion, and those who would oppose Hellenic pagan polytheism to Judeo-Christian-Abrahamic monotheism such as Gemisthus Pletho or Thomas Taylor. Part of the significance of the Platonic tradition, for Beierwaltes, lies precisely in the subterranean nature of its influence. In the Christian world, Origen, Augustine, Boethius, and Dionysius the Areopagite drank deeply from Platonic sources. Medieval Christian thinkers usually drew upon a Platonism that had already been baptized and was not present as 'pagan' or in contrast to Scripture. Yet, the fruits of this 'plundering of the Egyptians' were genuinely philosophical. The efforts of Eriugena or Anselm were no less metaphysical by virtue of the theological context of their reception of certain ideas and arguments. Critics might object here that Beierwaltes tended to play down or diminish the real points of opposition between Christianity and antique Platonism. His book *Platonismus im Christenthum* is devoted to presenting the essential concordance of Christian doctrine and (Neo)Platonism. Perhaps that meant a deliberately selective interpretation of Augustine, and a lack of empathy for the equally Augustinian tradition of anti-Pelagianism, and indeed of more bellicose approach to secular thought in Pascal or Hamann, Jacobi or Kierkegaard.

Beierwaltes was robustly opposed to the association of Platonism with hermeticism or esotericism. For Beierwaltes, Neoplatonism is no degenerate or grotesque version of late antique irrationalism, but the preservation and sublimation of the metaphysics of Plato, especially the doctrine of the three

hypostases of the One, Intellect and the Soul as derived from the *Parmenides*, and as such is a resolutely theological structure. As a result, for all his respect for Gadamer, in some respects he is closer to the Tübingen school in his approach to Plato, although Beierwaltes rarely refers to that circle. The One is the transcendent absolute, resisting conceptual comprehension. The Intellect is the locus of the identity of being and thought, the plenitude of the ideas. This notion of the dynamic and relational identity of intellect as truth was of momentous significance for Christian thought. Rather than the model of the *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, the correspondence of thing and intellect, pilloried by Heidegger, truth is the convergence and coherence of the ideas within the Divine mind. This coherence model of truth (the identity of thought and being within the Divine Mind) is then fused with the Old Testament paradigm of Divine truth as unswerving faithfulness to his people through the logos principle in John's gospel. One can read this in relation to the striking exegesis of Exodus 3:14, 'I am who I am', in Beierwaltes' *Platonismus und Idealismus*, an exegesis based on the essential intelligibility of being as such. Being is spirit, thus corresponding to and cohering with itself in its intelligibility.

Here is a contrast to the French tradition of Neoplatonism, with its frequent stress upon the apophatic and the theurgic-liturgical dimension of late Antique thought.¹² Beierwaltes had little patience for the theurgical dimension of Neoplatonism, especially in Iamblichus. In the *True Self* he quotes the words of Plotinus' *μόνη δὲ λείπεται ἡ θεωρία ἀγοήτευτος εἶναι*—'*theoria* or contemplation alone is not to be bewitched'.¹³ The Neoplatonism of Beierwaltes is shaped by the tradition of German Idealism. This can be seen in his early work on Proclus, a dialectician so explicitly admired by Hegel. Schelling's complex and often conflicted approach to Neoplatonism was viewed by Beierwaltes as a genuine instance of the living tradition of thought. Schelling was both entirely modern, a product of Kant and the French Revolution, and the heir of a Neoplatonic strand of thought. Hegel had open admiration for Platonic dialectic, which is movement from the particular to the objective, and in particular for the Platonic critique of Parmenides through the definition of non-being as difference in Plato's *Sophist*, and its mobilisation in the Neoplatonic notion of intellect as constituted by difference in identity.¹⁴ Hence, Hegel could claim to find much of his own dialectic in Plato's *Parmenides*, and a brief glance at his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* shows his recognition of the great value of

12 Cf. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France* in Hankey and Narbonne (2006).

13 Plotinus, *Enn.*, IV.4.44, 1.

14 Beierwaltes (2011b), 241ff.

Neoplatonism. While Schelling's precise relationship to the Neoplatonic inheritance is ambivalent and critical as his early study of Plato's *Timaeus* and his *Bruno* evince, in his philosophy of art and his philosophy of nature he pursued and developed genuinely Neoplatonic themes: beauty as an organ of truth, and nature as spirit made visible. His unfinished work, *The Ages of the World*, is a fascinating document of Schelling's conflicted and yet highly productive development of Neoplatonic themes.

