2017

A Disease of Being: The Ontological Status of Sin in the Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Craig W. Giandomenico ThD
La Salle University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/religion_thd

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/religion_thd/8

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Th.D. Dissertations by an authorized administrator of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.
A DISEASE OF BEING:
THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF SIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF HANS URS VON
BALTHASAR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

BY
CRAIG W. GIANDOMENICO

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA
November 2017
DISSERTATION READERS

DR. JORDAN COPELAND, PhD (ADVISOR)

FR. FRANCIS BERNA, PhD

DR. ANTHONY PAUL SMITH, PhD
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation, and the whole of the work done towards this degree, are inconceivable without the many loved ones, friends, mentors, and colleagues that provided me with both personal and academic support.

First and foremost, I thank my wife, Autumn McClintock, for her constant encouragement in this endeavor and for the many acts of selfless, practical help, without which, neither this dissertation nor my sanity would remain intact.

For being raised in a home of parents and siblings that encouraged theological discussion and academic pursuits, I am deeply thankful – especially for my mother, one of the finest theologians I’ve had the honor of studying under.

Finally, a deep debt is happily acknowledged to my mentors, teachers, professors and colleagues in the La Salle University Department of Religion and Theology. You have all, in your individual ways, made this possible. In a special manner, I’d like to acknowledge the following: my advisor, Dr. Jordan Copeland, for his willingness to work with me over these past four years and to offer insightful direction at each step; Dr. Anthony Paul Smith, for introducing me to the work of several philosophers and theologians who have greatly influenced my understanding of the topic at hand; and, finally and most significantly, Fr. Francis Berna, PhD., who has been, both personally and professionally, an endless source of inspiration, encouragement, and wisdom.
“It is uncertain how the Faun came to be in Wiltshire. Perhaps he came over with the Roman legionaries to live with his friends in camp, talking to them of Lucretilis, or Garganus or of the slopes of Etna; they in the joy of their recall forgot to take him on board, and he wept in exile; but at last he found that our hills also understood his sorrows, and rejoiced when he was happy. Or perhaps he came to be there because he had been there always.”

“The Curate’s Friend”, E.M. Forester, 1911
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRONOLOGY OF BALTHASAR’S MAJOR WRITINGS ON SOTERIOLOGY</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. THE CONTEXT OF BALTHASAR’S LIFE, WORK AND RECEPTION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. BALTHASAR AND THE PRIVATIVE TRADITION</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. BALTHASAR AND THE INFLUENCE OF PAULINE “MYSTICAL REALISM”</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. THE <em>A PRIORI</em> CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR SUBSTANTIAL SIN’S EXISTENCE – PRIMORDIAL CHAOS AND BARTHIAN NOTHINGNESS</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. THE <em>A POSTERIORI</em> MECHANISM OF SUBSTANTIAL SIN’S INSTANTIATION – SCHELLING’S FREEDOM AND BLONDEL’S ACTION</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### CHRONOLOGY OF BALTHASAR’S MAJOR WRITINGS ON SOTERIOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Title</th>
<th>Original Publication Date/English-language Publication Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirit &amp; Fire: Origen – A Thematic Anthology of His Writings</td>
<td>1938/1984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor</td>
<td>1941/1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms</td>
<td>1943/1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heart of the World</td>
<td>1945/1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Theology of History</td>
<td>1950/1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Theology of Karl Barth</td>
<td>1951/1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>1955/1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love Alone is Credible</td>
<td>1963/2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mysterium Paschale 1969/2000


To The Heart of the Mystery of Redemption 1977/2010


The Threefold Garland: The World’s Salvation in Mary’s Prayer 1978/1985


The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies (Anthology) 1981/1990

You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Sermons through The Liturgical Year 1982/1989


Life out of Death: Meditations on the Easter Mystery 1985/2012


Explorations in Theology: Volume V – Man is Created 1986/2014

Dare We Hope “That All Men be Saved”? — With a Short Discourse on Hell 1986/1989


Epilogue 1987/2004

INTRODUCTION

The theological project of Hans Urs von Balthasar contains elements of speculation that give the contemporary theologian pause. This is no great secret. Mention of his name in a group of theologians will produce as many raised eyebrows as enthusiastic nods. Even in the very act of defending his orthodoxy, some of his most ardent expositors acknowledge that, much like one of his professed Patristic masters, Origen, Balthasar was raising issues within Catholic theology that had either gone unexplored or lain dormant for centuries, and in doing so, he was not concerned with proposing (imposing) any necessary systematic presentation of them. In fact, as will be outlined in the first chapter, his antipathy toward most attempts at “systematizing” the mysteries of the Faith is a well-documented aspect of his work, theological-style, and career. Instead of a system, the bulk of Balthasar’s work seeks to delineate and explore various theological themes mined and catalogued in an act of Ressourcement:

There are any number of theses deserving of development which the Fathers initiated, and which, subsequently, as theology became systematized, were held unsuitable, unimportant, and so left in abeyance; a process of exclusion carried further, and with rapidity, in Scholasticism from the late Middle Ages to the present.

---

1 “Were I to be asked which of my own books gives me the greatest joy [...] the answer would be, without doubt, my Origen anthology. For in Origen I discovered that brilliant sense of what is Catholic which I myself would like to attain.” My Work in Retrospect. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 108-109. The anthology to which he refers, Spirit and Fire – Origen: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings, begins with a fitting epigraph by the subject that could be applied just as well to some of Balthasar’s own work in speculative theology: “I want to be a man of the Church. I do not want to be called by the name of some founder of a heresy [...] if I become a scandal to you, the Church, then may the whole Church, in unanimous resolve, cut me off and throw me away.” Origen: Spirit & Fire – A Thematic Anthology of His Writings. Translated by Brian Daly. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1984).

What is especially interesting to the scholar of these more speculative elements of his oeuvre is discovering one common thesis, picking up the thread, and following it on its course of winding development, through the varied lenses of his many volumes. I here submit that the subject of sin’s ontological weight, its substance, the very quiddity of the morally evil, is one such repeated motif in a theologian whose work is often dubbed “symphonic.”

Whether in the abstract or the mundane, the issue of sin’s substantiality appears as clearly central to many of the speculative ideas Balthasar explored. These encompass themes as far reaching (but as deeply intertwined), as his theology of the Trinity, with his focus on the eternal “risk” involved in the Father’s act of allowing the existence of the “Other” (the Son), through to a soteriology, wherein the Incarnate Son assumes a substantially real burden of sin (abstracted from the sinner), and finally on, into his deeply divisive interpretation of the destruction of said sin by way of Christ’s removal of its whole during his descent into Hell. In all these areas of theology, Trinitarian, Christological, and Soteriological, we find Balthasar, proposing bold notions on the nature of moral evil. This is all the more striking given the way in which he speaks of sin. Balthasar does not employ the normative, Augustinian grammar of privation. To be clear, this is not to say that Balthasar offers any alternative theodicy to the Augustinian, or any other, theodicy in the traditional understanding of that word (as literal “God-Defense”). While the issue of the origin/cause of evil is certainly touched on in the course of his wide reaching speculation, Balthasar’s exploration of these issues is more interested in a tentative construction of an ontology of evil, one in which the nature and essence of this tragic substance is better understood (though never comprehensively)
because it is better defined. If granted the metaphysical or theological “permission” to possess a substantial nature, one that gives full weight to the events of the Paschal Mystery, sung of in the ancient liturgical acclamation: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*, Balthasar believed that we could better understand what our atonement entailed.

In normative Christian theology, sin (often expressed liturgically as “the sin of the world”) *exists*, at least in the language used to speak of one crucial instance, in the state of its salvific transference, from one subject to another: the Paschal Mystery. In as much as this act alone supports some measure of exploration into sin’s ubiety, it also, to that extent, justifies an exploration into sin’s *substantiality*. Ubiety, after all, is a particular property of a substance – the act of possessing a location. This medieval term, originally used by Scholastic philosophers to help understand how angels, spiritual substances, interacted with a world of physical substance, is also at work in this type of soteriological language. Substances, in Thomistic thought, are able to exist without depending on a relationship with, or in, another substance, which is to say that they are not merely *accidents* of another substance but possess some measure of subsistence.³ As will become clear, one of the major arguments of this study, outlined in both Chapter 2 and the Epilogue, focuses on the lack of a working metaphysical taxonomy with which to speak meaningfully of sin. If it does not possess substance, or is merely accidental via

³ "An Individual thing is a substance because it underlies (substands) accidents […]. Subsistence is not identical with substance, [but] a thing has subsistence if, unlike an accident, it does not need a subject in which to exist." Armand A. Maurer. *Medieval Philosophy.* (Toronto, ON: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982), pg. 31.

I have chosen, for this study, to use the term “substance”, as opposed to “subsistence”, as the former implies more of a reification of the subject at hand than the latter, and to that extent, better accords with the language of Balthasar, as will become clear in the passages of his that follow.
privation in another subject, how do we account for our Scriptural and Liturgical language surrounding the *sacrum commercium*?4

Mention of the disparity between Balthasar and the “traditional” Augustinian denial of sin’s “substantiality” made a peripheral appearance in 2006-7, when a particularly heated exchange began in the pages of *First Things* over the larger issue of the orthodoxy of the soteriology of Balthasar.5 The first salvo sounded from an unexpected source: a recent recipient of a doctoral degree from the Vatican’s Angelicum, Alyssa Pitstick. Her scholarship, which was to be published in 2007 as *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell*, was extremely critical of Balthasar’s theologoumenon on the salvific value of Christ’s Descent into Hell, as well as openly suspicious of what these perceived soteriological innovations also said about his Christology, Trinitarian orthodoxy, and ultimately therefore, his trustworthiness as an ecclesial theologian.6 If the source was unexpected (a new voice representing a conservative, Neo-Scholastic-driven distrust of Balthasar, in spite of his established reputation as a papal favorite), the place of attack was equally surprising. *First Things* had been a regular outlet for one the foremost English-language Balthasarian scholars, the late Edward T. Oakes, SJ. While disagreeing

4 The *sacrum (or admirable) commercium* is probably best defined by one of its earliest expressions, Athanasius of Alexandria’s statement that “the Son of God became man so that we might become God”, *De Incarnatione*: 54.3.

5 The term “traditional”, both here and throughout the course of the present study, should not be confused with “Tradition” in the Catholic sense of dogmatic definition by way of implicit or explicit Magisterial teaching; instead, it should only designate the majority, or normative, approach – if one exists in an particular instance (i.e. privation models of sin) – among Catholic theologians, past and present.

with many of Pitstick’s conclusions, it is not my intention here (within this Introduction, or within the body of the present study) to address her particular criticisms of Balthasar. Instead, mention of her exchange with Oakes is made in order to highlight one thing that both scholars seem to agree on: Balthasar was certainly proposing something unusual in the way he wrote about sin.

During her original entry, Pitstick mentions the concept of our direct concern, Balthasar’s granting of a realism to sin, at least in the moments comprising the Passion, that borders on ubiety:

The received Catholic theological tradition holds that Christ’s death on the cross was satisfactory in virtue of the preeminent qualities of his person, that is, his divine excellence and his perfect charity. In contrast, Balthasar’s soteriology of Christ’s descent depends on quantitative penal substitution: In the place of all sinners, Christ suffers the punishment for all sins. *Humanity is redeemed by Christ’s cross insofar as the guilt of all sins is actually transferred to him there*, but these sins remain to be expiated in Sheol through his suffering their punishment in place of the sinners who deserved it.\(^7\)

While disagreeing with the first half of this statement as to what actually consists of the “theological tradition” regarding atonement, there is no arguing with the second half, with her assessment of Balthasar’s most central conception of the workings of that atonement, *vis a vi* sin.

---

And in the course of Oakes’ first response to Pitstick, while heartily defending the orthodoxy of Balthasar on the larger issue of the salvific value of the Descent, this same Balthasarian conception of sin is presented with all its idiosyncrasies acknowledged:

Hans Urs von Balthasar is a disturbing theologian. Even among some of his most vocal enthusiasts, he seems ‘not quite right.’ [...] And surely the central reason for that uneasiness is Balthasar’s claim that Christ descended into the depths of hell in order to rescue, at least potentially, all [...] Since Christ is “literally ‘made sin’” in Sheol, Balthasar thinks that sin is something like a substantial reality due to the energy invested in it by the sinner. 8

Returning to this issue, in the most definitive presentation of it in her aforementioned monograph, Pitstick summarizes the situation as follows:

Balthasar characterizes Christ’s experience in Sheol in two ways: in one, he stresses hell as the absence of the presence of God; in the other, he emphasizes the visio mortis of Sheol [...]. Setting aside any questions about the nature of being, not being, and the contrary of being, the unity of the two approaches might be expressed thus: where God is not, there is what-is-not God, in the sense of what-is-contrary-to God.9

In short, it is exactly the metaphysical concerns that Pitstick set aside that I would like to take up and explore in no little detail. This is especially necessary in light of the traditional Catholic (Augustinian and Thomistic) understanding of sin as a privation or defect, possessing no ontological value of its own. How does Balthasar’s soteriology work within this non-traditional paradigm? Even if he resisted the idea of a systematic

8 Ibid. Emphasis, mine.
9 Alyssa Pitstick, Light in Darkness, 100. Emphasis, mine.
theology, does he present a coherent position on the subject of sin’s potential substance in the major works that comprise his soteriology? If so, what does he say of its quiddity? What of its pathology? It is to these questions that this work devotes itself.

However, as the foregoing Pitstick-Oakes debate demonstrates, the issue of sin’s substantiality is deeply embedded in several other theological and philosophical concerns. With this in mind, it is worth stressing that, however much they may employ many of the same subjects in pursuits of different objectives, this study should not be read as concerning itself with questions of Theodicy (i.e. with the human condition/problem of evil). Nor should the following be read as Harmitology, those Biblically-based attempts to define the workings of sin within the individual human soul, perhaps best exemplified by the first chapter of Romans, where Paul presents an examination of the cause and effect of idolatry, or the third chapter of James, wherein one finds a similar treatment of slander and gossip. Finally, it most certainly should not be read as an attempt to present a Moral Theology of Balthasar, outlining his understanding of Christian virtues in need of cultivation and vices in need of avoidance. Instead, I present this work as an attempt to construct a metaphysic of evil in Balthasar’s work, with a particular eye to questions of ontology. Further, I propose to undertake this effort in two principle ways: first, via exegesis of the central Balthasarian texts that bear upon the substantiality of sin (and in the process, demonstrating their coherence as a whole) and secondly, to propose central theological, philosophical, and personal influences on Balthasar that will help contextualize such passages (and the larger whole to which they contribute).
Therefore, having proposed that in contradiction to the normative Catholic theological tradition on the privative nature of sin, key Balthasarian texts speak of sin that possesses substance, it will be my intention to explore the issue in the following way:

In **Chapter One**, I provide the context necessary to demonstrate what this present study brings to the ever-growing field of Balthasarian studies. This will be done primarily in two ways: first, by briefly outlining the ecclesial reception of Balthasar and his theology, and secondly, by exploring some of the posthumous English-language efforts to present his work as a whole, as a unified theological-project. From this baseline, I'll look briefly at those few works that have attempted to evaluate, in particular, his conception of evil.

Having determined that those few works that do look at this aspect of Balthasar’s work all tend to avoid ontological engagement, **Chapter Two** will consider one of the reasons for this: the perceived binding nature of the Augustinian theological norm of privation. In light of this perception, it will become necessary to explore the origins of Augustine’s anti-substantiality stance and to look at those passages from Balthasar’s corpus that deal directly with Augustine and this issue.

**Chapter Three** will explore what conception of sin Balthasar proposes in the wake of his rejection of the Augustinian tradition, with a close reading of his major forays into an ontology of sin, as they appear in his life-long engagement with explicating the event and effects of the Passion. Doing so will reveal Balthasar’s indebtedness to a very particular language of “mystical realism,” mined from his scholarship in Pauline exegesis and Patristic thought.
Having established the substantiality of sin witnessed to in the Paschal mystery, **Chapter Four** will explore the major philosophical and theological *a priori* concepts that allowed for Balthasar’s development of a notion of substantial sin, primarily ideas of primordial chaos and Barthian nothingness.\(^{10}\) **Chapter Five** will then proceed to examine the *a posteriori* mechanisms of this substantial sin’s instantiation in humanity, revealing Balthasar’s deep debt to both F.W.J Schelling’s work in the area of human freedom and Maurice’s Blondel’s philosophy of action.

Finally, in a short **Epilogue** undertaken in the manner of Balthasar’s own theopoetic tendencies, I hope to bring all of these considerations together into a “pathology” of ontological sin, using an oncological metaphor that lends it the metaphysical language its tragic existence demands.

