

## **Pre-modern Approaches to Postmodernity: Recentering Ethics and Aesthetics in Thomas Mann, Alisdair MacIntyre and Hans Urs von Balthasar**

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In this paper I shall discuss how three writers have sought to reestablish ethics (in the case of MacIntyre), or ethics and aesthetics (in the cases of Mann and Balthasar), after what they see as the failure or collapse of modernity, envisioning a new philosophical-cultural foundation, but they have done this outside the scope of postmodernity as usually understood. I shall argue that rather than subverting modernity while retaining many of its assumptions, as in the postmodern, they have rather sought to revive versions of the pre-modern, but differing from the pre-modern to the extent of including an awareness of what modernity has been, an awareness unavailable to those who preceded modernity. What the approaches of these writers have in common, as well as a looking back to the pre-modern for a solution to the problems of the modern, is the advocating of approaches which cancel the marginalization from which ethics and aesthetics may be argued to suffer from in many modern philosophical approaches, compared with the centralization of ontology or epistemology, understood in terms of language and logic. Each of these writers, in different ways, proposes a philosophical framework which ties ethics, or ethics and aesthetics, into the ontological foundation. I shall start by discussing how those modern approaches which view truth as attainable centralize logic and find ethics and aesthetics problematic. I shall then discuss how in postmodernism logic is destabilized but ethics and aesthetics are not thereby centered. After that I shall describe, in turn, how Mann, MacIntyre and Balthasar seek to replace what they see as the collapsed foundation of modernity with a new foundation inspired by pre-modern antecedents.

The different strands of modern philosophy tend to have in common two principal features, namely, the attempt to find a foundation for thought without relying on a dimension religious-metaphysical revelation, and an understanding of reason as a form of logic as close to the mathematical as possible, rejecting the Aristotelian logic of the Middle Ages. Whereas some thinkers of modernity have come to doubt whether there is any access to objective truth, and in this way have given a powerful impulse to the postmodern position, those who have viewed some understanding of truth as possible have understood truth as primarily accessible by means of verifiable logical statements, and the linguistic aspect of this has been emphasized increasingly as modern philosophy has developed. It has been found to be more difficult to explain in logical terms statements of obligation or statements on beauty than empirically verifiable statements or statements which are internally logically consistent. The beginnings of this privileging of the epistemological and problematization of ethics and aesthetics can already be seen in Kant, who divides the field of philosophy into three, and deals with epistemology first in his major trilogy. While Kant does try to find ways of providing a foundation for ethics and aesthetics in terms of the understanding of reason which he has established in the first volume of his trilogy, later on, in positivism, any statements which are not empirically verifiable, or internally logically consistent (truisms), are regarded as nonsense. Habermas in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* explicitly discusses the division of the field of reason in modernity into science (the cognitive-instrumental), art (the aesthetic-expressive) and morals (the moral-practical), and expresses his regret at this division, and his hope that philosophy can mediate between the spheres, but the solution he offers, based on his idea of communicative action, which in turn rests on

universal consent to logical statements, still results in ethics and aesthetics being subordinate to logic (as H. Fairlamb has argued in *Critical Conditions: Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*).

The group of philosophies known as postmodernism, while owing much to Nietzsche's understanding of truth claims as being nothing but expressions of the will to power, are also crucially indebted to Derrida's subverting of Saussure's conception of language as structure. While Saussure's linguistic structure fits in well with other modern conceptions of language, treating language as an object which can be studied scientifically, even empirically, Derrida produces a postmodern conception by taking an aspect of Saussure's theory and extending it beyond the point envisioned by Saussure. That is, he takes the concept of negative definition in Saussure, whereby any term in the structure can only be defined by contrast with other terms, not through any positive quality of its own, and makes the point that any other term by which the first term one seeks to define might be defined also lacks any positive qualities, and is dependent on other, not in themselves defined, terms. Therefore when one seeks to define a term, the arrival at a definition is always deferred, and never arrived at. I would argue that this destabilizing of the structure of language-logic is nevertheless not so much a decentering as an unhinging, and the structure still floats at the centre, not providing any definable terms, but providing the unstable framework against which any element which is not part of the framework, such as the drives or 'chora' proposed by Julia Kristeva, reacts and is therefore shaped by. Whereas there may be a strong desire to see the unframed oppositional elements to the structure of language-logic as being ethical, this identification cannot be affirmed within the terms of postmodernism, as any positive ethical assertion will be categorized as part of the language structure and revealing a will to power and not truth, while the anarchic drives outside the system cannot be reduced to any positive affirmation.