That step from the Renaissance to the great Idealists meant a gap in the narrative, and not all scholars of Idealism are convinced by the argument of Beierwaltes. No one doubts a great flowering of Greek thought on German soil in the late eighteenth century, but is it Neoplatonism? Apart from a brief discussion of Leibniz, Beierwaltes does not discuss the period between Bruno and Schelling. What was the link between the renaissance of Platonism in the Renaissance and the emergence of Neoplatonic themes in the Romantic-Idealist period of thought? This is a complex and puzzling domain, and many scholars simply question the affinity between Platonism and Idealism presented by Beierwaltes. It is perhaps one of the very few shortcomings of the Platonic narrative of Beierwaltes. My own view is that Cambridge formed a bridge between Florence in the Renaissance and Tübingen and Jena at the dawn of Romanticism. Here one can only offer a few suggestions to remedy the gap between the Renaissance tradition and the development of speculative philosophy in the eighteenth century. The enigmatic figure of Jacobi is pivotal for this. Jacobi was part of an important circle around the Princess Gallitzin: Hemsterhuis, Hamman, Johann Friedrich Kleuker, Stolberg and Schlosser. Later in his life, he lived in München and was associated with Schelling and Franz von Baader. Jacobi, who initiated the Pantheism controversy and originated German Idealism, became the source of another vigorous controversy in southern Germany, sometimes known as the theism controversy. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron has written:

Quoiqu'il ait pu en penser, Jacobi n'était pas de la famille platonicienne, et sa pensée évoque plus pour nous Pascal que Platon. Ce n'est donc que d'une façon très marginale qu'il a participé à la renaissance de Platon dont Tennemann et Hemsterhuis furent les meilleurs artisans.¹⁵

The historian of philosophy Georges Gusdorf further notes: 'Hemsterhuis est un sage, un néo-platonicien dans la tradition des penseurs de Cambridge et de

¹⁵ Vieillard-Baron (1997), 83.

Shaftesbury.¹⁶ Moreover, he observes: ‘Par l’intermédiaire de Jacobi, l’influence de Hemsterhuis s’étendra à Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Schiller et de là aux jeunes romantique, en particulier à Novalis.’¹⁷ The constellation of Boehme, the Cambridge Platonists, the Cabbala, Mystical Pietism and Shaftesbury is part of the account of the otherwise somewhat puzzling story of how Platonism was able to furnish a key role in post-Kantian philosophy.¹⁸

3 Aesthetics

The religious and the aesthetic constitute a crucial part of the Beierwaltes oeuvre. Music was of great personal importance to him, and his fascination for Theodor Adorno was doubtless linked to this.¹⁹ Adorno is critiqued, however, in proximity to Heidegger. Beierwaltes views Adorno’s opposition to the concept of identity as the promotion of the ‘non-identical’ to a basic category of thought. Identity is the scapegoat for the ills of philosophy and society in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through the idea of thought as an instrument of oppression that relegates all items under the power of the ruling subject. Identity becomes the instrument of identifying the real and thereby a totalising synthesis excluding those objects that do not fit, and especially opposing critique. Art is absorbed into this total society and thereby robbed of its capacity for critique. In a reversal of Hegel, Adorno claims that the whole is the false. The realization of the non-identical can break the ‘compulsion for identity’ from which man suffers in his present situation in society. Beierwaltes takes Adorno’s non-identical as a paradigm of the relationship of identity and difference in twentieth century thought, and in deploying the concept of the nonidentical Adorno seeks to explain social and historical phenomena in a universal manner. Even if explicitly anti-Hegelian, the debt to Hegelian Dialectic remains.

Beierwaltes, however, notes the striking parallel between Adorno’s privileging of the artwork and Schelling’s vision of art as the ‘organon of philosophy’. Adorno’s notion of the non-identical as the particularity that resists

16 Gusdorf (1976), 280.

17 Gusdorf (1997), 281.

18 The important role of Henry More (1614-1687), in this reception has yet to be properly acknowledged. <http://www.cambridge-platonism.divinity.cam.ac.uk/about-us/about-us>. Henry More, theologian, and philosopher, is usually considered to be one of the leading Cambridge Platonists. His European influence was largely through his correspondence with Descartes and *Latin Opera omnia* (1675-79).