---

\(^{10}\) Throughout the course of this work, the term “*a priori*” will be used in its normative fashion within philosophical discourse as referring to those arguments based on deduction from a set of previously established (literally, “*before the fact*”) philosophical and theological conditions. Likewise, “*a posteriori*”, will be used throughout to refer to those arguments drawn from mundane experience (literally, “*after the fact*”).
CHAPTER ONE
The Context of Balthasar’s Life, Work & Reception

In undertaking an introduction to the life and work of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1929-1989), the historian of theology is immediately met with three major challenges. In the first instance, she must come to terms with the sheer size and scope of this one man’s writing, witnessed to by a bibliography running to 174 pages, with more than 80 monographs, and well over 100 journal articles. Room must also, of course, be made for the primary work of a priest who never rose in ecclesial ordination or rank beyond parish pastor: that is, hundreds of homilies and sermons, both those collected for publication and the bulk that remain unreleased. Representative of and in many ways crowning this prodigious and oft-times overwhelming catalogue looms what has come to be known as his Trilogy (or Triptych). This 15-part work represents Balthasar’s life-long exploration of the central mysteries of Christianity through the prism of the transcendental (ontologically coextensive) properties of Being, including the Beautiful, represented by the 7 volumes of his Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, the Good represented by the 5 volumes of his Theo-Dramatics, and the True, represented by the three volumes of his Theo-Logic.

Secondly, despite Balthasar’s massive written output, and the corresponding effect it has had on Catholic theology over the past 60-plus years, the contemporary scholar will find little by way of biographical information with which to better contextualize such work; in fact, as of this writing, there remains no full-length, scholarly biography of the man behind such major contributions to the Catholica (despite, as will be shown, the many extraordinary circumstances just such a resource
would clarify). However, like almost all other English-language Balthasarian studies, given the limited needs on this subject for the purpose here, this lacuna will be filled as best as possible with recourse to a few remarks of his own as well as some preliminary sketches of his life, education, and ministry, as provided by his cousin, retired Auxiliary Bishop of Chur, Switzerland, and Professor Emeritus of apologetics at the Gregorian, Peter Henrici, SJ.  

Finally, a third challenge arises when, turning from Balthasar and his work, to the ever-growing field of critical scholarship on both, one is faced with more than a little polemic. At first glance, there appear to be no moderate opinions or options regarding Balthasar and his theological heritage. Mention of his name invites the extremes of reception. The late Edward T. Oakes, encountered in the First Things debate related in the Introduction, summarized this last challenge well when he wrote:

> Many liberal theologians see him as too conservative precisely for rooting his thought in the sources of the tradition, while on the other hand he is regarded with deep suspicion by many Catholics on the traditionalist right for his alleged innovations [...] Prescinding from these particular issues at least this much can be said about his relation to the past: unlike so many self-styled traditionalists, he actually knows the tradition.

However, what Oakes had to say here is by no means restricted to posthumous application. As the following brief overview of the contemporary reception of

---

11 The most comprehensive of these, though still frustratingly vague in details of childhood, family life, personality, etc., would be the following: Peter Henrici, SJ, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life” in Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work. Edited by David L. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 7-44.

Balthasar’s ministry and work will demonstrate, he was already quite *sui generis* in the conciliar generation of ecclesial polarization, spending time as both perceived theological revolutionary and perceived theological reactionary.

**A: Balthasar’s Ecclesial Reception**

**1- Balthasar as Progressive (1930’s – 1969)**

The man who would come to be considered by many the “court theologian” of three major post-conciliar pontificates (Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), actually spent the first 30 years of his ministry under a steadily growing cloud of ecclesial suspicion. Even his education and spiritual formation would have been seen as unusual for the time. After entering the Jesuit novitiate in 1929, having first obtained a doctorate in German literature, he became closely associated with two scholars who would remain his primary theological mentors for the rest of his life. These two fellow Jesuits were themselves regarded with a critical canonical eye for their own work, both driven in their respective fields, by a practice of actively engaging in a *Ressourcement* of Catholic thought before its entrenchment into an axiomatic, manual-bound, Neo-Scholasticism.

The first of these seminal influences was Erich Przywara (1889-1972), whose work in Thomism is only beginning to find an American audience after the first English-language translation of his magnum opus, *Analogia Entis*, in 2014. The title is telling of Przywara’s particular preoccupation within Thomistic metaphysics, a preoccupation

---

passed on to Balthasar and, subsequently into many of the latter’s works that will be used within this study: the analogy of being. This rejection of univocal and equivocal language concerning the relationship between Creator and creature, officially “canonized” at the 12th Ecumenical Council, Lateran IV, became a matter of no little contention among German-language theologians during the interwar years, with Przywara defending this Catholic principle during public debates with the great theologian of Neo-Orthodoxy in Protestantism, Karl Barth (1886-1968). After the close of World War II, when the conversation was able to resume, it was Balthasar who stepped into his master’s place in the debates, developing a life-long friendship with Barth.14 As will be explored in Chapter 4, besides leading to one of his earliest, popular publications, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, Balthasar discovered in Barth’s theology some of the conceptions that would lead to his formulation of sin possessing ontological substance.15

The second of the major theological influences on Balthasar’s development was another Jesuit who was causing quite a stir with his own *Ressourcement* of a central Thomistic conception. Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), who would outlive Balthasar by 3 years (famously remarking at the latter’s funeral that he was “undoubtedly the most cultured man in Europe”), had been under Ecclesial suspicion since his work in the great debate over the interaction of the supernatural and natural orders. This suspicion

---

14 This fascinating theological friendship has recently been documented in Stephen Long’s excellent *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

would continue to grow, until the promulgation of *Humani generis*, in 1950, which would result in the silencing of Lubac (as author and teacher) until he would see his theology become deeply embedded in the documents of The Second Vatican Council. It was not, however, this particular aspect of his work that would draw Balthasar into his circle when he arrived in Fourvière for further theological training; rather, it was Lubac’s commitment to a *Ressourcement* of patristic thought. Balthasar himself would attempt to define his own work in terms essentially drawn from this goal of the movement during this period:

> We proceed in the conviction that [...] we are recovering a certain stream of the tradition that, in modern times, especially in Christian thought, has become slack and formed peculiarly stagnant pools. Just compare the understanding of the Fathers [...] or the breadth and sovereign command with which an Aquinas could describe it, with the meager propositions that are the sum and substance of what contemporary manuals of Christian philosophy are able to serve up!\(^{16}\)

This movement, to make the primary texts of Thomas and pre-Thomistic theologians available to a general readership for the first time since Trent, resulted in three major patristic monographs by Balthasar (dealing, respectively, with Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor).\(^{17}\) While these works are absolutely central to a proper understanding of Balthasar’s own theology, it can be argued, however, that his introduction to other members of the *Ressourcement* circle and their respective areas of

---


scholarship were equally formative to his thought. It was during this time with Lubac that he was introduced to Jean Daniélou (1905-1974), and his groundbreaking work on archaic formulations of Jewish Christian theology, and Henri Bouillard (1908-1981), and his deep engagement with the philosophy of Maurice Blondel. As will be seen, in Chapters 4 and 5, both of these subjects became key to Balthasar’s conception of sin with ontological value.

Besides these personal oases of theological stimulation, Balthasar spoke of the 15 years of his Jesuit formation in stark terms. He once went so far as to describe the experience as follows:

> My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God. I could have lashed out with the fury of a Samson [...]. It really took Basel, especially the soothing goodness of the commentary on St. John to lead my aggressive will into true indifference.

The commentary referred to is an allusion to the longest work dictated to him by a woman he believed to be a contemplative and a mystic whom he had met in 1940 and who would change the course of his life, Ecclesial career, and theological reception. He

---


20 This study will not concern itself with the status of Adrienne von Speyr’s life, work, or private revelations. While there is good evidence that (St.) Pope John Paul II believed it to be both valid and worthy of study, even convening a Vatican sponsored symposium on the issue in 1985, little information exists as to the current ecclesial standing of von Speyr’s work. On this particular, if not peculiar, aspect of Balthasar’s theological development, the reader is directed first, to his own writings on the topic, primarily: *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981) and *Our Task: A Report and Plan* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

In addition, two scholarly articles have become central to the question of how to interpret Balthasar in light of the influence of von Speyr: Fergus Kerr’s "Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von
encountered Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967) during his first assignment, having been sent to act as student chaplain to the University of Basel, when she was seeking a priest to begin her reception into the Catholic Church in 1940. She soon confided in Fr. Balthasar that she had been the recipient of visions and mystic states since the early days of her Presbyterian upbringing. Within four years, Balthasar was taking daily dictation from her visions and experiences during these reported phenomena. At the heart of them, she believed she was being called (and Balthasar, through her) to begin the foundations for a lay order that would live in community, under the traditional evangelical counsels, to be called the Community of St. John (Johannesgemeinshaft).

As the visions and experiences (including reported stigmatization) continued in intensity, Balthasar officially asked his superiors in the order to assume the role of “ecclesial patron” of this community. After reviewing the request, The Jesuits refused in 1946. Balthasar, frustrated by this setback, proceeded to ask the order to officially review von Speyr’s private revelations and mystical experiences. Disappointment only increased when, in 1947, his superior announced that they would not, in fact, rule on the genuineness of her case, but instead encouraged Balthasar to leave his work with her and prepare for taking final vows. In order to deal with this profound decision, Balthasar made a long retreat during 1949, eventually coming to his decision to leave the Society of Jesus in 1950, in order to continue what he believed to be a genuine movement of the Spirit. He would comment on this troubling time, in his confession

that, “For me, the Society was of course a beloved homeland: the thought that one might have to ‘leave all’ more than once in a lifetime in order to follow the Lord, even an order, had never occurred to me, and struck me like a blow.”

With this decision to pursue the foundation of the Johannesgemeinshaft, and continue his daily work as theological secretary and spiritual guide to von Speyr, Balthasar officially entered into a period of canonical exile. While still a priest, he was now without a diocese, an order, or even a university post. Perhaps most importantly for the purpose of the arguments herein, this crucial moment in his life left his own theological writings, which continued to flow at a surprising rate, largely overlooked or outright ignored by his peers. In fact, one could say that Balthasar became largely overlooked and ignored by the institutional Church, even while gaining readers among its German-speaking ranks as he began a strenuous life of public lecturing. Of course, this theological rejection was most glaringly obvious in the fact that Balthasar, one of the foremost names in contemporary discussions of conciliar theology, was tellingly not invited to participate in any preparatory or session work of the most important theological event of his lifetime: the Second Vatican Council. His absence is all the more

---

21 Henrici, “A Sketch of His Life and Work”, 22.

conspicuous in light of how many of his theological friends and peers played such central roles there: Lubac, Daniélou, Rahner, Ratzinger, etc. Even the Protestant Barth had been invited to observe. This 15-20 year period of theological exile should not be forgotten by those who, today, automatically and anachronistically, assume that this seeming conservative, an eventual aid to the papacies of both (St.) John Paul II and, posthumously, Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI, had never experienced the role of perceived liberal, anti-Roman theologian.

2 - Balthasar as Court Theologian (1969-1988)

It is interesting to note that when the tide of opinion regarding Fr. Balthasar’s theology did begin to turn, it did so among non-Catholic sources. 1965 saw him win the Orthodox-based Golden Cross of Mount Athos Prize in theology, primarily for his work in Patristics. An honorary doctorate in Theology followed the same year from the Protestant University of Edinburgh. Finally, on the strength of his highly reviewed, newly collected essays (dedicated to a young Fr. Ratzinger), and on the publication of the first 3 volumes of the *Theological-Aesthetics*, two bulwarks of the German Catholic university system followed suit, with both Universities of Munster and Freiburg conferring similar honors. Finally, Roman attention to Fr. Balthasar, was caught, and in 1969, by appointment of Pope Paul VI, he joined the newly formed International Theological Commission, alongside the likes of Ratzinger and Rahner. Balthasar would hold this post, on the Commission convened to oversee questions raised in the wake of the perceived doctrinal changes of the Council and to advise – when called upon – the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, until his death, in 1988.
In the twenty years between his appointment to the Commission and his death, Balthasar’s theological reputation continued to grow at a rapid pace. Passing quickly by his 1984 reception of the inaugural Paul VI Prize in Theology, awarded by (St.) Pope John Paul II, one of the most telling signs of his theological reputation and influence, especially among the Curia and within the Apostolic Palace, remains the strange honor of being the only theologian quoted in an Apostolic Letter while still alive and actively writing. 23 1987’s Muleris dignitatem (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), the document largely seen as having introduced an official ban on women’s ordination into Magisterial-level teaching, quotes an essay of Balthasar’s in note 55, to Section 6, reading, “A contemporary theologian has rightly stated that Mary is ‘Queen of the Apostles without any pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers’ (H. U. von Balthasar).”24 Finally, a year later, after two previous attempts had been declined, (St.) Pope John Paul II demanded that Balthasar accept his invitation to be named Cardinal. Balthasar, however, again escaped the appointment by cause of his sudden death in the June of 1988, two days before his elevation.

However, even – and perhaps especially – his death, and the obsequies of his funeral, display the esteem with which the ecclesial community had come to accept this once rouge theologian. They also offer historians of theology a unique chance to hear the Church, in an official stance, endorse a scholar’s work in a manner not seen since Her (eventual) embrace of Aquinas.


While the Pope could not attend the funeral in person, he sent the following telegram to be read by “Then” Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

It is my particular desire [...] to show the deceased, on the occasion of his burial services, a final honor through a personal word of commemoration. All who knew the priest, von Balthasar, are shocked, and grieve over the loss of a great son of the Church, an outstanding man of theology and of the arts, who deserves a special place of honor in contemporary ecclesiastical and cultural life [...]. Your participation at the solemn funeral services, very reverend Cardinal [“Then” Ratzinger], will be an expression of the high esteem in which the person and the life work of this great priest and theologian are held by the Holy See.

Having conveyed these papal sentiments of praise, Ratzinger himself delivered the funeral homily. But it is to Ratzinger’s words after his elevation as Pope Benedict XVI that will next be quoted at some length, in order to establish the fact of the ecclesial respect, if not implied canonization, of Balthasar’s theology at this period.

During a Balthasarian convention celebrating the centenary of his birth in 2005, the now Pope Emeritus proclaimed:

I am convinced that his theological reflections preserve their freshness and profound relevance [...], and that they incite many others to penetrate ever further into the depths of the mystery of the faith, with such an authoritative guide leading them by the hand. The example that von Balthasar has given us is [...] that of a true theologian who in contemplation had discovered a consistent course of action for giving Christian witness in the world. [...] With these sentiments, I encourage all of you to continue, with interest and enthusiasm, your study of the writings of von Balthasar.

---

and to find ways of applying them practically and effectively.26

While the encouragement to further Balthasarian scholarship should, of course, be taken in the context of the Pope's intended audience, his continued esteem for Balthasar’s theology is clear. In point of fact, it is also evident in the latest, and purported last of Ratzinger/Pope Emeritus' texts, the 2016 *Last Testament*, a book length interview containing the following exchange:

Q: *HANS URS von BALTHASAR [...] WHEN DID YOU MEET?*

A: I’d already read him as student, of course. In 1949, I was at a lecture he gave at the University of Munich. In Freising, I was already utilizing some of his ideas in my lectures. I first met him personally in Bonn, in 1960 [...]. We simply understood each other very well, from the first moment on ... From then on, Balthasar became a household word for me. Here, the theology of the Fathers was present, a spiritual vision of theology, which genuinely developed out of faith and contemplation, which goes down to the depths and is new at the same time […], a synthesis of erudition, genuine professionalism, and spiritual depth. That was what enraptured me. From then on, we were connected to each other.

Q: *REAL KINDRED SPIRITS?*

A: Certainly; even if I can’t keep up with his erudition. But the inward intention, the vision was always the same.

Q: *YOU COULDN’T KEEP UP?*

A: No, absolutely not. Really. It is unbelievable what this person has written and done.27

---


These laudatory passages appear here at length to, once again, emphasize the drastic polarization of Balthasar, and his work, even during his lifetime. His early *Ressourcement* connections and publications, coupled of course with the institutional Church’s initial reaction to his work with von Speyr, and what he perceived to be the genuine commencement of a new charism, led him and his ideas to an early (in fact, original) perception of him as a progressive liberal. After all, one of his more famous publications from this time boldly proclaimed a theological agenda to “raze the bastions” of the hold that Neo-Scholasticism had upon the Church’s teaching Magisterium.\(^{28}\) However, Balthasar’s later reception, almost 30 years after his initial ordination, finds him deeply informing the theological language and paradigm of two Pontificates, which would include the publication of binding Church documents (not the least of which is, of course, the 1994 publication of the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*). And, while one would be hard-pressed to apply any Euro-centric Theological model to Pope Francis, it is also of some note that three of the touted “papabile” of the past two conclaves (2005 and 2015) are pronounced Balthasarians, each having worked with him at one point, and each having written at least one major volume on his theology. These include the now retired Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan, Angelo Scola (b. 1941); the previous Primate of Canada and Archbishop of Quebec, Cardinal Marc Ouellet (b. 1944); and most notably, Archbishop of Vienna and Editor of the aforementioned *Catechism*, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn (b. 1945). If Balthasar’s theology is to continue to have a contemporary role in issues regarding the

Magisterium, it will largely be due to the efforts of the last. Cardinal Schönborn continues his engagement with Balthasarian themes in his scholarship and writing, while also having become a trusted advisor to Pope Francis on theological matters, having been most recently tasked with explaining possible confusion over the promulgation of *Amoris laetitia*, in 2016.