In discussing Thomas Mann I shall concentrate on his novel *Doktor Faustus*. *Doktor Faustus* was one of Thomas Mann's later novels, written against the background of the unfolding of the Second World War, especially its closing stages. In it he describes the career of a fictional avant-garde composer, Adrian Leverkühn, while through discussions involving Leverkühn and other characters, including his friend and helper, the humanist Septimus Zeitblom, Thomas Mann hints at a decline in Western civilization since the time of the Reformation, one which Mann controversially suggests is helped on its way by innovating figures such as for example, Beethoven, and his own character, Leverkühn. What Mann shows the most innovative and revolutionary figures in the arts doing is gradually destroying the conventions on which the arts rest by producing the ultimate form of each genre, which then cancels the possibility of all further development in that genre, and makes it unavailable as a creative possibility for posterity. Mann analyses the development further by proposing that the modern artist sunders the realms of the rational and the emotional, which were united in a humanist past, and thereby produces extreme forms of both, which are nevertheless humanly impoverished, rationality becoming a mechanical, mathematical logic, and the emotions becoming a wild explosion of untamed drives. In terms of Leverkühn's artistic production the final stage, which wraps up the entire tradition of Western classical music, according to the novel, is a piece, 'Doctor Fausti Weheklag', which combines a rigid mathematical form with an expression of raw lamentation. Mann is thinking of Schönberg's twelve-tone serialism when he describes this imaginary piece. Throughout the novel artistic and social developments are presented in parallel, in a way which suggests that cognate developments are in progress in each sphere, so the destruction of humanistic

traditions and the sundering of the connection between the rational and the emotional, a connection which in Mann's view is the foundation of humanism, spell not only the end for the possibility of producing a work of art, but also the end for society.

Towards the end of the novel, Leverkühn, at the brink of going mad, calls a group of friends and admirers together for a preview of his last piece, of which he is to perform an extract on the piano, but instead of beginning with the performance he starts a speech, in archaic language, reminiscent of the speech of Dr. Faustus in the renaissance Faust legend, at the end of which he collapses, and never recovers sanity. I believe that this speech is the key to the novel - Mann shows Leverkühn apologising for his innovative but, according to the novel, destructive, musical career, as if it was a sin, and while he implies that he has been arrogant in turning to extravagant and spectacular solutions to the artistic crisis of the times, Leverkühn makes a hint at what he should have done instead: he should have sought a way of finding a ground and space for the work of art to be able to thrive, and for human society to become better ('Denn es heißt: Seid nüchtern und wachet! Das ist aber manches Sache nicht, sondern, statt klug zu sorgen, was vonnöten auf Erden, damit es dort besser werde, und besonnen dazu zu tun, daß unter den Menschen solche Ordnung sich herstelle, die dem schönen Werk wieder Lebensgrund und ein redlich Hineinpassen bereiten, läuft wohl der Mensch hinter die Schuld und bricht aus in höllische Trunkenheit: so gibt er sein Seel daran und kommt an den Schindwasen.') So, although this novel is mainly about what has gone wrong with modernity, the hint is there that a re-founding of culture is necessary, the re-establishing a humanistic ground on the basis of which artistic and social developments can grow anew. While during the novel the church-dominated period of the Middle Ages is talked of with approval as a humanistic period, what exactly Mann's re-founded culture would look like is not discussed further, but some sense of what he had in mind may be provided by other later works of his, especially from the *Joseph* novels and from *Der Erwählte*. In the *Joseph* novels Mann retells the story of Joseph and his brothers from the Old Testament at great length, enlarging on the psychology of the characters, and also reflecting on history, comparing the contemporary (with Mann) reader's view of Joseph with Joseph's own view of earlier legends. Mann seems to be trying to make the story of Joseph available to the reader of Mann's time through a layer of self-consciousness and questioning which nevertheless confirms the story's value rather than undermining it. In *Der Erwählte*, telling the tale of a man of the Middle Ages who commits incest but later becomes pope, Mann with quite strong but affectionate irony affirms the humanity of the concept of forgiveness in the medieval church, while creating a distance meant to allow readers contemporary with Mann scope for the self-consciousness and reflectivity through which they can approach the story seriously, and not automatically dismiss it as naive. I do not believe that the irony is meant as destructive parody, a stage which Leverkühn passes through in his creativity in *Doktor Faustus* before reaching his formalistic end stage. So Mann in these novels is I believe experimenting in an attempt to re-found literature by rehabilitating the pre-modern cultural foundation, while making it accessible to and credible for the reader who has been through modernity by showing it though a layer of irony and self-consciousness which affirms its value while allowing for less literal and direct interpretations of the stories than they may have received from pre-modern readers, or hearers.