19 Beierwaltes (2011b), 303ff.

conceptual thought and his vision of music as the privileged expression of the non-identical means that art is cognitive, even if the pessimistic mood of Adorno's philosophy furnishes a close link with Schopenhauer.²⁰ While Adorno's ambivalent but potent association with Hegel is evident, the relation to Schelling is less often noted, but Beierwaltes makes the connection explicit. For Beierwaltes, beauty is the expression of the eternal in the transient, the promise that we can feel 'at home' in the world.²¹

There is also a bond with Heidegger. Beierwaltes notes that the pathos of authentic art is important for Adorno, not least in his savage critique of the amusement and consumption of the culture industry, notwithstanding his celebrated critique of the 'Jargon of Authenticity' in Heidegger.²² One should not think of Heidegger and Adorno simply as foils for Beierwaltes. Notwithstanding the manifold differences between the two German thinkers, Beierwaltes wants to make clear that their respective critiques of 'metaphysics' have much in common. They both summon the concepts of identity and difference to describe the 'alienation of man' that emerges from the 'reign of the being of modern technology' (Heidegger) or 'the context of involvement and deception' in society (Adorno). They both, moreover, wish to be harbingers of a new 'being'. Reflection upon the 'consistent consciousness of *non-identity*' for Adorno is meant to breach this alienation and at least spark social renewal. Beierwaltes sees Adorno's as a kindred effort to Heidegger's intention of 'saving' man from the compulsions of technical 'planning and calculating' by virtue of a 'thinking ahead, looking toward that which approaches us as the call of the active nature of *identity* between man and Being', whereby this 'Identity' designates the willingness to be open to BEING which entails the thinking 'difference *as* difference'.

Here we touch upon the vexed question of the relationship between Mythos and Logos. As with Adorno and Heidegger, there was perhaps a Schellingian dimension to the thought of Beierwaltes. One of the core themes of Platonic myths is the soul and its destiny. In Plato's *Phaedrus* we find a combination of both rational arguments and imaginative stories about the soul and its vocation. The myths of Plato are a rather odd form of the genre, and clearly shaped by the demands of a rigorous philosophical project. Reason, on the other hand, should not be construed too narrowly in terms of conceptual analysis or observation since science and morality rely upon principles which

20 Beierwaltes (2011b), 310ff.

21 This is how I interpret Beierwaltes, "Marsilio Ficino's Theorie des Schönen", in Beierwaltes (2017), 231-278, esp. 276.

22 Beierwaltes (2011b), 304.

defy such strict explication. That is to say that we should not confuse reason with rationality in the narrow instrumental sense that has become so widespread since the European Enlightenment. Rationality is more than a narrow ‘calculating’ scientific rationality. It relies upon the revival of the distinction between νοῦς (intuitive reason) and δῖάνοια (discursive reason).²³ Plato’s seventh letter (on the reasonable assumption of its authenticity) presents a model of the kindling of insight that cannot be identified with patterns of deduction or empirical induction. This account of intuitive cognition is reinforced by the Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides*, and in particular Plotinus on the apprehension of the One. One might add that the religious imagination must be guided by both νοῦς and δῖάνοια if it is not to collapse into fantasy and wish fulfilment. Both the Scylla of relativism and skepticism of the post-modern ideologues and the Charybdis of narrow scientific materialism and utilitarianism must be confronted with the intellectual resources of the philosophical tradition.²⁴

4 Epochs of Thought and Subjectivity

Beierwaltes, for all his philological precision and nuanced historical awareness, was loath to envisage the conceptual apparatus of an epoch of philosophy as constituting a Nietzschean ‘prison house’ of thought. While he was emphatically not a perennialist, he was nevertheless conscious of continuities between ancient, medieval and modern culture. He spoke warmly of Hans Blumenberg, once his colleague in Muenster, even though that seemed to me an unlikely intellectual kinship. *Platonismus und Idealismus* is a normative-programmatic as well as a descriptive title. Both shared immense learning in the history of philosophy and shared interest in metaphors, but Blumenberg’s anthropological and epistemological pessimism was far removed from Beierwaltes, for whom Neoplatonism furnished a structure for Christianity to emerge as the religion of antiquity. As we have noted, here was a counterargument to figures like Heinrich Dörrie, who viewed the relation between Christianity and Platonism as irrevocably antagonistic and hostile. Thus, for Beierwaltes, Neoplatonism was not just a culmination of Graeco-Roman Antiquity but provided the basis for its inheritance in the ‘gothic’ Middle Ages. One might add that Islam and Judaism relied as heavily upon Neoplatonic structures as the

23 Beierwaltes (1985), 82ff. See also Beierwaltes (1966).

24 See Hengsteman (2021).

Christian West, but apart from his work on the *Liber de Causis*, Beierwaltes' research was focussed upon the Christian West.²⁵