But the polarization of Balthasar’s theological project promises to continue, as noted in the introduction, with the recent work of Alyssa Pitstick. In fact, in response to the above and similar citations in praise of Balthasar that had been used to attack the conclusions of her first text on Balthasar, her second work, 2016’s *Christ’s Descent into Hell: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday*, was written to address the relationship between these Churchmen and Balthasar’s thought concerning his most infamous theologoumenon. While one can find profound disagreement with her seeming unwillingness to dialogue with the theology of the *Ressourcement*, by default dismissing 75-100 years of crucial Catholic thought, including Magisterial teaching, Pitstick’s work is important in that it stands as a reminder that the theological reputation of Hans Urs von Balthasar is far from settled, even after two pontificates of avowed support. However, for the purposes of the present examination, it is important to analyze the context of the earliest English-language studies of his work as a whole, as a systematic project, in order to then survey the subset that have dealt with Balthasar’s theology of sin and evil.

B: Context of the Earliest English-Language Studies of Balthasar’s Theology

While little substantial scholarship on Balthasar’s work was undertaken in English during his life (besides early translations and a first wave of dissertations completed for British and American universities), critical scholarship began in earnest shortly after his death. In briefly surveying three of the most important “Balthasarian” scholars, David L. Schindler, Edward T. Oakes, SJ (+2013), and Aidan Nichols, OP, similarities quickly present themselves. All three were among the first translators of Balthasar’s work into English. All three would eventually write or edit major introductory works on his theology, and would continue their respective scholarship largely within the pages of three major theological journals. As Balthasar himself was responsible for the founding of one of these journals, Communio: An International Catholic Review, it is to David L. Schindler, named editor-in-chief of the North American branch in 1982, that the examination should turn first.

Communio was founded by Balthasar, alongside Lubac and Ratzinger, in order, essentially, to continue the Ressourcement school of theology in a post-Conciliar setting. In this respect, when viewed in light of the Aggiornamento-minded Concilium (founded by Congar, Küng, and Rahner), that had begun publication in 1965, it is often reduced to one side of a theological binary that does little justice to the complexity of thought offered by both “camps.” Regardless of its origins, or perceived “pole,” by the late 70’s Communio had begun to publish the first of its English-language issues. In 1978, the North American branch held its first symposium devoted to Balthasar’s theology (inaugurating a tradition to be repeated in 1990, 2005, and 2015), having by then published well over 50 articles and excerpts of his works. In 1991, under the guiding
hand of Schindler as editor and contributor, one of the central volumes in English-language Balthasarian studies was published under the fitting title *Hans Urs Von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (1991).\textsuperscript{30} It featured such scholars as the above-mentioned Ouellet and Schönborn, in addition to (now Cardinal) Walter Kasper, and ranged in Balthasarian studies of exegesis to ecumenism. Schindler later repeated the task with a second collection of essays (largely adapted from papers presented at the 2005 symposium), entitled, *Love Alone is Credible: Hans Urs Von Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2008), widening both the scope of authorship and topics treated.\textsuperscript{31}

Though Schindler may be seen as a primary point of transmission to a North American audience, his own scholarly interests have primarily centered on Balthasar's contribution to a philosophy of Christian culture, and he has written much on this topic. However, the first comprehensive study and attempted systematic presentation of Balthasar's theological system came from another source, the aforementioned Edward T. Oakes, SJ (1948-2013). His *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, first appearing in 1994, is the work of scholarship and translation that has long kept its place as the primary, though by no means simple, summa.\textsuperscript{32} This accomplishment in focusing on the structure and methodology behind Balthasar's most

---


important work, the volumes comprising his *Triptych*, also foregrounded certain motifs that have since become synonymous with Balthasar’s theology, such as the theological application of metaphysical structures, including the analogy of being and the transcendentals, as well as the soteriological concerns surrounding the Christological acts of kenosis and Descent (into Hell), etc. Oakes’ work for the publication, *First Things*, would go on to provide him with an organ with which to further research these complex Balthasarian themes.33 His aforementioned (see Introduction) passionate defense of what he perceived to be, at times, *ad hominem* attacks by Pitstick against the orthodoxy of Balthasar would result in 2007’s systematic and convincing "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders".34 And in 2013, the year of his death, he released an article that was both a distillation of his previous work and a summation of the problems he foresaw for future Balthasarian study, “Reason Enraptured: Commending the Theological Project of Hans Urs von Balthasar”.35

Finally, turning from the North American reception of Balthasar, and particularly from the scholarship of Oakes and his introduction of Balthasar’s theology of the *Triptych*, the British Aidan Nichols, STM – OP also deserves examination.36 Having first

33 *First Things*, is published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, having been founded in 1990 by Richard John Neuhaus.


36 As opposed to the present understanding of a "Masters" degree, and in keeping with the medieval university system which produced the likes of Dominican Masters such as St. Albert Magus and, of course, Aquinas, this *Sacrae Theologiae Magister* is awarded by the Order of Preachers on those
published work on the theology of Ratzinger in the late 1980’s Nichols began to turn his academic attention to one of the sources Ratzinger’s thought. In 1998, the first of (what has thus far run to) five volumes of commentary on Balthasar’s work appeared, with 1998’s The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics. This was followed in 2000 by No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar’s Dramatics, and in 2001, with Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar’s Logic.

Like Schindler, at Communio, and Oakes, via First Things, Nichols has also had the benefit of continued work in, and dialogue on, Balthasarian themes through his order’s journal of New Blackfriars. His authoritative voice on the subject has drawn many other Balthasarian contributions to the journal, from the likes of the historian of 20th.-21st century Thomism, Fergus Kerr, to the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, and early ecumenical voice in Balthasar’s reception, Rowan Williams.

The foregoing survey of the three major early, English-language Balthasarian scholars should not, in any way, imply that there have been no Balthasarian critiques. Two points require some consideration in this regard. First, those scholars who expressed concerns or suggested correctives to Balthasar’s work in English during his individuals who are recognized, through the value of their teaching and publications, as an ecclesial theologian of the highest order. Nichols was awarded the title, by the Master of the Order (who, as such, also holds the office of Grand Chancellor of the Angelicum), in 2003.


lifetime, and the first 5-10 years after his death (when his Papal esteem was perhaps still in its ascendancy), were few. It was not until the three scholars mentioned above had already begun to lay the groundwork for a largely positive reception that more skeptical voices made themselves heard. Secondly, when these critical works did begin to appear, they tended to argue against specific issues within Balthasar's theology as opposed to commenting upon his theological project in toto, unlike the more comprehensive contexts set by the studies of an Oakes and or Nichols. Representative of this work, mention should be made of Susan Ross’ 2005, “Moving Beyond Balthasar”, the first feminist critique of his (now) much-maligned use of patriarchal language and paradigms; and Roberto Guizueta’s, Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation, which features discussion of Balthasar’s euro-centric understanding of beauty, in light of a Latina/o theology of Liberation. \(^{39}\) One more recent, corrective study that does, in fact, finally approach a more comprehensive critique of his whole theological project appeared in Karen Kilby’s 2012 (appropriately titled), Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction. \(^{40}\) Her work highlights a new phase of contention in Balthasarian criticisms by focusing on the theologian’s style, specifically what she refers to as his tendency to write from a “God’s-eye-view”. \(^{41}\) While this is,


\(^{41}\) “Though he never draws attention to himself, or to his own role as a theologian, Balthasar’s programmatic deployment of [aesthetic] images, in fact, silently positions him quite distinctly in relation to his readers and his materials.… And Balthasar’s use of the image of the drama, fascinating though it is, seems implicitly to locate him well above all that he speaks of, so that ultimately he is in a position to
again, not a study intended to argue for or against such criticism, with the task of outlining Balthasar’s understanding of sin ever in view, it is however interesting to note this turn toward talk of style. As another Balthasarian scholar has recently noted, this issue is deeply tied to our present task –

Balthasar’s metaphors are particularly at risk when transposed out of the context in which they are used and in which they take their meaning, and outside of the ontology that supports and controls them. However, while prone to ambiguity, Balthasar’s use of metaphor is richly evocative and, indeed, most apt to the sheer beauty and glory of the mystery he wishes to convey.\textsuperscript{42}

It is exactly this attention to the “supporting ontology” that should be brought to his statements on evil as substantial, especially due to its centrality in his soteriology. With this in mind, we turn to those few scholars who have completed scholarship on the issue.

\textbf{C: A Short Survey of Work Addressing Balthasar’s Conception of Moral Evil}

Having set the context for English-language studies of Balthasar’s work in \emph{general}, we turn our attention now to three contributions toward a response to the question at hand: \textit{Balthasar and the nature of sin/moral evil}. As will become clear in doing so, if these scholars do speak of moral evil, they do so in light of the classic theodicy approach – that is, looking for the cause of the first sin, be it human or angelic, and subsequently attempting to defend/attack either the concept of divine

\textsuperscript{42} Anne Hunt, 88
omnipotence, or divine benevolence, on the basis of that information. As already stated above, however, the present work is not concerned with the “legal proceedings” as it were of an attempted “God-Defense”, and certainly does not wish to concern itself with issues of morality or ethical systems, but rather with the metaphysics underlying some of Balthasar’s bolder/more controversial soteriological statements on the issue. These same statements that alarmed both Pitstick and Oakes as “unorthodox” or “troubling” (i.e. innovative and anti-traditional) strike me as a carefully mined Ressourcement of Archaic, Patristic, and Medieval perspectives on the Paschal Mystery. Therein, Balthasar wrote of the substantial nature of human sin, amassed and assumed by Christ on Good Friday, passively experienced as the viso mortis in His descent to Sheol on Holy Saturday, and finally overcome (from within) on Easter. To be even more precise, the area of metaphysics underlying this soteriology that needs further elucidation is ontological in nature. While the works mentioned do attend to metaphysical questions (these would be hard to avoid in writing of Balthasar), few of those questions are ontological in nature. None of them try to explain what, for Balthasar, sin is – qua sin.

The first of these three works to appear did so even before the more holistic studies of Balthasar’s project mentioned above (Oakes, et al). Gerard O’Hanlon’s 1990 *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* not only introduced Balthasar’s idea’s on the divine nature and humanity’s conception of impassibility to American theologians, but it remains one of the foremost studies on the topic over 25
years after its initial publication. His contributions to this particular question in Balthasarian studies, which will be explored further in Chapter 5, centers around his foregrounding of Balthasar's ideas on “unterfessing”, a German term he employs to stress the metaphysical grounding of all extra-Divine existences within the intra-Divine procession of Son from Father. However, as much as O’Hanlon’s work deals with Balthasar’s assertions that, because of this cosmic Christological structure, all of humanity’s collective “no’s” to the good are, while still free, subsumed in (because only possible through) the Divine “yes”, the nature of evil itself remains a secondary concern, never fully explored.

Nicholas Healy’s, The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion has received the most attention among Balthasarian scholars of late. This is not unexpected; Balthasar’s eschatological ideas are still those that draw the most readers into his theology. His hope (never expressed as a certainty) for universal salvation and an Origen-like apocatastasis, most clearly presented in the late-in-life Dare We Hope …?, is one of the major topics of dispute in his theological reception, deeply tied to his theology of Christ’s Descent. However, for Healy, in exploring these themes, “evil” while a consideration, remains so only in universal-eschatological terms. While he reaches similar conclusions as those of O’Hanlon on Balthasar’s


44 Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”? – With a Short Discourse on Hell. Translated by David Kipp and Lothar Karuth. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

conception of the Christological girding of all reality, Healy’s proposal, that the goal of all reality is to function according to this ontic law (kenosis, or “being as communion”), is not applied to sin, is not examined as the “control group” against which sin could be examined.

One finds a similar situation at work in Jacob Friesenhahn’s *The Trinity and Theodicy: The Trinitarian Theology of von Balthasar and the Problem of Evil*. Once again, while some metaphysical consideration is afforded to the possibility of “evil”, given Balthasar’s understanding of the “distance between the Persons of the Godhead, (as seen in O’Hanlon, and Healy), he offers no talk of its substantiality, its quiddity. As one reviewer accurately summarized, “His goal here is to reassess the Trinitarian theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar and to uncover its potential as a resource for a new constructive response to the ‘problem of evil’.” In short, an attempt to present a Balthasarian response to “the problem of evil” once again prevents an actual examination of what evil is.

It takes very little sifting through this brief survey to uncover the common thread present in all three studies, each an otherwise excellent exploration of its respective theodical questions via direct discussion with Balthasar’s work. The problem, from the perspective of this study, however, is the shared refusal to enter into the realm of the ontological – even while hard at work in metaphysics. This is to say, quite plainly, that none of these works, or any others that I have encountered thus far in

---


47 Thomas Cattoi. Review of above (see no. 32) in *Theological Studies*, 74, 1. (March 2013): 212-214.
the rapidly expanding field of Balthasarian studies, deals with the question most repeatedly raised in any prolonged engagement with his work on evil: the substantiality of sin. The cause of this avoidance should be quite clear. The question of sin’s quiddity is never raised because the traditional (note: not The Tradition’s) theological grammar does not even allow for the question to be, properly speaking, posed. And so this study’s first task will be to turn and face the imposing wall that seems to deflect further exploration into the present subject: Augustine’s theory of moral evil as accidental, and specifically privative of substantial existence per se.
CHAPTER TWO
Balthasar and the Privative Tradition

Balthasar’s critics and I agree on at least one point, he is undoubtedly in conflict with a long and eminent tradition, well entrenched in Catholic theology, of viewing moral evil as non-substantial and, in fact, privative of any existence per se. In just one instance of his very conscious and open divergence on this issue, he boldly proclaims that, “because of the energy man has invested in it, sin is a reality, it is not nothing.”48

The air of challenge here is clear, a challenge to a theological tradition in which he himself was steeped. Before exploring Balthasar’s divergence from it, however, the extent, if not existence, of the authoritative nature of this tradition of viewing sin as privative needs clarification.

A: Augustinian Origins

The language that the privative tradition depends upon is strictly philosophical in nature, and therefore not a matter of theology per se. It is important, however, to both stress and clarify that use of “strictly” – after all, a great deal of Christian doctrine is expressed by means of a philosophical “scaffolding.” The important distinction, of course, being that none of the datum of faith seeking such expression arise from philosophy. Perhaps, then, it would be better to say that, for Balthasar, it is precisely sin’s theological nature that renders it ultimately irreducible to a complete philosophical systematization. As he stated in the course of discussing the theological

---

truths present in the art of ancient Greek drama, especially the ritualized performances of the great tragic cycles, the spectator was confronted with "[...] guilt which cannot be morally quantified any more than it can, through equation with finitude, be metaphysically wished away, for indeed, the only proper description for it is theological."\textsuperscript{49}

In point of fact, the language of the \textit{Catechism of Catholic Church} supports this claim. When speaking of the existence of evil (a datum of faith, if not personal experience, and hence its proper inclusion in a catechetical context) it does so by citing the opening words of Augustine's arguments for a privative explanation of moral evil:

\begin{quote}
God is infinitely good and all his works are good. Yet no one can escape the experience of suffering or the evils in nature which seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures: and above all to the question of moral evil. "Where does evil come from? I saw whence evil comes and there was no solution," said Saint Augustine [...].\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

\textit{The Catechism}, rather tellingly, however, does not follow the great Doctor of the Church

\textsuperscript{49} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord: A Theological-Aesthetics – Volume IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Antiquity}. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 128. In light of Balthasar's mining the tragic, as well as philosophical, Hellenist traditions for further insight into the human condition, see his essay "Tragedy and Christian Faith", from \textit{Explorations in Theology, Volume III: Creator Spirit} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1967). While discussing this moment of confrontation mentioned above, between the audience and the tragic spectacle of their own lives displayed on stage, the following passages seem particularly relevant: "When we consider that such an act of disclosing the human situation, in its exposure to the gods, is intended as a cultic, a liturgical act, that here man is held up into the light and into the darkness of the gods in the same way as the Flesh and Blood of Christ [...], so that all those who stand around may see it, and so that the divine Father himself may turn his eye to it, then one suddenly sees how exposed this act of disclosure in itself is. (395-6)." He continues: "The drama which holds the human situation into the light of the truth, the absolute truth that holds sway between god and man, as a sacral symbol, as something that has become possible to see in its totality for a moment, is something like a sacrament -- that contains something like grace and redemption in a form perceptible to the senses. It does not lie in the mastering and abolition of the fundamental contradictions of existence (397) -- emphasis, mine. For further elucidation of Balthasar's ideas on this subject, I recommend the work of Christopher Steck, especially his excellent article "Tragedy and the Ethics of Hans Urs von Balthasar," \textit{The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics} Vol. 21 (2001): 233-250.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1994), 385
into the subsequent logic at work in his privative argument, despite beginning, as he had, with this notion of God’s goodness. Instead, leaving the continuation of these lines from *The Confessions* aside, *The Catechism* returns to the language of faith, not of philosophy, reminding the reader that, “[Augustine’s] own painful quest would only be resolved by his conversion to the living God. For ‘the mystery of lawlessness’ is clarified only in the light of ‘the mystery of our religion’.”  