Alisdair MacIntyre, from the point of view of moral philosophy, also views modernity as having developed towards catastrophe, and describes this catastrophe in dramatic terms in his 1981 book *After Virtue*, in which he claims that moral discourse

at the time of his writing consists of the incoherent use of fragments of a previously coherent moral system, without any understanding of the former meaning of these fragments, or even an appreciation that they no longer carry the same meaning as they did when part of a coherent system. MacIntyre believes that the theistic-Aristotelian moral system of antiquity and the Middle Ages had coherence, and allowed for objective moral reasoning, but that after the Middle Ages the two sustaining ideas of the system, at least one of which is necessary for it to be viable, have been discarded. These sustaining ideas are the Aristotelian understanding of the *telos* of man, and the idea the divine law. The Enlightenment, according to MacIntyre, was characterised by a series of unsuccessful attempts to preserve the possibility of objective moral reasoning without the bases it rested on in the theistic-Aristotelian system. He discusses, for example, Kant's attempt to found moral reasoning on universal reason, Hume's attempt to found it on the passions, and Kierkegaard's to found it on the idea of fundamental choice, but finds that none of these approaches, nor any later ones, succeed in giving moral discourse an objective basis which would make moral reasoning possible. In MacIntyre's view these failed attempts lead to a situation in the late twentieth century in which the theory of emotivism accurately describes how moral arguments have come to be used: that is, any moral argument employed, while the language it is framed in claims objectivity, is in fact grounded on an irrational choice of the speaker. Emotivism is actually put forward as a theory of the grounds of any moral discourse at any period, but MacIntyre insists that it only describes what moral discourse has become by the latter stages of the modern period, and that in fact moral discourse can be, and has been, objectively rationally grounded. MacIntyre believes that developments in philosophy are always accompanied by effects in society, and see the effects of emotivism as a society dominated by managers and therapists seeking to extend their power through the use of moral fictions.