The next great era in Beierwaltes' depiction of the development of the history of thought is the Renaissance. It should be noted that this is quite unusual. In many histories of philosophy, the Renaissance is a rather neglected period, an epoch straddling the heyday of the nominalists in the late Middle Ages and the philosophy that emerged triumphant with Galileo and Descartes. For Beierwaltes, however, the Renaissance is a pivotal element in Western thought, not least because of the rediscovery of Platonism. It is Ficino in whom 'the philosophy of the Renaissance became a renaissance of Platonism',²⁶ and Ficino was a master interpreter of both Plato and Plotinus, the *interpres secretorum sive mysteriorum Platoniorum*. Beierwaltes clearly relished the magnificent achievement of the Italian Renaissance as philosophy in action. While Nicholas of Cusa was one Beierwaltes' favourite philosophers—and Cusa stands on the threshold between the medieval and the Renaissance—Ficino, Reuchlin, Pico and Bruno were also significant figures for Beierwaltes.²⁷ There was a Christian humanism that he saw in the great works of Michelangelo. The stress in Beierwaltes upon the Renaissance was not the wilful occlusion of the seventeenth century so much as different perspective. What represented the distinctively 'modern' for Beierwaltes was not the separation of facts from values or the gap between rationality of science and any vision the good that emerges from the *esprit géométrique* of early modern science but rather the spirit of subjectivity, creativity and freedom as it came to glorious fruition in the Renaissance.²⁸ He greatly admired one of the treasures of the Alte Pinakothek, one of the splendid art museums of Munich, the self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer;²⁹ and there is an addendum to the essay on Nicholas of Cusa on the possible connection between the self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer and the thought of Cusa. The portrait is enigmatic: both personal and yet universal. Dürer was clearly using the artistic conventions of the depiction of Christ of the period. Beierwaltes notes that the criticism of arrogance or even blasphemy in the self-portrait could be countered by the idea of the *imitatio Christi*, according to which the image represents the archetype and telos of human life. Beierwaltes

25 See Beierwaltes, "*Primus est dives per se*. Das erste ist reich durch sich selbst. Meister Eckhart und der *Liber de Causis*", in Beierwaltes (2007), 129-164.

26 Beierwaltes (2011a), 233.

27 Beierwaltes (2011a), 231-299.

28 Werner Beierwaltes, "Subjektivität, Schöpfertum, Freiheit", in Beierwaltes (2017), 361-379.

29 Beierwaltes (2011a), 224-229.

links this to the central idea of the *filiatio Dei* as the expression of the 'supreme human potential' (das höchste Vermögen des Menschen).³⁰

Auf das Selbstbildnis Dürers hin gedacht: Im Bild erscheint Christus als die apriorisch begründete und zugleich endlich-erfahrbare Wahrheit der eigenen Gott-Ähnlichkeit, als Einheit der beiden Blicke oder Angesichter dargestellt. Beide fallen 'im Grunde' zusammen.³¹

'In relation to the self-portrait of Dürer: through the image Christ appears the truth of God-likeness, both from the perspective of the a priori foundation and the finite experience thereof. It is the presentation of the unity of both glances or faces. Both, 'fundamentally' come together.'

Here is the coincidence of finite and infinite, and the renewal of the finite in the infinite through the process of deification. This is not 'the eye that sees not itself',³² but the validation of 'immortal longings' in the vision of God.³³ Another English Platonist, Owen Barfield, once observed:

There has been no better characterization of the distinction between Platonism tout simple and Neoplatonism than was made by whoever defined the latter as 'Platonism plus the concept of genius'. At all events it seems to me to be in this sense that the stream of thought to which I referred may properly be termed 'Neo-platonic'. Plotinus, Plutarch, Iamblichus, Synesius, Augustine, Ficino, Bruno, Boehme, Henry More, Shaftesbury, Blake, Goethe, Coleridge, Emerson and Yeats were no doubt very unlike each other in many respects; but they were all aware, in a way that Pythagoras and Plato were not yet aware, of the active role of the individual human spirit.³⁴

I can envisage Werner Beierwaltes cringing at the Barfield utterance. And yet there is a degree to which he would concur. It was the 'active role of the individual human spirit' in the Platonic tradition that was inspired and vindicated for Ficino and Pico, and the liberal arts are just so because they are instruments of freedom. Pico's *De hominis dignitate* represents the highpoint of a

30 Beierwaltes (2011a), 225.

31 Beierwaltes, (2011a), 225.

32 Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1 Scene 2.