This is, as I will argue below, the same thinking at the heart of Balthasar’s ultimate rejection of privation as a viable theory for exploring the mystery of moral evil, especially as that mystery is revealed in a unique way via the Paschal Mystery. Nonetheless, if for no other reason than to better situate Balthasar in the context of his divergence from it, it is important to understand the privative tradition, at least by way of its most popular (ecclesial) formulation, in the work of Augustine. With this in mind, I quote the central passage from *The Confessions* at length here, at the outset of our investigation:

> And it was made clear unto me that those things are good which yet are corrupted, which, neither were they supremely good, nor unless they were good, could be corrupted; because if supremely good, they were incorruptible, and if not good at all, there was nothing in them to be corrupted. For corruption harms, but, less it could diminish goodness, it could not harm. Either, then, corruption harms not, which cannot be; or, what is most certain, all which is corrupted is deprived of good. But if they be deprived of all good, they will cease to be.  

Two issues arising directly from this passage, that of the transcendentality (or “ontological-coextension”) of goodness and existence, and the Christian conception of

---

51 Ibid.

Creation – as well as of both issues’ respective relationship to Balthasar’s conception of evil, will be further explored in Chapter 4. For now, it is enough to say that these considerations on coextension and on creation lead Augustine to the conclusion that:

If [corruptible substances] shall be deprived of all good, they shall no longer be. So long, therefore, as they are, they are good; therefore whatsoever is, is good. That evil, then, which I sought whence it was, is not any substance; for were it a substance, it would be good.

While this is certainly the central passage of Augustinian theodicy, the question of evil’s nature is implicit in almost all of Augustine’s philosophical-theology—a result, I propose, of an ontology deeply rooted in his Neo-Platonically oriented abandonment of Manicheism. After all, his faith in the Persian dualism at the heart of Manicheism had at one time required the future philosopher-bishop to maintain metaphysical positions on the nature of substance that appear logically untenable. The psychology behind this commitment, along with many of Augustine’s philosophical self-revelations, have been explored by Augustinian scholars for centuries. Recently, Sandra Lee Dixon, has continued this tradition in her Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self, where she confronts the issue directly:

How an amazingly intelligent man could have associated himself with a sect devoted to such fantastic teachings baffles many modern scholars. He tells us little of the attraction of the Manicheans for him. [But,] their

---

53 As will be argued, sin need not work according to the coextensive properties of transcendental being (i.e., goodness) because said properties apply only to those things that God has created. As I hope to demonstrate below, in Chapter 4, Balthasar envisions sin as an act of de-creation, a movement toward the disorder and chaos from which creatures were called forth by God into order, at the creative act. The free will with which one of these creatures, humanity, is endowed (both by and, to that extent, within the bounds of God’s free will) seem capable of providing the ontological conditions for creating something which is not also good: a paradox in and of itself, a contradiction of reality per se.

54 *The Confessions* Book 7, Ch.12
The problem of evil had so preoccupied Augustine that it not only made the Manichaean and their answer to it attractive to him, but reinforced his attachment to them.\textsuperscript{55}

As to the “fantastical teachings” he was asked to believe, primary among them is the idea that that two infinite substances could co-exist in the same reality: an ultimate principle of Light and an “equally ultimate” principle of Darkness. This is, after all, the very bedrock of Zoroastrian Dualism upon which Mani (216–274 AD) would expound, employing the language of Gnostic-Christianity to do so. As I propose that Augustine’s one-time belief in an eternal, personal principle of Evil had a profound effect on his later theodicy and philosophy as a whole, especially his rejection of any substantial value to moral evil, it would be wise to reconstruct the basics of what we know about this mysterious being.

While much of our knowledge of Manicheism comes from Christian (and later, Muslim) scholars attempting to dismantle the logic, or defame the practices, of its followers (the majority of these works belonging, by far, to Augustine himself), more recent scholarship has attempted to reconstruct a basic outline of its major tenets. One such work, \textit{The Other God}, by Yuri Stoyanov, proposes that, “In Mani’s synthesis, the Gnostic, anti-cosmic dualism of spirit and matter coalesces with the latter Zoroastrian type of dualism of the two primordial, irreconcilable principles of good and evil [...].”\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Sandra L. Dixon, \textit{Augustine: The Scattered and Gathered Self} (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 83 & 112

\textsuperscript{56} Yuri Stoyanov, \textit{The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cather Heresy} (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000), 108.
With Mani linked securely back to the metaphysics of Persian Dualism, Stoyanov investigates the latter’s cosmogony in more detail, offering, in summary:

In classical Zoroastrian accounts of the new strict dualist system, Ohrmazd and Ahriman appeared as two separate prime causes existing from the beginning—two absolutely independent and diametrically opposed spirits [...]. Ahriman perceived the light of Ohrmazd and, obsessed with envy and desire for destruction, fashioned from his own darkness his destructive ‘black and ashen’ creation and the essence of the demons, an evil (disorderly) movement, designed to bring destruction to Ohrmazd creatures.57

While Augustine’s many mentions of his time among the Manicheans offer very little discussion directly relating to the nature of Ahriman, I believe that as earlier as the 2nd and 3rd chapters of The Confessions, Augustine’s ontological concerns, inherited by way of his time confessing such an ultimate dualism, make themselves quite clear.

Taking up his book-length tale of conversion, Augustine is immediately at pains to demonstrate the infinity of God, by way of the rhetoric of his training and subsequent fame in Rome: “What room is there in me where my God may enter […]? Is there anything in me that can contain you […]? Is it the case that, since nothing that is could exist without You, therefore whatever is must contain You?”—ending, finally, in the existential assessment that, “I would not exist if I were not in You.”58 The Confessions, in both name and nature, is a work driven by a compelling first-person, monologue-cum-autobiography. Within the process of relating his movement toward metaphysical, as

57 Ibid., 39-40

58 Confessions Book 1, Ch. 2
much as religious clarity, it seems appropriate that Augustine begin with questions ultimately not reducible to “why am I here?”, but rather much closer to “how am I here?”, ontologically speaking, in light of his new-found Christianity and its commitment to One, personal, infinite principle: God. Having rejected dualism, can he still find room for himself, or will all collapse into monism? From this personal epicenter, the same line of questioning begins to expand in scope, to take in the two spheres of creation, by asking, “Where then do You pour forth what remains of Yourself after You have filled Heaven and earth? Or [...] the things that You fill, You fill by containing them? [...] or are You wholly everywhere, and yet nothing can contain You wholly?”

In short, having abandoned dualism, he ponders its philosophically opposite pole of possibility, a monism approaching pantheism. And ultimately, from probing the ontological possibility and, to that extent, nature of both self and creation, Augustine arrives at the question of the nature of the one infinite principle and cause of both:

How deeply, even then, did my innermost soul sigh after you when, often and diversely and in many and large volumes, [the Manicheans] spoke of You to me in empty words [...]. These fictions had no resemblance at all to You as you have now declared to me; for they were only corporeal phantoms, false bodies [...]. But you, O my Love are neither those bodies that we see, though they be in the heavens, nor those that we do not see elsewhere [...] How remote then you are from those fantasies of mine, imaginings of bodies that have no being.

These passages and their like, directly related in the text to his introduction to Neo-Platonism, are presented in such a fashion that while his conversion, properly speaking,
will come in the famous garden scene outlined in Book 8, Chapter 12, Augustine comes rather close to making philosophic realization revelatory in nature, demonstrating just how deeply these ontological issues were at play in his leaving heresy behind. After confessing his Neo-Platonist inheritance, Augustine seems unable (and understandably so) to conceive of Ahriman in metaphysically acceptable terms. The Dark One was said to be a personal, eternal, spiritual substance. But how can such a being even exist?

Augustine struggles with this when he realizes that:

In my ignorance, I was disturbed by these questions, and in going away from Truth, I thought I was going toward it, for I did not then know that evil is nothing but the privation of good, and that it is in reality nothing at all. For how could I have discerned this, when my eyes could only discern other bodies... Again, I did not know that God is a spirit without lengths and breadths of limbs, that he has no corporeal...  

It would still be another 50-odd years before Boethius (480–524) would propose what would become the standard philosophical definition of a “person” in his Theological Tractates: naturæ rationalis individua substantia. However, already in Augustine’s struggles, one can appreciate the growing importance of the logic behind such a definition, and the fact that it had not yet reached the level of clarity it would find in the “last of the Romans”. This is quite clear in Augustine, in the very passages just explored, where concepts of substance, and the possible conflation of spiritual ones with those material in nature, are at work. In point of fact, I would argue that the logic that led Augustine to abandon the idea of any co-infinite principle, let alone one of a 

---

61 Confessions, Book 3: Ch. 7. Emphasis, mine.

personally substantial evil, would also bind him, through a perceived consistency of an attempted systematization, to reject the possibility of impersonal (but) substantial evil, even such a substantial evil that claims to be neither co-infinite nor co-eternal with God (even if the datum of revelation seem to refuse such a logic and belie such a systematization). For, while all persons are substantive, not all substances need be personal, or even animate.

I will return to this issue of how a substantial, but non-personal, spiritual substance (such as moral evil) may best be classified below. For now, it is enough to recognize that when Augustine began to move away from dualism it was primarily over issues of ontology, and because of this, one can usually expect ontological issues (i.e. privation) to present themselves to the reader as barely below the surface of the respective theological reflections in which they appear.

Balthasar recognized this ontological confusion, directly addressing it in the context of the construction of the Augustinian theodicy in two passages from the Triptych. In the first, from the second volume of the Theological-Aesthetics, he states:

Augustine has to press his argument against the Manicheans into the finest points of detail and tentatively, but also firmly, he makes no exception for the sufferings of the rational creature [...]. This interpretation, in which immanent evil considered transcendentally, becomes good, is then used to close the gap left open by philosophy [...].

In short, Balthasar comprehends that Augustine’s classification of evil as privative may best be viewed as the result of the latter’s attempts at philosophical systematization (a desire born of the confusion caused him by his early Manicheism), but certainly not the

---

result of an existential exploration of evil as actually experienced.

The second of Balthasar’s direct assessments of the Augustinian theodicy, written some 25 years later, in the second volume of his Theo-Logic, continues the direct critique of Augustine’s attempt to force something that is, by nature, perhaps an ontological paradox into a ready-fit system of logic. Therein, Balthasar feels compelled to state that, “[as] far as the New Testament is concerned, this contradiction [moral evil], whatever else it may be, is not nothing: “This ‘not nothing’ engendered the speculations of Manichaeism. Augustine can escape them only by interpreting evil as a privation.” As I argued above, Balthasar finds a personal, philosophical reaction (or overreaction) to an experience of metaphysical dualism to be at the heart of Augustine’s privative theory. I agree, proposing further that the language of ontology being employed is a direct result of Augustine’s Manichaean revolt and, that to such an extent, and in consideration of the fact that Manicheism blamed evil on an eternal person, or agent of action, that this ontological language is not being employed for actual metaphysical purposes. Rather, this language is being used to construct a theodicy.

In The City of God, while maintaining the same ontological perspectives on display in The Confessions (“For evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name “evil”), Augustine moves the argument further away from our concerns of substance to those of causation. Which is also to say that he has moved away from his consideration of the quiddity of evil and is now concerned with questions

---


65 The City of God, XI: 9
properly belonging to a theodicy. The logic is rather clear in this regard. If the question
at hand is one of causation it is, in essence, a question of agency and, eventually, a
question of blame. Where blame appears within a very particular
Theological/Philosophical context as this, a theodicy is usually in the making. A passage
from the 6th part of the 12th chapter of *The City of God* illustrates this particular point:

I ask if it [evil] has been existing in some nature. For if not,
then it did not exist at all; and if it did exist in some nature,
then it vitiated and corrupted it, and injured it, and
consequently deprived it of good. And therefore the evil will
could not exist in an evil nature, but in a nature at once
good and mutable, which this vice could injure. [...]66

Note how suddenly concerns originally ontic at heart (language dealing, respectively,
with subsistence, existence, nature, privation, et al.) appear to inexplicably invite
considerations of the “will”. The same passage continues, displaying in doing so a
similarly sudden, unexplained transition from metaphysical-ontological terms to those
theological-theodical in concern:

And therefore there could not be from eternity, as was
suggested, an evil will in that thing in which there had been
previously a natural good, which the evil will was able to
diminish by corrupting it. If, then, it was not from eternity,
who, I ask, made it? 67

Finally, from issues of general causation to a proper examination of efficient causality,
Augustine has arrived at the question of responsibility for the “making” of evil; the very
heart of theodicy:

How, I say, can good be the cause of evil? For when the will
abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it
becomes evil— not because that is evil to which it turns, but

66 Ibid., XII:6

67 Ibid
because the turning itself is wicked. Therefore it is not an inferior thing which has made the will evil, but it is itself which has become so by wickedly and inordinately desiring an inferior thing...68

It is worth repeating that a study in causation is a study in agency, and if the agency in question be one worthy of blame – (and what else is more blameworthy than being the agent of disorder, of evil?) – then this is an attempt at theodicy and, to that extent, does not have bearing on what the actual nature of evil is. After all, the very construction of this particular theodicy requires that no study of its nature is possible, as it seemingly does not exist. And yet, that nature most evidently remains a reality for humanity. In short, the privative tradition is theodicical in both origin and intent, and, to that extent, not useful in any attempt to discuss evil qua evil.69

68 Ibid

69 While Aquinas adds little to the ontological discussion of evil, teasing out the subtleties, as it were, of the Augustinian theodicy, it is nonetheless important to consider the following passages: "... it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good. And this is what is meant by saying that "evil is neither a being nor a good." For since being, as such, is good, the absence of one implies the absence of the other. [ST I: Q 48, Article 1] and, "But not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a privative and in a negative sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else [...]. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness [ST I: Q 48, a3 (emphasis, mine)]". These ideas are repeated, with minor contextual differences, in Summa Contra Gentiles: SCG III: Q 6, 1 & 11, as well as Q7, 2]. In fact, even the Angelic Doctor’s rather lengthy treatise on the subject, De Malo, repeats the same basic ontology: "We speak of evil in two ways, just as we do of white. For when we speak of white in one way, we can understand the subject that is white. In the second way, we call white what is white as such, namely the very accidental quality. And we can similarly understand evil in one way as the subject that is evil, and this subject is an entity. In the second way, we can understand evil itself, and evil so understood is the very privation of a particular good, not an entity [De Malo I: Q1]". From this, by now, familiar stance in regard to what evil is (or, more properly speaking, what it is not) his considerations turn to demonology, finally ending with an examination of the classical vices.
B: Voices of Critique and Attempts at Classification

Balthasar was certainly not alone in his concern over the consequences of placing philosophical consistency over the maintenance of revelation. One can find similar sentiments as his own in regard to the limitations of the privative tradition from voices both suspected and surprising. In the latter camp, an excellent example presents itself in the case of the theologian Charles Cardinal Journet, O.P. (1891-1975). This contemporary countryman of Balthasar’s, although on cordial terms with such Ressourcement figures as Lubac and Congar, was an adamant Thomist of the Roman school, suspicious of the “New Theology”, which would include the work of Balthasar.70 It is little surprise, in that light, that one of his best-known works was a presentation of the classic Augustinian theodicy, The Meaning of Evil (1961).71 What is surprising, however, is the fact that within this systematic presentation of the Catholic use of the privation theory, Journet presents an honest account of its shortcomings as a metaphysical theory. Most important among these, for our present considerations, is his admission that:

[To] define evil as a privation is not to declare that it is nonexistent and powerless. [...] It is an inverted positivity whose ravages can be limitless and disastrous in the order both of being and action [...]. Let us therefore not talk of pure non-existence, but of an existence which, like letters hollowed out of stone, can be a terrible reality. The depth of evil will always be measured by the value of the being which it destroys.72

---


72 Ibid, 43. Emphasis, mine.
Here, while the spirit of privation is maintained, its ontological consequence in the order of the real, the *existing*, is not dismissed as a simple lacking, without its own manner of existence as “lack”, per se. What is more (and what will be echoed in Balthasar’s conception of this manner/mode of evil’s existence), is that Journet “doubles down” on his insistence of its existence by assigning it at least one characteristic: power, an accident requiring a substance in which to inhere. Thus, even here, in an attempted defense of the traditional Augustinian-Thomistic conception of evil, there appears to be some hint of concession to sin’s possible substantiality.