As can be seen from the above, MacIntyre, like Mann in *Doktor Faustus*, sees the time of coherence as the pre-modern period, and his recommendation for the solution of modern disjunctions is a return to the basis of the moral system which worked before modernity. Having shown how moral reasoning needs concepts which were rejected at an early stage of modernity, and which the many attempts to replace them during the modern period failed to replace, and were bound to fail to replace, MacIntyre proposes a continuation of the Aristotelian ethical tradition of the virtues as the way to restore rational moral discourse, the virtues being those qualities necessary to allow humans to achieve their *telos*. A renewed development of this tradition would of course include an awareness of what had happened to moral discourse during the modern period. It also involves a renewal of Aristotelian logic, which, in allowing for final causes, brings the idea of the *telos* of an entity, including a human, into the basic ontological understanding of what it is. Therefore the dimension which supports ethics is contained inside ontology, and ethics is relieved of the marginal and problematic status which it receives in many modern accounts.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, the theologian, was writing at a time, during the twentieth century, when many other Catholic theologians were looking for ways of approaching modernity, and in some cases, such as for example, Karl Rahner, evaluating it positively. Balthasar however insisted that the project of modernity was a mistake, and elaborated an approach to theology which, while distinguishable from the version of Thomism taught in the seminaries in which he was trained, which he found lacking in inspiration, was also conceived of as a response and alternative to modernity. Balthasar, like Mann and MacIntyre, took inspiration from the pre-modern

period, in his case from Fathers of the early Church, bringing into his own writings some of their mystical and Platonic emphases.

Balthasar is particularly known for his multi-volume trilogy on theology, which includes considerable philosophical and literary content, and which he divides into three sections, first aesthetics, second ethics, and third ontology, self-consciously reversing Kant's order. These sections are called 'The Glory of the Lord' (Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik), 'Theo-Drama' (Theo-dramatik) and 'Theo-Logic' (Theologik), and the originals were brought out between 1961 and 1987. He finishes the series with an 'Epilogue' (Epilog). For Balthasar, the qualities of the beautiful, the good, and the true, corresponding to aesthetics, ethics, and ontology/epistemology, are transcendentals, involved in all Being, and intimately linked together. He also describes the beautiful, the good and the true as 'self-showing', 'self-giving' and 'self-saying', and of these three 'self-showing' is the most basic to the extent that it is characteristic even of inanimate beings, whereas living beings are also characterized by 'self-giving', and humans additionally by 'self-saying'. Self-showing consists of a self-revelation which is like the irradiation of a light, and is analogous to God's 'kenosis', or self-emptying in revelation. So for Balthasar the being of even something inanimate is a dynamic process, not a static fact as in modern ontology. 'Self-giving' is an offering of oneself, also analogous to divine characteristics, and associated with living beings, so less basic, but more complex, than self-showing. 'Self-saying' is at the apex in terms of development, but the least basic of the transcendentals, being achieved by beings with spirit, such as humans, and, like the other transcendentals, analogous to aspects of divine life.

Balthasar puts together a theological-philosophical foundation, which while firmly based on pre-modern models, especially the Platonism of the early Church Fathers, but not rejecting later Aristotelianism, at the same time embodies a self-conscious offering of an alternative to modern conceptions. Thus at the same time as considering modernity as a wrong turning, it takes a form which it would not have taken without the fact of modernity having happened for it to refer to. At the same time it takes aesthetics and ethics into the heart of a dynamic model of ontology, cancelling the marginal status they are vulnerable to in modernity.

To emphasize what these three writers have in common, they all react to modernity by finding it to be a wrong turning, and draw their inspiration for a new foundation which they wish to lay from a vision of a pre-modern foundation. In each case the revived pre-modern foundation which they propose for after modernity is enriched by the inclusion of an awareness of what modernity has been, an element unavailable to the pre-modern models. In each case they reverse the tendency of many modern philosophical approaches to find ethics and aesthetics more problematic than ontology-epistemology, and in the case of MacIntyre and Balthasar, include ethics, or ethics and aesthetics into a dynamic ontological core. Mann is less philosophically explicit, but his idea seems analogous, though much less worked out in detail. I think that taken together, these approaches, and of course many others, add up to gradual setting up of a project, one which is post-modern in the sense of being after modernity and formed through an awareness of modernity, but which is an alternative to that postmodernist project based on Nietzschean and poststructuralist ideas. As a project it has a chance of deproblematizing ethics after modernity, through its positing of a dynamic ontological framework which can accommodate a dimension of human purpose. The Nietzschean-poststructuralist project may be unable to achieve this deproblematization of ethics, due to the impossibility of truth claims which is internal to the theory.