33 Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act 5 Scene 2.

34 Barfield (2010), 221.

Renaissance vision of human liberty as the unfolding of Protean and yet creative powers guided by the vision of the good and never reducible to the arbitrary, the wanton, nor wilful perversity. 'Man is a lump', said John Donne. But if we are just mammals alongside other mammals, albeit endowed with greater intelligence; if consciousness is merely a function of neural complexity; if the mind is a combinatorial recursive system rather than a *speculum animae*, then the great religions of humanity, Christianity included, appear to be instances of delusion.

The next pivotal era for the historiography of Beierwaltes is the Romantic-Idealistic period as an age of the rediscovery of Neoplatonic metaphysical impulses and ideas. It was fitting that his chair was in the *Schellingstraße*. Neoplatonism is a pivotal moment in the shift from the medieval to the modern period in the Renaissance. In this manner Beierwaltes produces a subtly different vision of Modernity than Löwith or Blumenberg. Modernity or *Die Neuzeit* is neither the secularisation of medieval Christianity, nor is it the legitimate break from it.³⁵ For Beierwaltes, there has clearly been a loss of a sense of transcendence in European thought and this has driven a new kind of wedge between philosophy and theology, one that would have perplexed Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusa or Ficino. At the same time, Beierwaltes was just as hostile to gloomy or reactionary dismissals of the modern age (*die Neuzeit*) as he was disapproving of the rebarbative *marxisant* critiques of the bourgeois enlightenment in Foucault or Derrida. Whatever he shared with Heidegger and Adorno, it was not their deep pessimism about modern Western civilisation.

5 The True Self and the Problem of the Soul

For Beierwaltes, it is an error to envisage the thought of Plotinus, in particular, as a merely cerebral adumbration of a static hierarchy of metaphysical abstractions, hypostases stretching from the One to the Intellect and the Soul; instead, we should envisage the philosophy of Plotinus as the thinking of the One and the Intellect through the Soul for the sake of a life lived in accordance with the Good. Like Pierre Hadot, Werner Beierwaltes wanted to stress the practical and transformative aspect of Plotinus' philosophy. Yet unlike Hadot, and in accordance with the German Idealistic inheritance, Beierwaltes lays greater stress upon the idea of *subjectivity*. For him, the self-scrutiny of thought itself, the

35 There is a question of terminology here. *Die Neuzeit* in German is the general term for the modern age. *Die Moderne* has a different and more restricted meaning than the English equivalent.

exploration and analysis of its own *a priori* structure, is part of the warp and woof of the Neoplatonism of Plotinus.³⁶

While most would consider the procession of reality from the One as the key issue in Neoplatonism, Beierwaltes insists that this must be discussed with regard to man's own *self-knowledge*, i.e., in a reflection upon and awareness of that principle that is working immanently within, while transcending, finite subjectivity: in the enigmatic core of our nature 'We are rooted in Him by converging towards Him'.³⁷ This consciousness of the transcendent Absolute furnishes the rationale for the Plotinian imperative which accompanies and inspires: ἀνάβαινε πρὸς ἐκεῖνον—'Ascend to Him'.³⁸

The monograph *The True Self* is concerned with the relation between the Soul and the Intellect as the traditional Platonic interpretation of the Delphic imperative 'Know Thyself'. This, for Beierwaltes, is emphatically not the self as an impervious or impenetrable datum of much psychological, economic or political theorising, but as an ideal that emerges through the ascent of the soul to the noetic world, and more mysteriously, the One itself. Here is a doctrine of a higher and lower self, one which Beierwaltes presents as common to Christianity and Platonism. It also forms a bridge to one of the key themes of modern philosophy: subjectivity. The great American Idealist Josiah Royce wrote:

The higher Self, the deeper spiritual nature, the individuality which ought to be,—to whom does it originally belong? To the man who finally wins a consciousness that this has become to him his true Self? Or does this higher self come, as Aristotle said of the Nous, θύραθεν, from without, into the natural man?