From another contemporary of both Journet and Balthasar, located on the fringes of the *Ressourcement*, “Then” Joseph Ratzinger, we find a similar concern that an ontology of negation not, in point of fact, negate the existential, human experience of the reality of evil. Interestingly, Ratzinger’s best expression of this concern comes not in a discussion of Augustine’s understanding of evil, but rather in the course of discussing another Neo-Platonic Father, Origen, on the same subject:

The effect of Neo-Platonism in [Origen’s] *Peri Archon* was to over accentuate the idea that evil is in fact nothing and nothingness, God alone being real, the great Alexandrian divine later sensed much more acutely the terrible reality of evil, that evil which can inflict suffering on God himself and, more, bring him down to death. Nevertheless, Origen, could not wholly let go of his hope that, in and through this divine suffering, the reality of evil is taken prisoner and overcome, so that it loses its *quality of definitiveness*.\(^7\)

Similar to Journet, “Then” Cardinal Ratzinger seems to allow evil at least one quality, it’s

“definitiveness”, which again, seems to speak to some conception of its objective substantiality.

The last example of a shared concern over the ramifications of the privative tradition I offer here is, perhaps not surprisingly, from a Balthasarian translator and commentator, Aidan Nichols, OP. The passage in question, however, does not come from any of the number of works dealing directly with Balthasar by the British Dominican.\footnote{Nichols is best known, in Balthasarian circles, for his English language translations of several central volumes of Balthasar’s work as well as for his four part commentary on the major sections of Balthasar’s theological project, an immense and invaluable project: \textit{The Word has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics} (1998), \textit{No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar’s Dramatics} (2000), \textit{Say it is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar’s Logic} (2001), \textit{Scattering the Seed: A Guide to Balthasar’s Early Writings on Philosophy and the Arts} (2006), and \textit{Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide to Balthasar’s Theology beyond the Trilogy} (2007), all published by Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.}

Instead, it is within the course of Nichols’ own attempt at constructing a contemporary Catholic theological-synthesis, within \textit{The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History}, that one finds the following:

We might wish to ask whether a theory of the ontological status of evil can depart too far from the facts of experience and still stay credible. The meontic theory is fine when trying to explain what happens when a carton of cream turns sour, but it is less successful in coping with the individual who says ‘Evil, be thou my good,’ and seeks what is evil with extraordinary energy and determination.\footnote{Aidan Nichols, \textit{The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to its Sources, Principles, and History} (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 70-1.}

With such reservations in mind, reservations from across the spectrum of Balthasarian criticism, reservations about the value of the privative understanding of the ontic value of evil, it becomes more and more evident that in order to speak further about the quiddity of moral evil, we need some manner of naming it. This attempt at
classification, however tentative or preliminary, is necessary to avoid the tautology that seems to arise by accepting the logical conditions of Augustine’s explanation (that which does not exist has no need of names or classification: issue solved, case closed). However, if as I propose, Balthasar presents us with sin that sounds surprisingly like a substance then by very virtue of this substantiality, it should be pliable to metaphysical classification. Further, what better way to classify substantial sin than according to the same metaphysic at work in Augustine’s theology, that of the last great pagan Latin Neo-Platonist, Porphyry (c.235-c.305).

I believe this attempt at classifying sin within this particular metaphysical context to be worthwhile, as Porphyry was not only the most likely hand behind much of the philosophical work that Augustine mentions encountering and admiring (The Confessions: Book 7, chapter 9), but also because his commitment to the Aristotelian elements present in Neo-Platonism allowed him to contribute to the construction of the now eponymous Porphyrian Tree – a tool seemingly ready-made for this task of metaphysical classification.

As the contemporary realist metaphysician, David S. Oderberg, has pointed out:

The basic idea behind the Porphyrian tree, as it is has come to be called, goes back at least to Plato, was highly developed by Aristotle, defined by Porphyry, [and] what taxonomy aims at is real classification. It aims precisely at the classification of things based on their essences. Since everything has one, and only one essence, there can only be one correct scheme of classification for each thing.  

However, if one were to begin to construct a definition of evil according to the orthodox version of the Porphyrian Tree, she would seem to run into an immediate problem. The tree is only “descend-able” to the ontic footing suitable for definitions by way of affirmations made about the substance in question. And the substance in question here, if accepted by way of the privative tradition, does not, of its nature, lend itself to any positive description. To this issue, Oderberg points out:

A positive classification is needed for the entity being classified. It is difficult to see how one could get a wholly positive classification of the nonliving, since the very concept is parasitic on the concept of the living. Hence, the best we can do for the non-living is to classify it as such, as inanimate, but to register the fact that we are focusing on positive features.\(^{77}\)

Nonetheless, if for no other reason than to proceed in our exploration of Balthasar’s conception that sin is substantial, the following classification of it by way of an unorthodox descent along the Porphyrian Tree is offered.

For purposes of contextualizing this experiment, Figure 1 presents the metaphysical pedigree of the mineral: a non-living, corporeal substance, while Figure 2 presents the same for the animal: a living, corporeal substance:

\(^{77}\) Ibid, 96, no. 1.
Having defined a living and non-living corporeal substance, in light of our goal of doing the same for sin, we must also consider the classification of an incorporeal substance. Catholic theology offers only one instance of such a particular existent: the angelic (Figure 3).

Before allowing sin its own journey toward definition, however, the question must be asked if the incorporeal substance is synonymous with the spiritual, with the animate. While it is certainly true that, at least according to my research, no other spiritual substance save those which
move/live (even if only from a state of potentiality to actuality, from will to accomplishment) are given consideration in the Christian metaphysical tradition, I do not believe this is the product of a conscious equating of all that is incorporeal with that which moves (the animate, the living). This seems evident from the fact that most presentations of the Porphyrian Tree arising from this same tradition separate the question of whether or not a substance possesses corporeality from the question of whether or not that same substance possesses “vivum” – the most general classification of anima/life. With this clarification in mind, a tentative classification of sin can be offered as a non-living, non-corporeal substance (see Figures 4a and 4b).
But, to push the premise of such philosophical questions even further, let us ask about the ultimate consequences of giving up the Augustinian refusal to reify sin, of allowing it the existence necessary to classify or define it. Are there major theological ramifications in doing so? A contemporary philosophical critique of privation theory taken, as it were, on its own terms, without the perhaps overly reductive reading of its origin in Augustine’s life as I’ve proposed is available. There are few better treatments of this very question than the one offered by the late philosopher of religion, G. Stanley
Kane (1938-2010), in his 1980 paper, “Evil and Privation”.\textsuperscript{78} Therein, we find him proposing:

The general thinking that lay behind the development of the privation theory was that there are certain articles of faith or theological doctrines whose truth is logically tied to the truth of the privation theory, so that if the privation theory is not acceptable these doctrines and beliefs are indefensible. [...] the major doctrines that were regarded as standing or falling together with the theory are in fact unaffected by its rejection.\textsuperscript{79}

Now, one of the primary doctrines believed to be upheld by ascribing to the privation theory is that of the essential goodness of God’s creation. This was, after all, at the heart of the Augustinian version of the theory, resting on its premise that “everything that exists is to that extent good”. Kane, in referencing his contemporary, Wallace Matson (1921-2012), a historian of philosophy, points out that the privation theory may, in point of fact, rely on a metaphysic so imbued with Neo-Platonic emanationism that, if taken to its logical consequence, would end in the eventual denial of the major doctrines that were regarded as standing or falling together with the theory.\textsuperscript{79}

---


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, Kane, 52 Let’s pause for a moment and briefly explore one such “unaffected” doctrine, as Balthasar sees it; the doctrine of divine omnipotence, which allows for the goodness of what God, via this power, has created. In his 1984 essay “Divine Omnipotence” from Explorations in Theology, Volume V: Man is Created (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), Balthasar insists: “We must not forget this Trinitarian horizon of divine omnipotence - God’s power to be himself, the other, and the unity of both - when considering his all-powerful freedom to go beyond his own nature by creating other natures endowed with the gift of freedom and (proportionate) power in their turn.” This same insight appears again in the last work of Balthasar’s, Credo: Meditations on the Apostles’ Creed (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990). When discussing the very first article and its affirmation of belief in a omnipotent Creator God, Balthasar states the following: “When the New Testament refers to him in many passages as “almighty”, it becomes evident from these that this almightiness can be none other than that of a surrender which is limited by nothing--what could surpass the power of bringing forth a God ‘equal in nature’, that is, equally loving and equally powerful, not another God but an other in God... It is therefore essential, in the first instance, to see the unimaginable power of the Father in the force of his self-surrender, that is, of his love and not, for example, in his being able to do this or that as he chooses.” But, here, again, we begin to wade too deeply into the waters of a theodicy. Balthasar can certainly offer one, based especially around his Trinitarian theology of an eternal kenosis within the Divine, but this is neither his goal nor our own.
of the goodness of anything outside of the First and Ultimate Cause: God. Or, as Kane writes:

A mistaken inference is drawn from the fact that the privation theory goes hand-in-hand with the doctrine that whatever exists, in so far as it is real and positive, is good. The mistake can be seen in the following quotation from Wallace Matson, "evil, then, considered in itself, is mere nonbeing, the deprivation of reality, whereas being and perfection are synonymous. In so far as anything is real, it is perfect and good. But everything, except God, is and must be finite; hence everything, except God, must be evil to some extent." 80

Here, the very existence of finite beings lends them an air of privation, and fault, when conceived as occupying the same reality as the perfect, Infinite One, which would result in a failure to properly integrate exactly that aspect of the Christian revelation of God as Creator of an explicitly "good" creation that Augustine was trying to defend. Clearly, this is a result of Neo-Platonic emanationism, for if any existent along the chain of being is evil, then this evil (at least "evil by way of comparative finitude") is applicable both upwards and downwards along the rungs of the ontological ladder. All of which seems to beg the question: how would privation affect a thing/existent/res in a system of thought that is not dominated by an essentialist ontology but rather, one more existential in nature? 81 Balthasar himself, speculates on this same question in the second

80 Kane, 46

81 This brings to mind some of Etienne Gilson's insightful lines in comparing the existential Thomas to the more essentialist Bishop of Hippo: "By a strange paradox, the philosopher who must completely identified God with the transcendent immutability of essence was the Christian most aware of the immanence of divine efficacy in nature, in the universal history of humanity, in the personal history of the individual conscience. When he speaks of these things as a theologian, St. Augustine seems infallible. Here he is without rival in the history of Christian thought. He has only disciples. His greatness is not the philosopher's but the theologian's whose philosophy lags behind his theology without retarding its progress... We willingly accord St. Augustine the full measure of success possible here, but we have also to recognize that to justify Christianity as history by means of an ontology in which 'becoming' hardly
volume of his *Theo-Logic*, looking at the ontological repercussions of what, in Catholic morality, is commonly considered a “sin of omission”:

A missed opportunity to do what we ought to have done is an irredeemable deprivation, which appears as a mere negation, only from the outside. When this external viewpoint is adopted, speculative reason, though bound in solidarity with the real and actual use of the practical reason is artificially separated from it. The result: "bloodless concepts" and "words", which then, by reason of their purely abstract mutual in- and exclusion, give rise to an empty logology (school logic) outside of real being [...]. Authentic choice always intends the whole: being or nonbeing.82

The privation of a particular action results in the creation of a real, existential situation; or, for our purposes (avoiding the abstract/external), such a situation of “deprivation” results in a real *thing*, a substantial *thing* – a substantial (not “bloodless”) sin. The failure to recognize this *thing-that-should-not-be* results from a choice to maintain philosophical consistency over the datum of either divine revelation or human experience. This is the “logology (school logic)” that Balthasar, along with other major figures of the Catholic *Ressourcement*, worked so hard to overthrow by a “return to the sources” in the face of their shared training in the manual tradition of Neo-Scholastic, axiomatic theology.

Later, in the course of the same section of *Theo-Logic – Volume II: The Truth of God*, Balthasar continues to explore how to present an honest account of the experience of evil in light of the real havoc that it works not just on the ontic level of reality but also deserves to be called ‘being’ was a very difficult undertaking.” *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York, NY: Random House, 1956), 134-135.

82 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Volume II – The Truth of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 30, no. 9: "[...] this point becomes clear to an ever greater degree when we consider the goal of Blondel’s main work, *L'Action...*” Something this study will do, in fact, at some length, in chapter IV.
in the human attempt to confront it, to conform it to logic, to a strict philosophical
systematization:

Diabolical contra-diction cannot be assimilated into God’s
logic. Can it claim an existence of its own as the lie, as an
un-logic, next to, or outside of, this logic? [...] can sin, which
openly contradicts the truth and, therefore, beauty, be
incorporated into the structure of the – logical! – whole in
this way, unless it be inwardly over-, or under-, taken in
some (for now) altogether unforeseeable manner?83

The reference to an “unforeseeable manner” is, of course, to Christian Soteriology, to
the “unforeseen” life-through-death of the Paschal Mystery itself. It is to this event, and
to what Balthasar believes is uniquely revealed in it about substantial, non-privative
sin, that one must turn for answers in the face of the illogical, but seemingly necessary,
statement that “sin exists.” As mentioned above, a careful scholar could construct the
beginnings of a Balthasarian theodicy, centering on the theologian’s conception of God’s
creative omnipotence finding its best expression in the kenotic process of allowing for
other existents. Balthasar himself, however, does no such thing. His own attempts to
conceive of, and subsequently speak of, substantial sin are always focused on or around
the act of its transference from the world to Christ. This talk of the “transference” of sin
becomes all the more relevant while closing this look at the privative tradition, as both
the Doctor gratiae and the Doctor angelicus offer the slightest of caveats to their
respective commitment to said tradition. What is more, both brief statements mirror
the very idea that Balthasar was stressing: if sin is substantial, it reveals itself most
clearly as such during Christ’s Passion.84 And so, despite his essential role in the

83 Ibid, 32
84 Hans Urs von Balthasar, To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption (San Francisco: Ignatius
Press, 1977), 26: “The transplantation in question is real, it sets up a new ontology of man.”
privative tradition’s entrance into Latin Christian thought, one can find Augustine, in his *Enchiridion*, stating that sins “in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. *And when they are not transferred elsewhere, [...] they cannot exist anywhere else.*”\(^8^5\) And likewise, in Question 48, article 1 of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas briefly employs language allowing for the possibility that something he has spent considerable time arguing possesses no ontological value is still able to act in a manner more consistent with a substantial being; for, as he has it, “evil imports the absence of good.”\(^8^6\)

With this talk of the transference and importation of sin in mind, coupled with Balthasar’s repeated insistence that sin reveals the substantiality denied it by the privative tradition exactly in Christ’s assumption and removal of it, a closer look directly at Balthasar’s soteriology of the Cross follows.

---

\(^{8^5}\) *The Enchiridion*, 11. Emphasis, mine.

\(^{8^6}\) *Summa Theologica*, Pars Prima, Question 48, article 1.
CHAPTER THREE
_Balthasar and the Influence of Pauline “Mystical Realism”_

For Balthasar, all theological knowledge is revealed in the singularity of the Hypostatic Union. This is especially the case for Theology, _proper_, that is the study of the nature of God and, in this case, through the window of the Cross, the triune nature of God as multi-personal/communal. One finds him affirming this as early as the publication of a collection of aphorisms, gathered during the 1940’s and early 50’s, many used as seeds for future reflection in his later theology. Thus, in _The Grain of Wheat_, Balthasar writes that:

[Christ's] works, words, and miracles are one and all signs that point to something: they do not signify only themselves. They possess an unbounded depth into which they attract and invite us. But we do not find the truth behind, them at a second, purely spiritual level [...]. Rather [...], the Word became Flesh; the eternal Meaning has become incarnate within the temporal symbol. What is signified must be sought within the sign itself [...]. No one shall ever leave Christ's humanity behind as obsolete instrument.

As I will argue, this last emphasis on the impossibility of moving beyond what has been definitively incarnate will play a major role in the development of Balthasar’s ontology.

---

87 Benedict XVI, one time colleague and friend of Balthasar, was sure to point out this central aspect of his theology when composing his October 6th, 2005 MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF FR. HANS URS VON BALTHASAR: “He made the mystery of the Incarnation the privileged subject of his study, seeing the Easter _Triduum_ - as he significantly entitled one of his writings - as the most expressive form of God’s entrance into human history. In Jesus’ death and Resurrection, in fact, the mystery of God’s Trinitarian love is revealed in all its fullness.”

of substantial sin. Most Balthasarian scholars recognize this revelatory Christology as a very particular hallmark of his theological style. As Aidan Nichols, one of the most prolific translators of his works, had to say:

[Balthasar’s] Christology is highly concrete, and has been compared, suggestively, to the iconography of Andre Rublev [...], directly involved in an account of the mysteries of the life. In each major moment (mystery) of the life, we see some aspect of the total Gestalt Christi, and through this, the Gestalt Gottes itself.89

These lines from Nichols are found at the outset of Mysterium Paschale, Balthasar’s in-depth, theological-commentary on the Triduum. For, if his Christology is revelatory in nature, and all of Christ’s physical acts point to an essential truth of the Godhead, the Paschal Mystery must be seen as the summit of all Christological revelation. And, in point of fact, this is exactly how Balthasar treats it. For him, Theology, proper, is impossible without Christology, and Christology is only discernable (or worth discerning) in as much as it is salvific for humanity.

While this foregrounding of the Paschal Mystery is hardly unique to Balthasar, his particular stress upon it and the ideas he proposes to gleam from it, are – as the work of Anne Hunt has argued. Expounding on this topic, as especially ripe for comparisons with Scholastic and Neo-Scholastic contrasts, she writes that:

[He] offers a profoundly inspired and highly evocative reflection on the Trinity as it is revealed in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Based on that reflection, he rejects the classical psychological analogy and seeks instead to explicate God’s being, including the Trinitarian processions, not in classical terms of absolute being, Actus Purus [...] but rather in terms, as revealed in the paschal mystery, of the

89 Aidan Nichols Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s, Mysterium Paschale. Translated by Aidan Nichols, OP. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 6-7.
self-emptying, self-sacrificing, and intrinsically dynamic nature of love.\textsuperscript{90}

With such a clear emphasis placed by Balthasar on the revelatory nature of the Paschal Mystery, and, for our present purposes, on what is revealed there of substantial sin, it would be wise to turn to his most explicit discussion of both, in his assessment of Pauline soteriological claims.

\textbf{A: The Pauline Passages in Question}

That Balthasar's preferred presentation of this theo-phanic Paschal Mystery is Pauline in origin should surprise no one familiar with his soteriological works. Wherever the issue of atonement is discussed, it is done with a strong conviction that Paul’s account of the event is the oldest and most reliable. Often doing battle with other theologians who he felt had failed to employ the historical-critical method of scriptural exegesis, Balthasar finds his surest footing there. This is most evident in a posthumous collection of papers, presented in the late 1960's and early 1970's to various retreats of clergy, subsequently published as \textit{To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption}, wherein he states:

It is not possible to dismiss the Pauline texts quoted, or other similar passages, as witnesses of a later New Testament soteriology, one that could consequently be relativized... Not only are the Pauline epistles the most ancient documents that we possess, not only do they incorporate and develop soteriological formulas that are still older, but the earliest \textit{Credo}, the one quoted to us by

Paul in 1st Corinthians 15, already contains the formula *pro nobis*, and it was starting from this that the whole *Credo* was going to develop.\(^91\)

From this starting point, Balthasar begins to focus on those elements of the Pauline kerygma that stand out as biblically unique in their presentation of the Cross, especially those passages of Paul that speak directly to the relationship between Christ and sin in the act of redemption. Among these, Balthasar finds three verses in particular, drawn from those epistles thought to be genuinely Pauline in authorship, stressing their unprecedented language of the assumption of substantial sin into Jesus during the Passion.

Moving in the order of their composition, not their present canonical ordering, there is Paul’s assertion in Galatians that, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”\(^92\) This is then echoed in 2 Corinthians, where Paul writes that, “for our sake he made him to be sin that knew no sin [...]”\(^93\) This claim, in turn, is further explored with a bit more detail in the eighth chapter of Romans, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful

---

\(^91\) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 28. Balthasar continues, citing a 1972 study, *Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie*: “Martin Hengel, moreover, has demonstrated [...] that the theories that assign very distinct stages to an evolution of Christology (a Palestinian phase, then a transition to a Hellenistic Judaism, and finally a purely Hellenistic phase of pagan origin) do not take into account the brevity of the time in question: according to Hengel, in the very first years after the death of Christ, more things took place in Christology then in all future centuries.”

For Balthasar’s longest sustained treatment of “pro nobis” as the oldest and most viable model of atonement, see “On Vicarious Representation”, (1973) – contained in *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

\(^92\) Galatians 3: 13 (NRSV)

\(^93\) 2 Cor. 5: 21(NRSV)
flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh [...]". The common
Christological and soteriological element among these passages is clear. They each
present an understanding of the Passion in which sin is *reified* and subsequently
*relocated* by means of Jesus' bodily existence. Balthasar, himself, sums this concept up,
in a passage that will become central to this chapter's argument:

“It was thus necessary to be able to find a method to
separate the sin from the sinner – and it is of this that the
Pauline texts speak to us, whether we like their mystical
realism or not... In reality, it is a question of a gathering
together, a concentration of universal sin in Christ.”

There is a note of challenge present in the tone here, recognizing that such a concept,
whatever its Apostolic pedigree, may strike modern ears as too graphic to be spiritually
useful. This Pauline “mystical realism", as Balthasar dubs it, and its effects on the
construction of a Balthasarian ontology of sin, will be the major concern of this
chapter's exploration. However, before moving on to such an exploration, a closer look
at the passages in question is in order.

One modern perspective on the problem that may support Balthasar’s
ontological speculations is that of the New Testament Greek scholar, Bradley H. McLean.

---

94 Romans 8:3 (NRSV)

95 Balthasar, *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption*, 24 (emphasis mine).
Hunt reflects upon this reification of sin, a subject we will return to below, in her *The Trinity and the
Paschal Mystery* ..., referenced above: “Sin is recognized and judged for what it is: alien to God and alien to
life. Though Balthasar does not develop the symbolism any farther, his powerful image of sin in itself,
separate from the sinner also adumbrates, I suggest, a modern understanding of corporate or
institutionalized sin in which the human person appears not only his agent but as a victim of sin... Finally
and perhaps most importantly, this reification of sin also allows Balthasar in effect to contrast the infinity
of God's love [...] with the finitude of sin.” (73-74, emphasis mine) While recognizing the importance of
Hunt's work in this area, I can't help but disagree with her conclusion. Certainly not because Balthasar
systematically “developed the symbolism” of reified sin which she seems to find lacking, but because he
certainly continued work with these symbols in a consciously un-systematic manner throughout the
whole course of all of his theology (which is the very argument of the present work).
First proposed in a 1992 paper for *New Testament Studies*, and further developed in his 1996 monograph, *The Cursed Christ: Mediterranean Expulsion Rituals and Pauline Soteriology*, McLean’s scholarship focuses on the unique vocabulary employed in those Pauline passages featuring this “mystical realism”. Doing so, he proposes that:

Paul’s soteriology is taxonomically unique and therefore can be profitably compared with [...] Mediterranean apotropaic rituals; that is, rituals used in averting evil, curses, and defilement [...]. I shall argue that an analogy exists between Paul’s theology of atonement and these apotropaic rituals in that they share a common paradigm. Therefore, Paul’s idea of atonement can be profitably interpreted in the light of this broader ritual context.96

The proposal, to interpret these particular (and peculiar) Pauline passages on atonement by way of a non-Hebraic paradigm, arises from McLean’s contention that, “when Paul’s theology is compared with Jewish sacrifice, it is the contrasts – not the similarities – which abound.”97 He argues that an application of standard Levitical paradigms to explain Paul’s theology of the cross “prove uninformed about Jewish sacrificial practices and theory [because] there is no theological or textual justification to describe Paul’s cursed and sinful Christ as sacrificial.”98

Finding the Hebraic models of sacrifice wanting in attempts to explain the graphic language of substitutionary “cursing” found in these passages, McLean proposes that we take Paul at his word when he claims that “to those outside the law I became


97 Ibid.52

98 Ibid.52
like one outside the law [...], to win over those outside the law.”99 And that, as Apostle to the Gentiles, he has “become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel [...].”100 In doing just that, Paul, when writing to those congregations lacking a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures which was present in his other, synagogue-centered missions, turns to a seemingly ready-made pagan paradigm of atonement: the practice of apotropaic rituals of societal expulsion.

McLean presents the basic cosmological presuppositions of said paradigm, with language featuring concepts of primordial chaos, to which I will return in Chapter 4:

Defilement can be defined as a disturbance of the system of classification that determines two distinct worlds: the inner world of society, order, and culture; and the outer world of chaos, wilderness, and natural forces. Defilement poses a real danger in society because it threatens to damage the border between the two worlds such that chaos and its deadly natural forces overtake society. The apotropaic rituals were used to maintain and restore these borders. They reflect a shared belief in the reality of defilement from the outer world of chaos. Once unleashed in society, there was a very real possibility of physical contagion.101

While concepts of defilement, especially from contact with primordial chaos, are hardly foreign to the Hebraic sacrificial paradigm, according to McLean, the ritual solution for the physical removal of curses, following upon such defilement, are.102 And, while the

99 2 Corinthians 9:21

100 2 Corinthians. 9:22-23

101 Ibid.,71

102 One possible exception to the lack of apotropaic ritual in the Hebrew Scriptures is the case of the Nehushtan, or bronze serpent, reported in Numbers 21:8-9: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.” Here we have an inanimate example of McLean’s Pauline-paradigm: an object (an image of the very ill in question), being used to draw the curse out of, and away from, those suffering under its effects. Besides a brief mention in 2 King 18:9 (“[Hezekiah...] broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to
Jewish Law presented methods of individual purification for particular offences, it was Hellenistic religion that offered Paul a model for the physical removal of a communal (world-wide) curse by way of ritual substitution. As Mclean argues:

Apotropaic rituals take advantage of this [...] feature of transferability by selecting a victim upon whom this physical infection could be transferred and, by expelling the victim, the curse is also expelled. The act of performing an apotropaic ritual can be divided into five steps: selection, consecration, investiture, transference, and finally expulsion (sometimes followed by execution).\(^{103}\)

The parallels between McLean’s presentation of Mediterranean expulsion rituals (derived, for the most part, from his study of the pharmakos rites of Hellenistic paganism popular before, and at the time of, Paul’s missionary endeavors) and the Passion narratives are, of course, telling.\(^{104}\) Using the steps just outlined by McLean, a

\[\text{that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.}\], the only other mention of the Nehushtan in Scripture comes from John’s Gospel, and seems to lend credence to McLean’s theory of fruitfully applying the apotropaic model of soteriology to the Paschal Mystery, as Christ Himself applies the imagery to his salvific actions in John 3:14-15: “‘Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him’” and again in 12:32-33: “‘And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself’. He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.” As I will go on to argue that Balthasar uses this apotropaic reading to expound on the Pauline texts in questions in the process of constructing his ontology of substantial sin, it is worth noting that he only makes use of the Nehushtan example once. In his Mysterium Paschale, in the course of arguing for an understanding of the Incarnation as ordered directly toward the Passion, he offers the following highly condensed commentary on these passages from John: “‘Becoming flesh’, since it involves ‘not being received’ (1:14), is for that reason a crushing of the self (6:54-57). It is dying into the earth, disappearing (12:24), yet being ‘lifted up’ in death-and-resurrection like the serpent in which all poison at once gathered and met its antidote (3:14)” (pg. 19, emphasis, mine).

\(^{103}\) McLean., 72-3. A more recent examination of the subject, supporting many of McLean’s claims on this point can be found in chapter 5 of Richard E. DeMaris’ The New Testament & Its Ritual World (London: Routledge, 2008).

\(^{104}\) Much as the etymology of the word makes clear, the pharmakos, was a “medicine man”, who brought healing to the community or city-state, by assuming its perceived curses. A similar role can be found in the Celtic “sin-eater”, whose graphic title may better represent that role’s function.
close reading of both the synoptic and Johannine traditions present multiple correspondences.

The “selection” and “consecration” of the apotropaic victim can be seen in both the accounts of Jesus’ anointing at Bethany (which he himself interprets as his preparation for burial, his “expulsion” to Sheol) and in the welcome granted him at Triumphal Entry, at the very head of the events of Holy Week.\footnote{For Jesus’ anointing and his equating of this action with his impending death, see Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8. Luke’s account, according to most New Testament scholars, seems to refer to a separate incident at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and, most importantly for this reading, contains no equation on his part of the actions with his burial.} The “investiture” is quite clear in the actions of Herod’s court (Luke 23:11) and all the more so in the barbaric behavior of Pilate’s soldiers, who “stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him. Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand.”\footnote{Matthew 27: 28-29a. For other accounts of this same manner of violent investiture, see Mark 15:16-18 and John 19:1-5 (the famous “Ecce Homo” passage).} The “transference”, that is the transference of the substantial sin of the world into the person of Jesus, will be the concern of the remainder of the present chapter, as it is with this particular step that Balthasar will be most concerned, and from which he will develop his ontology of substantial sin.\footnote{Though, it is worth noting here that all of the Gospel accounts of the Passion place the Crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem.} For, if sin is to be transferrable, it must be more than simply legal in nature, it must, in fact, be substantial.\footnote{As the “expulsion” (via “execution”) step of McLean’s paradigm involves the contemplation of substantial sin by Jesus, in his descent into the chaos of Sheol, it will be explored in Chapter IV.} And, if this spiritual substance must be physically assumed by, and removed in, the body of the archetypal Pharmakos, Jesus, as Balthasar contends, then a.
closer look at the philosophical “mystical realism” underlying such a process, must be dealt with first.

**B: Balthasar and “Mystical Realism”**

In reviewing the Pauline passages to which Balthasar turned in the construction of his ontology of sin, I previously quoted his challenging assertion that, “it is of this [sin, abstracted and assumed by Christ] that the Pauline texts speak to us, whether we like their mystical realism or not.” But what is meant by this term, so central to Balthasarian soteriology? What is this “mystical realism”? In the context of Balthasar’s theology, and for the purposes of this study, I propose the following definition. Mystical Realism is a holistic, incarnational approach to theology, stressing the mediation of the material world (the "realism" in question), especially the human body, in achieving ends usually (mis)understood as strictly spiritual (the “mystical” in question). Now, this theme is certainly not unique to Balthasar, in as much as one would expect to account for a certain level of realism in any theological landscape dominated by central tenets of incarnation and sacramentality. However, with the influence of Latin Neo-Platonism acting as the philosophical scaffolding preferred for the purposes of expounding the Christian Mysteries (tellingly not Greek Neo-Platonism, with its own holistic-sacramental system of theurgy), the suspicion of the body as detrimental – and certainly not useful – in the process of sanctification/deification grew. Balthasar,

---

110 On this issue of Eastern versus Western schools of Neo-Platonism, and their effect upon early Christian sacramentality, see the wonderful scholarship in Gregory Shaw’s *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neo-Platonism of Iamblichus*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995).
while appreciative of the positive outcomes of this influence, would nonetheless, throughout his theological career, seek to rectify the damage of this dis-incarnate mindset. Two Christological themes, in particular, are repeated often enough to be considered *motifs* of this Balthasarian stress on the importance of the flesh, or corporeal substance: recapitulation and reification.\(^{111}\)

As early as the above mentioned collection of aphorisms, *The Grain of Wheat*, Balthasar was mining the theological possibilities of the early soteriological model of Christ’s incarnation as the recapitulation of all creation: “As new Adam he encompasses everything human but he also incorporates the animal realm in himself, since he is lamb, scapegoat, sacrificial ox, ram, and lion of Judah. As bread and as vine he incorporates the vegetative.”\(^{112}\) This is not simply the “the Word made flesh” but, rather, the Word made into *human* flesh which, of its own proper nature, is already the microcosm of all Aristotelian levels of anima: vegetative, appetitive, and rational. This is, in fact, the macrocosm made microcosm, in order that the former may be rectified by way of the latter.\(^{113}\) To this extent, Balthasar is simply putting the *Ressourcement* of

\(^{111}\) It is important to note that, along with the concepts of “pro nobis” and of “apotropaic” rituals, the latter of these two ideas, that of Christological recapitulation, is also Pauline in origin (1 Cor. 15: 45-49 and Romans 5: 12-21).

\(^{112}\) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*. Translated by Erasmus Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 1987), 55. Even earlier in the same work he argues that: “The Fathers like to stress the fact that man sums up and sets free all of nature’s beings in himself. In this ontological universalism there are to be found almost more possibilities to understand, in a Christian sense, the ‘cosmic-global’ feeling of our time than in the epistemological universalism of the scholastics [...] . By virtue of my vegetative nature, I can participate in the being of all plants. I know what lies in their being. Thus also for animal life. If we reflect on this, we will fully come to understand Paul’s doctrine concerning nature’s sighing and rejoicing along with us.” 17-18.