Royce continues:

And the two doctrines which, in European history, have most insisted upon the duality of our higher and lower selfhood, viz. the ethical teaching of Plato and the Gospel of the Christian Church, have agreed in insisting that the higher Self is a resultant of influences which belong to the eternal world, and which the individual man himself is powerless to initiate.³⁹

36 Beierwaltes (2017), 361-379.

37 Plotinus, *Enn.*, v 1.11 (10), 14-15: ἐνιδρύμεθα δὲ οἱ ἅν συννεύωμεν ἐκεῖ.

38 Plotinus, *Enn.*, v.1.3, 3; v.5.4, 1: ...δεῖ τὴν ἀναγωγὴν ποιήσασθαι εἰς ἔν και ἀληθῶς ἔν.

39 Royce (2018), 250.

It is in this spirit that Eckhart can say that God is within, but we are without. The acquisition of the *true self* is to be attained by the allegiance to that truth, beauty and goodness which is higher than the immediate ego or self. In his exposition of the doctrine of the Intellect in Plotinus, Beierwaltes lays weight upon the principles of absolute value: 'Truth', 'Wisdom', 'Beauty', 'Loving Union' as aspects of the Intellect. This is both an epistemological and an ethical thesis. The empirical world is in certain respects obscure and refractory. The frailty of the human epistemic capacities is such that mere correlation can be confused with causation or statistical coincidences can seem like laws of nature. The mind is prone, as both Plato and Bacon insist, to 'idols'. The capacity of the mind to penetrate the veil of appearances, if reality (the world of value and fact) is not the product of human contrivance, and the very confidence that science and ethics are possible, relies upon the conviction that the human mind is attuned to the design of the universe by its Maker.

Owen Barfield once observed that: 'Words are only themselves by being more than themselves. Perhaps the same thing is true of human beings.'⁴⁰ The point is that as mere sounds or characters they have little significance, it is because of what the words convey that they have power. And perhaps the same is true of human beings. We indeed are merely hairless apes languishing Pascal's dismal 'eternal silence of the infinite spaces' of the universe. And yet the articulation of sound and form is also the summoning of the Logos that was begotten not made, and that very pattern by which, according to the Gospel of John, all things have been created.

6 Realising the Image

Werner Beierwaltes spent his adult life studying Platonic and Neoplatonic texts. These are texts that he approached as a live philosophical option, not merely as an exposition and exploration of ideas in Plato that came to be developed in the Neoplatonists and exerted an influence on Christian thought and German Idealism. Without ever posturing about his metaphysical commitments, and harbouring a deep suspicion about philosophical dogmatism, Beierwaltes' oeuvre is committed to a particular vision of philosophy.

One might crudely distinguish between three philosophical approaches to reality: Affirmation, Renunciation and Participation. The first position endorses the world; the second renounces the world; the third views the world as a stage of redemption and renewal.

⁴⁰ Barfield (2013), 193.

1. The affirmation of the world. Beierwaltes grew up during the dark days of oppression and war in Germany, and upon becoming a university teacher he encountered the turbulence and frenzy of the student riots. He could not accept the view presented by philosophers such as Protagoras, Hobbes, Spinoza or the *amor fati* of Nietzsche that the world we encounter should be affirmed as it appears, vexing and rebarbative, full of violence and injustice.
2. Renunciation. Yet nor could Beierwaltes accept the ethics of resignation and renunciation: the idea that the world we encounter should be renounced in favour of an approach of forbearance and compassion. If Beierwaltes is sympathetic to the term 'mysticism', it is not because he wished to deny the gap between the 'is' and the 'ought'. Nor would he endorse the melancholy code of the proud Stoics. The growing popularity of Buddhism in the West, from Schopenhauer and Wagner to the American counterculture, perhaps reflects this option of resignation.
3. The metaphysics of Beierwaltes is neither *amor fati* nor Stoic renunciation, but one of Participation. Lying behind his magisterial overview and analysis of the great Platonic-Neoplatonic-Idealistic strand of Western thought rests the conviction that the world we encounter is an imperfect image of its transcendent archetype. We can reckon on this model of reality presented by Plotinus and St Paul that the world contains real enigmas and real obscurity; yet we should also expect intimation and tokens of the One, and reflections of the eternal Logos that pervades the phenomena of experience. Piety, on this model, is not the adversary of philosophical cognition. Beierwaltes referred to both the metaphysics and the ethics as *Realisierung des Bildes*. The visible world is a theophany: our senses are neither sundered from the sensible nor the intelligible worlds.

I remember visits to Würzburg at the end of his life, and the delight that Werner Beierwaltes exhibited in showing me the magnificent palace and the chapel in the residence with its sacral baroque. I recall his pleasure in the midst of the great fresco of Tiepolo of the four continents, and remember his account of how close to destruction this artwork had been through the bombing raids of the Second World War. There were buildings that evoke the sense of the drama, exuberance, and grandeur of the Love that moves the sun and other stars. A scene of worldly magnificence; yet betokening a reality beyond the material cosmos.

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