\(^{113}\) This is certainly the case with Balthasar’s groundbreaking (at the time) work on Maximus the Confessor’s Christology of recapitulation, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*. Translated by Brain Daley, SJ. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). This particular stress of Maximus’ on the salvific effects of Christ’s Incarnation into flesh already considered microcosmic in nature was explored even further by the Swedish Patristics scholar, Lars Thunberg, in the appropriately
Patristic Christology to work. But Balthasar does not stop his speculation on the extent of recapitulation at the level of the vegetative. Instead, he presses on, into the inanimate, the bare res:

Finally, in the Passion, he became a mere thing and thus reached the very bottom of the world structure. This reification is most evidenced in the sacraments and especially in Christ’s quantification in Communion wafers and in his multiplication: Christ as printing matrix as generic article. Such reification has its cause [...] in an intensely personal decision of the Redeemer, and in the strongest possible effects of the redemption itself, whereby the Lord makes himself irrevocably a thing at the disposal of anyone who request it.\textsuperscript{114}

The inclusion of mere object-hood in this process of incarnational recapitulation is key, as it will allow for the possibility of a relationship between the bare res of sin and the person of Christ. While Balthasar will go on, in other works, to explore his understanding of the admirabile commercium, or “admirable commerce” (whereby, the res of sin is exchanged for the res of Christ, primarily in the Eucharist), my concern at present is strictly with the ontological identification of the Incarnate Logos with the lowest rung of existence. In the same year that his collected aphorisms saw publication, Balthasar also published a collection of prose poems that explore, in deeply personal and highly symbolic language, some of the Christological concepts introduced in The Grain of Wheat.\textsuperscript{115} So it is that, in a section of his 1954 Heart of the World, entitled “The

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotetext{114}{Balthasar, The Grain of Wheat, 55-56 (emphases, mine).}

\footnotetext{115}{For a concise presentation of Balthasar’s conception of the admirabile commercium, see the wonderfully titled meditation “The Dissolved Substance” in his Life out of Death: Meditation on the Easter Mystery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984): “And if this Easter grace [...] presupposes Jesus’ cross and death, which in the death [...] is vicariously ‘made into sin’, the institution of the Eucharist includes this

70}
Putting-Off Game”, the same relationship of recapitulation to reification is contemplated through accounts of the trials of the Passion:

You become a burden, especially to those closest to you: from the New Covenant, from your Church [...]. Driven out of your Church, you fall to the Jews, the people of yore. You fall into the enclosure of the covenant which you yourself had once directed around Israel, but here you are no less unwelcome... And the ball rolls on, out of the covenant enclosure, and it chances over to the people outside -- the nation of the heathen... Thus it is that you are totally expelled outside the farthest "outside", up like a Host over the earth which has rejected you, fastened onto the indifferent sky. [...] Be off! Tolle, crucifige!\textsuperscript{116}

While presenting his feelings on the contentious question of the legal responsibility for the crucifixion, by having every party take a turn at kicking the “ball” further along the road that leads outside the walls of Jerusalem, to Golgotha, Balthasar again employs the imagery of mere res-hood. He is at pains to stress identification of Christ, via recapitulation, with even the lowest rung of existence, the utterly passive object. But to what end?

Why this stress in Balthasar on Christ’s ontological identification, both as creating Logos and incarnate Lord, with every level of being? I believe the clearest answer to this question, one that accounts for this relationship between recapitulation, res, and substantial sin, to be found in Balthasar's reading of the theology of Irenaeus. In the second volume of his Theological-Aesthetics, Balthasar offers what is essentially a collection of short, but dense, monographs on those Christian theologians that deal same cross and this same death in anticipation of itself. [...] How the living Lord in the form of corporeal solidity was able from the outset to make use of this corporeality in the dissolution of death remains a mystery.” (45-46). The mysterious nature of this Christological ability does not, as we will see below, keep Balthasar from further exploration of it.

\textsuperscript{116} Balthasar, Heart of the World. ,102-103
directly with the concept of the Beautiful. In this process, he engages with the 2nd century thought of Irenaeus, one of the Latin/Western fathers to deal with the recapitulation theory of atonement, which would become much more prevalent among the Greek/Eastern fathers in the centuries to follow. Therein, we find Balthasar proposing the following about Irenaeus’ view of Christ as “fulfiller” of all grades of reality:

The active power of the fulfiller to give every emergent thing scope within itself in order, by assimilating it to himself, to bring it to its own fullness: without this active attraction into his own primacy recapitulation would be impossible [...], a process in which all things are fulfilled and redeemed, not outside themselves, but in their own essence, with an effect which works back in time. [...] All Christ’s acts must possess this absorptive power.117

Of special note here, in light of McLean’s reading of Paul’s Passion “narratives” as reliant on apotropaic rituals of transference, are the powers Balthasar chooses to ascribe to Christ in his role as macrocosm (the Logos) made microcosm (man). He is able to recapitulate a disordered reality by way of “assimilating”, “attracting” and, “absorbing”. For Balthasar, just as Jesus is able to restore all existents by calling them back to their source, into his very person, he is also able to assume the substance of sin and physically remove it, in his death, from the presence of the living.

So central is the theology of Irenaeus in passing this Pauline stream of atonement-realism into the theology of Balthasar, that at least one scholar has made the bold claim that whole work of the latter can best be understood as a Ressourcement of the work of the former. In his excellent The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von

---

Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval, Kevin Mongrain proposes that “Irenaeus, read through the Lubac's lens, therefore became von Balthasar's primary critical resource from the patristic archive for reforming contemporary Catholic theology...”  Having introduced the major hand played Henri de Lubac and the Ressourcement in this Irenaean transmission, Mongrain refines his thesis even further:

A careful reading of von Balthasar’s trilogy shows that he is undertaking a massive project to rehabilitate the doctrine of the corpus triforme by presenting it in its Irenaean version. His overarching goal is to preserve Irenaeus’ emphasis on the organic 'unfolding' of the one Body of Christ in a multiplicity of incarnational forms throughout history... My contention is that this Christology spans von Balthasar’s trilogy.  

I believe Mongrain to be quite right on this point, and that his research here helps support our own. Reading Balthasar, one can find him affirming several aspects of this thesis. As to its basic content, the “multiplicity of incarnational forms”, Balthasar makes continued use of this concept in several works. Perhaps none of them are so connected to the present study of the transmission of the substance of sin as his 1978 devotional work on the Christology of the Rosary, The Threefold Garland: The World’s Salvation in Mary’s Prayer. Therein, he proposes that, “[in] its totality, Christianity never ceases being Incarnation: God’s incarnation in Christ, the incarnation of sin in Christ, and Christ’s incarnation in our corporeal existence.”

119 Ibid., 38
As to the duration of this concept throughout his over 60 years of active writing, and especially in his central works, the “trilogy” – or “triptych”, sure enough, one can find it as early as the second volume of the *Theological-Aesthetics*, from 1962, “[…] the living Second Adam finally also enters into bread and wine, into products of the earth, in order to recapitulate in himself not just man but also nature and the cosmos, the most deeply realistic earth.”\(^{121}\) And one can just as easily find it on display in the whole project’s closing, in the *Epilogue* (1987), where the stress on the metaphysical ramifications of incarnation are still on display in Balthasar’s assurance that, “according to the Cyrillian and Chalcedonian view of human nature, Jesus holds a position that alters the whole of this nature (as we say: for he shares in the materiality of all other humans).”\(^{122}\)

Finally, Mongrain’s thesis is validated in its presentation of the theological lineage that informed Balthasar’s incarnational insistence. He, himself, cites the link between his work and that of Patristic and Medieval exponents of this concept when he directs readers to the work of Lubac: “On this whole issue, cf. H de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (1949), in particular where he speaks of the unity of Christ's 'threelfold body' (in particular in Paschatus Radbertus).”\(^{123}\) Balthasar, however, here points to a name too often overlooked in this area of incarnationalism, placing Paschatus Radbertus


(785-865) in the line of transmission. This inclusion of the 9th century theologian bears some consideration.

I contend that within the lineage of Pauline Mystical Realism, and especially as it concerns this incarnational stress, Balthasar's understanding of the ontological ramifications of recapitulation (which, as argued above, directly affect his understanding of sin as substantial and transferable), is closest in content to that of Paschasius'. With this, and the continued task of defining the Pauline Mystical Realism in question, a brief look at Radbertus is in order. Perhaps the best introduction to his place and work in and on this issue, is to be found in a 2005 paper by David Appleby, 'Beautiful on the Cross, Beautiful in his Torments': The Place of the Body in the Thought of Paschasius Radbertus'. Therein, Appleby claims that:

> Alone among Carolingian authors, Radbertus located the 'imago Dei' in the whole human being, body as well as soul, apparently aligning himself with the second century figure Irenaeus, who, though rarely cited in the early medieval West, had understood the human image-relation to God in light of the incarnate Son's status as image of the Father.124

This stress on the post-incarnational ontological value of the human body would lead Radbertus, of course, into his most noteworthy appearance in theological history: the publication of his De Corpore et Sanguine Domini, containing the first use of the term transubstantiation, and the Eucharistic controversy that followed. His strong realist leanings, perhaps best expressed in the famed sacramental phrase “fleshy spiritually mingled with flesh”, are directly linked above, by Appleby, to the same Irenaean school

---

of thought that Mongrain finds present in Balthasar. Appleby goes on to expound some of the main themes of this mystical realism, inherited from Irenaeus and passed on to Lubac, and finally Balthasar, by pointing out that Paschasius:

[...] did not equate sanctification with a metaphysical process of detachment or flight from the body. [...] His deeper commitment was to a centered image of the person, in which the body could contribute positively to the process of sanctification.  

As a result of this unique theological anthropology, “Radbertus apparently accepted some form of the theory of the senses according to which...the five senses allow the soul to extend itself temporarily beyond the limits of the body. Through them the anima of the body is able to perceive other bodies.” This use of the body as conduit for spiritual exchange among persons is exactly the manner of mystical realism that Balthasar will put to use in his exposition of the events and consequents of the Passion. In fact, we find very similar language to the Paschasius of Appleby’s understanding in a late essay of Balthasar’s, “On the Christian’s Capacity to See”, where, reflecting his years of formation as a Jesuit, he draws the following conclusions from an examination of the Spiritual Exercises:

Catholic Christology can never be reduced to a mere 'theology of the word’, which is at most a propaedeutic to meditation on the incarnate Word, [...]. Unlike Origen, Ignatius does not speak of the 'spiritual senses', which supposedly awaken in the soul when their bodily counterparts have been quieted. Man is a unity of soul and body and, as Aquinas teaches, it is the intellectual soul, the unique form of the body, that sustains all of men’s sense

---

125 Paschasius Radbertus, PL 120, 1327A

126 Ibid., 15

127 Ibid., 16, no. 47
powers in being. *In themselves*, then, these powers have a
dimension that is at least spiritual and may even be super-
natural [...].\(^{128}\)

With this theological anthropology acting as the prerequisite to Balthasar’s
understanding of the soteriology of the cross, his use of the phrase originally in
question, “mystical realism”, becomes clearer. A spiritual (mystical) substance, sin, can
be concentrated and relocated into a human soul and human body (realism). And it is to
this act of sin’s substantial relocation in the Passion that we now turn.

**C: Balthasarian “Mystical Realism” and the Passion**

The first thing that strikes the careful reader of Balthasar's works dealing with
substantial sin is the language of spiritual boundaries and extension; after all, if sin is a
*res*, able to be physically removed in the body and soul of the person of Jesus, it is to
that extent measurable.\(^{129}\) It is not, therefore, surprising to find Balthasar claiming:

> The Passion, properly so called [...] begins, in the earliest
narrative, that of Mark, with Jesus 'falling to the ground'
(MK 14:35) [...] Jesus falls down so as to **undergo**, dashed
to the ground, the eschatological testing [...] Then the 'hour'
and the 'chalice' became the entry of the sin of the world
into the personal existence, body and soul, of the

---


\(^{129}\) If the idea of measurable qualities being applied to spiritual substances seems odd to modern
ears (as Balthasar himself implies by his presentation of Paul's mystical realism as challenging), the case
of angels and demons in Christian philosophical-theology stands out as a major case of precedent.
Patristic authors operated under the conception that these beings acted by way of some manner of
spiritual-matter, and Scholastic writers continued the speculation by spending a great deal of time on the
question of angelic/demonic "ubiety", or the property of being in a given place, *despite* the lack of
material bodies. In fact, many of the metaphysical speculations on substance (a term, give the subject of
our present study, of no little importance) arise directly from an attempt to reconcile a philosophical
commitment to hylomorphism (which presupposes some manner of form as well as matter, actuality as
well as potentiality) with dogmatic commitment to spiritual creatures.
representative substitute and mediator.\textsuperscript{130}

Jesus, in his initial confrontation with the \textit{res} of substantial sin, falls. It is as if he has encountered a boundary, has struck up against a wall, as it were. This lexigraphical stress on the boundaries of two distinct and, what is more, ontic-ly opposite substances is made even clearer in the 7\textsuperscript{th} volume of the \textit{Theological-Aesthetics}, written roughly within the same year as the passage from \textit{Mysterium Paschale} explored above, when Balthasar argues that, "within the brackets of this [intra-Trinitarian] love lies the whole momentum of the curse of the sin of the world, which crashes against the one who bears it. Inasmuch as this curse leads to death, [...] no faith or hope can ward off the lethal momentum of the blow."\textsuperscript{131} While Balthasar goes on, in this passage, to begin an exploration of Christ's interior state, I would like to pause here, at the exterior, at the place, at the moment, of "impact", in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the evening of Holy Thursday. I wish to do so in order to allow Balthasar's friend, advocate, and colleague, Joseph Ratzinger to expound upon this idea of sin's mystically real boundaries. He did so at length in a homily preached for the liturgy of Holy Thursday. Therein, the future Benedict XVI began his reflection by drawing on the historical context of Jesus' actions that night:

\begin{quote}
In the calendar of the nomads from whom Israel adopted the Passover festival, Passover was New Year's Day, i.e. the day on which the creation was re-founded, when it had to be defended once again against the inroads of the void [...]. A regulation forbade anyone to leave the city of Jerusalem in the night of the Passover. The entire city was felt to be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{130} Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, 100-101

the locus of salvation over against the chaotic night, its walls the rampart, protecting the creation.”

One notes the use of “boundary-language” in the protective status given to Jerusalem’s walls. But just as evident, by default, would be the status of that space outside of these walls. When this historical setting of Passover boundaries is taken in conjunction with the Torah’s account of what transpires to those Egyptian homes not marked off by the lamb’s blood on doorposts and lintel, that non-protected space becomes the abode of evil, the place of substantial sin. Ratzinger confirms this in the conclusion to the homily, when he reminds his listeners of Jesus’ actions that night, after the institution of the Eucharist, where reification again plays a vital role, when:

After the meal he got up and went out, and he overstepped the bounds of the law by going beyond the Brook Kidron, which marks the boundary of Jerusalem. He went out into the night. He did not fear the chaos, did not hide from it, but plunged into its deepest point, into the jaws of death; as we pray, "he descended into hell." Returning to Balthasar, we move forward in the chronology of the Passion to explore more of this “boundary language” in relation to substantial sin and the body and soul of Jesus. Moving into the graphic horrors of Good Friday, we find a similar theological-exegesis as encountered in Mclean’s reading of Paul outlined above. This is especially

---

132 “Then” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology. Translated by Graham Harrison. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 103-104. Our next chapter will be dealing at length with the connection between primordial chaos and the quiddity of substantial sin.

133 Exodus 12: 21-32 – “Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Go and procure lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover victims. Then take a bunch of hyssop, and dipping it in the blood that is in the basin, apply some of this blood to the lintel and the two doorposts. And none of you shall go outdoors until morning. For when the Lord goes by to strike down the Egyptians, seeing the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over that door and not let the destroyer come into your houses to strike you down.’” (NABRE)

134 Ibid., 108
evident in Balthasar’s 1978 devotional work on the Christology (and, by default, soteriology) of the Rosary: *The Threefold Garland: The World’s Salvation in Mary’s Prayer*, where we find him wondering:

Why was Jesus scourged? Certainly not because Pilate was making one last effort to soften the Jews. And also not in order to extort from Jesus a confession by means of torture: he had already confessed. Rather this is a preparatory measure for the crucifixion. The Jews scourged with a certain restraint: 40 strokes, less one, out of compassion. Pagan soldiers […] often thrashed their victim to death with sophisticated instruments whose straps were provided with bits of bone, or lead, which often succeeded in exposing the internal organs.\(^{135}\)

While it is of general popular Catholic piety to express devotion to the physical wounds of Jesus, Balthasar is clearly adding theological exploration to this practice, finding in them the very means of what McLean called the act of “transference”, whereby the victim of an expulsive- apotropaic ritual would need to be rendered physically able to absorb the curse or contagion of the land, city and populace in question. And, of course, once this rendering, in the definitive sense of “giving over” or “surrendering” something, has taken place, the *via cruces* follows: Jesus’ wounded, absorptive body is now literally opened to the infection of the whole of Jerusalem’s sins, which enter him as he moves – now laden down with them – outside of the gates of city. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”\(^{136}\)

This language of Jesus’ confrontation with a substantial, chaotic evil is further expanded by Balthasar’s use of the language of the dimension, as it applies to both


\(^{136}\) John 1:29
space and time. In a 1982 essay exploring yet another Pauline soteriological formula, “death, swallowed up by life”, he says:

He opens up his embodied spirit as a space in which he passively let's human sin work out the whole unimaginable brutality of its anti-divine fury. The dimensions of this sin extend from the beginning of mankind to its end; past and future are enclosed within the present event. This totality spiritually removes the suffering Christ into a kind of timelessness 'Jesus is in agony until the end of the world' (Pascal)...\textsuperscript{137}

But, if this talk of eternity seems to “spiritualize” the event of substantial sin’s assumption into the body and the soul of Jesus, the former’s role as conduit for the exchange is always stressed and re-stressed by Balthasar – again, firmly placing him in the line of mystical-realists explored above. Returning to a theology born of devotion to the wounds of Christ, specifically here the act of fixing his body to the cross, he boldly claims that:

What is involved here is a kind of perverse sacrament that effects interiorly what it signifies in the external image: the sufferings which are being driven into the body of Jesus are in truth the sins of the world, knocked forcibly into his total divine and human person.... In his humanity God experiences what the sin of the world is.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{137} Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Death is Swallowed up by Life" in Explorations in Theology – Volume V (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 2014), 231. Emphasis, mine. He continues, further unpacking the temporal implications: “Christ brings the modality of being dead into his eternal life. Though he does not remain dead he does remain the one who once was dead... The Pauline idea that ‘death is swallowed up by life’, then, means not that death is simply annihilated, but that it is incorporated into the life of Christ and of God. [...] If the Lamb of the Apocalypse stands on the throne of God, alive "as though it had been slain", then this ‘as though’ cannot mean that he was not really slain or that his appearance merely bears a distant resemblance to being slain or even that, though he actually was slain, the slaying took place in some bygone age far removed from the present. No, it must mean that, right now, in the life of eternity, the Lamb bears his slaying in his own risen body as a supreme mode of expressing the life that in him is one with love.” (236-237)

\textsuperscript{138} Balthasar, The Threefold Garland, 79. Balthasar continues, applying his speculations on the spatio-temporal nature of sin to the question of the Sacrament of Penance: "It is an incalculably amorphous amalgam... It contains my sins, too, which in turn are innumerable. A sin which is a palpable
But, if we have shown (as we contend we have) that Balthasar’s envisions transference of a cursed substance, the collective sins of the world, into the person of Jesus during the events of the Passion, what is one to make of this substance? What is it? Questions of quiddity follow naturally from proposals of existence, and I would contend that, with several direct and indirect references to “chaos” present in the passages outlined here, one could begin to answer the question of the quiddity of sin according to Balthasar.

---

reality is remitted by absolution, it does not simply dissolve into nothingness: through the alchemy of divine love it dissolves into the suffering of Christ."
CHAPTER FOUR
The a priori Conditions of Possibility for Substantial Sin:
Primordial Chaos and Barthian Nothingness

Having set aside the issue of the privative tradition (Chapter 2), and coming to
the heart of the matter considered in the Pauline passages of “mystical realism”
(Chapter 3), I propose that in answering the crucial question as to what sin is, per se,
von Balthasar consistently – if in a fragmentary manner – presents moral evil as a
substance of human creation. As the following chapter hopes to expound, for Balthasar
this is creation arising from the misuse of human freedom acting as a catalyzing agent
on a very particular a priori condition within an omnipotent God’s “good” Creation. I
also believe that this proposal of Balthasar’s substantial sin, existing within a classically
Thomistic relationship of actuality to potentiality, to be best explicated by first
exploring the latter of the two concepts, that is, the theological and metaphysical
presuppositions that undergird the possibility for sin’s “per se” existence, and then
turning to the question of the human concretization of the possibility via the misuse of
human freedom.

As multiple Balthasar scholars and commentators have stressed, Lateran IV, with
its promulgation of the analogia entis, plays a crucial role in understanding the
metaphysics of the world in which Balthasar’s theology functions.139 I would argue

139 The analogia entis, or “analogy of being”, is that principle of Catholic metaphysics that favors
analogous language when speaking of the Divine, as directly opposed to univocal or equivocal language.
This principle was canonized by the Church at Lateran IV (1215), which expressed the issue as follows:
“For between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity
cannot be seen between them.” As discussed in the Chapter 1, Balthasar’s reliance on this concept can be
traced back to the lively theological debates between two of his mentor-friends, Barth and Przywara, on
this very issue.

While many of the major Balthasarian translators and commenters (especially Aidan Nichols, OP,
Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and the noted scholar of the history of Thomism, Fergus Ker) have included
further that Lateran IV stands as an interesting co-incidence of two major themes in Balthasar’s work. The *analogia entis* (Denzinger 432) was defined there, with Balthasar taking up its exposition and defense (most famously, against Barth), incorporating the metaphysic that arises from it into some of his most central works on Christology, Anthropology and Ecumenicity. However, the other dogma that made its official creedral debut in 1217 was *creatio ex nihilo* (Denzinger 428), and, while the *analogia entis* was put to extensive use by Balthasar, *creatio ex nihilo* is not the model of creation through which his soteriology – with its subsequent ontology of sin – functions. Instead, one finds the repeated use of, and a clear working preference for, the model of creation apparent in more archaic strands of the Hebrew Scriptures, with God as the one who brings order from chaos. This preference of Balthasar’s is clearly on display in three works central to his ontology of sin, all appearing in print almost on top of one another in 1969-1970 (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume VII: Theology of the New Covenant; Mysterium Paschale*; and the essay “On Hell” in the fourth volume of his collected essays, *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution*). It is this “creation-from-chaos” preference, I contend, that is at the very root of the issue


140 See, respectively, his *The Theology of Karl Barth* (1951), *A Theology of History* (1959), and *A Theological Anthropology* (1967), as well as the last three volumes of *The Theo-Dramatics* (1978-1983).

141 It is of some contextual interest that this is also the year in which Balthasar’s theological contributions saw their first major recognition from Rome (as their author was tellingly not invited to act as *peritus*, like the majority of his peers, at the Second Vatican Council), in his appointment by Pope Paul VI to the newly formed International Theological Commission.
presently under consideration – the *a priori* condition of possibility for sin. For, as Balthasar, would have it:

> God once fashioned the world from chaos, but man through his sin, imported a second chaos into it; now, when the Son dies for sinners, it is 'as if God had let the world run back into chaos in order to refashion it from chaos at a deeper level'. 142

Allow me now to explicitly state that Balthasar does not reject the Catholic dogma of creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, he sees no *either-or* binary as necessarily existing between the two models. Jean Cardinal Daniélou (1905-1974), contemporary and friend of Balthasar and Patristic scholar most notable for his groundbreaking studies of 1st and 2nd century Jewish-Christian texts and theologies, has the following to say of the complex imagery employed in the opening narratives of the book of Genesis, “The comparative history of religions, depth psychology, and the rediscovery of symbolic knowledge show us that we are in the presence of data which lift up from the foundations of human experience the elementary and permanent lines of religious knowledge.”143 This layering of poetic symbols is especially relevant to Balthasar’s theology, including frequent mention of its “symphonic” structure by many of his best commentators. The key to this musical style (shared, in many ways, with the Barth of

142 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume V: The Last Act*. Translated by Graham Harrison. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 316. And, from one of this earliest publications, in dealing with Karl Barth’s concept of *Nothingness* (which we will explore in more detail below): “God created the world by snatching it from chaos, but he did not erase all its affinities to chaos. Only the power of God can prevent chaos from breaking through. If the world moved away from God and relied solely on its own resources, it would open the door to chaos. And the intrusion of chaotic indifference into the world, as depicted in the Bible, is the inevitable consequence of sin.” *The Theology of Karl Barth*. Translated by Edward T. Oakes. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 189.

the *Church Dogmatics*) is to be found in weaving repeated motifs into an ever more complex structure of interactive typologies drawn from Biblical, Liturgical, and cultural settings. We have already encountered an example of this style in action in the previous chapter with Balthasar's commentary on the mystical realism at work in Irenaeus' thought.

While not, therefore, in direct conflict with creation *ex nihilo* (in fact, as will be discussed at the chapter's close, he'll be able to establish the same *a priori* from *nothing* as from *chaos*), Balthasar seems more comfortable employing other, more archaic creation models for his particular theological needs. And he does so with good precedent: the accounts of creation as ordered chaos found in the Scriptures themselves abound. In order, therefore, to better understand the underlying condition allowing for sin's commission in Balthasar's thought, a closer look into this archaic model of God as Creator is in order.

**A - Archaic Models of Creation from Chaos**

"Then" Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and pupil/practitioner of the Balthasar-Daniélou *Ressourcement* 144

---

144 In the authoritative 1978 study of the issue, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation Out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, Gerhard May claims the following "It again becomes clear how little we are entitled to presuppose that the fully thought-out doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* had become by the middle of the second century part of the common stock of orthodoxy." (137). And again, "Throughout the second century and the early part of the third the doctrine of the pre-existence of matter was firmly held by philosophically educated Christians. [...] At the same time, these Christian Platonists are convinced of the unlimited freedom and omnipotence of God and put themselves on guard against the ontological equating of God and matter." (147). *Gerhard May, Creation Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation from Nothing" in Early Christian Thought.* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International: 2004).
style], offered the following summary of the Biblical presentation of creation in a 1995 collection of homilies on the themes of Genesis’ earliest chapters:

Gradually, in confronting its pagan environment and its own heart, the people of Israel experienced what creation was. Implicit here is the fact that the classic creation account is not the only creation text of Sacred Scripture [...] In the Bible itself, the images are free and they correct themselves ongoing-ly. In this way they show, by means of the gradual and interactive process, that they are only images, which reveal something deeper and greater.¹⁴⁵

With these words of Ratzinger in mind, especially in light of the role Balthasar would play in his theological development, as well as the role he would come to play in the papal “canonization” of Balthasar’s work, unpacking some of the creation “images” just referenced is necessary, especially those stressing the role of primordial chaos. Perhaps the best display of archaic (that is, “pre-ex-nihilo”) models of creation from chaos in Israel’s cannon come from the preservation of their liturgical life in the Psalms. Therein, one can find multiple references to both the henotheism of early Israelite religion and to the role of the LORD in this near-eastern pantheon. The God of Israel, as opposed to the other deities (be they Marduk, Baal, Molech, or Astarte, etc.), is the one who brought the world into order from the primordial waters. These mysterious waters play a role in the more familiar creation narratives of Genesis (1:2, etc.); however, the actual nature of these waters are of great interest to the present subject, as well as to the author of Psalm 74:

13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.

14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan; 
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
15 You cut openings for springs and torrents; 
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
16 Yours is the day, yours also the night; 
you established the luminaries and the sun.
17 You have fixed all the bounds of the earth [...]^{146}

Here we discover that the waters from which the well-ordered world will spring are, 
first and foremost, the home of dragons and of Leviathan, himself. In short, this chaotic 
abyss is the dwelling place of those forces understood by Israel to be inherently 
destructive and directly counter to the establishment of creation-order, so much so that 
the LORD must first violently subdue them in order to proceed with His work. In as 
much as a well-ordered creation is presented as the goal of divine action on Israel’s 
behalf, the primordial waters are the home of all antagonism to this plan. To this extent, 
one would not be wrong to call the waters home to “evil”.

Continuing, in not necessarily the order of their composition but, rather, in their 
canonical ordering, Psalm 104 contains a furthering of the same line of thought. Here we 
find the same creation narrative of God taming the waters, the abode of chaos and evil 
(or that which is resistant to God’s creative action):

5 You set the earth on its foundations, 
so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; 
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee; 
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys 
to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass,

^{146} Psalm 74 (NRSV)
so that they might not again cover the earth.\textsuperscript{147}

But, after the primordial waters have been tamed to the “boundaries” of creation-order, God continues to exert providential power over them by using what was once contrary to life to now sustain it:

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,  
11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.  
12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches [...]  
27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season;  
28 when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.\textsuperscript{148}

This very providence over the (now) tame waters of creation, however, seems to carry with it the ever-present corollary, the possibility that this water, whether in excess or scarcity, can be the means to death. Deluge or drought, the early nomadic Israelites are at its mercy, “When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.”\textsuperscript{149} To this extent, one would not be wrong to call the waters not only home to “evil”, but also “deadly.”

The last major link, within the tradition of the Psalms, between this association of water with adversarial forces and beings, comes in Psalm 139. While singing of the extent of God’s providential presence, the author states –

8b if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there  
9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{147} Psalm 104 (NRSV)
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.,104: 29
\end{footnotes}
10 even they’re your hand shall lead me […]\textsuperscript{150}

The place the writer observes as the very “launch-pad” of dawn, (for where else would the sun rest while dormant?), the far horizons of this water that has been measured and ordered (given its limits) by an inescapable God, is also the place of the dead, the mysterious Hebrew Sheol. To this extent, I propose that one would not be wrong to call the waters “the underworld.” Thus, in surveying the tradition of the Psalms, with its emphasis on creation from chaos, one can follow a basic chain of association: these primordial waters are “evil,” therefore these waters are “deadly,” and therefore these waters are the very dwelling place of the dead themselves: a Hebraic Hades.

The thematic associations with the waters of creation (evil, death, underworld, et al.), weaving in and out of the Psalmic tradition, are to be found once again, all at play, in the concluding chapters of the book of Job.\textsuperscript{151} Here, the Hebrew Scriptures have God himself outlining the events of creation from the waters of chaos, as he rebukes Job’s interrogation of divine sovereignty and justice. In chapter 38, we find the following familiar imagery:

3 Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

\textsuperscript{150} Psalm 139 (NRSV)

\textsuperscript{151} I’m Indebted here to the work of Abigail Pelham and her \textit{Contested Creations in the Book of Job: the world as it ought and ought not to be} Biblical Interpretation Series, Volume 113. (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2012).
8 "Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
9 when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
10 and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
11 and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?\textsuperscript{152}

Again, the primordial waters are in need of taming in order for God to sink the pylons
upon which terrestrial order will arise, and we find those waters less than compliant to
some simple divine "fiat." The waters are resistant to order, seemingly by nature. The
waters are "evil." Continuing through the passage, the chain of association met above
occurs again: this evil water, in as much as it needs controlling in order for
animal/human life to exist, is deadly and in point of fact, is the entrance to the realm of
the dead. For, as God asks Job, "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked
in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you
seen the gates of deep darkness?"\textsuperscript{153}

Finally, turning to the more familiar territory of the Genesis narratives, we find
the first of them affirming what has been established, "In the beginning, when God
created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered
the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."\textsuperscript{154} A
passage echoed, of course, in its polar opposite, when God, acting upon his regret over
creation, returns it to a state of deadly chaos via the very same waters, "When the seven

\textsuperscript{152} Job 38 (NRSV)
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 16-17
\textsuperscript{154} Genesis 1:1-2 (NRSV)
days were over, the waters of the flood came upon the earth. In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month: on that day all the fountains of the great abyss burst forth, and the floodgates of the sky were opened.”155 This is a core reminder about the providential care of God, and a reminder of the sinister essence of these waters upon which reality rests.

Before exploring theological conclusions drawn from this brief survey of creation as an ordering of chaos, a return to “Then” Ratzinger, and the fitting summation to his homily encountered at this section’s beginning is warranted:

At the very origin of the world lurks something sinister, and in the deepest part of humankind there lies something rebellious, demonic, and evil […]. Such views were not simply fairytales. They express the discomfiting realities that human beings experienced in the world and among themselves […]. The whole tale of these sinister powers melts away in a few words: “The earth was without form and void.” Behind these Hebrew words lie the dragon, and the demonic powers that are spoken of elsewhere.156

**B – Balthasar’s Theology of Primordial Chaos**

Balthasar makes great soteriological use of the Scriptural presentations of creation from the primordial waters of chaos, especially in his theology of Holy Saturday (and the subsequent ontology of sin he presents from within this theology). But, before turning to a Christian exegesis of these texts from the TANAK, it would seem wise to first listen to a Jewish theologian’s understanding of the issues at play in early

---

155 Ibid., 7:10-11

156 Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, 12-13
Israelite religion and its development into 1st Temple Judaism. The work of Jon Levenson, especially as formulated in his 1988 study, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, is be just such a voice.\(^\text{157}\) Many of the theological conclusion drawn here are the same ones which Balthasar himself proposed, nearly two decades earlier, as applied to the Christian mysteries.

Levenson’s thesis is readily displayed at the outset of his work, and reveals its import in comparison to Balthasar’s thought:

\[
\text{Although it is now generally recognized that } \textit{creation ex nihilo, the doctrine that God produced the physical world out of nothing, is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible, the legacy of this dogmatic or propositional understanding lives on and continues to distort the perceptions of scholars and laypersons alike. In particular, a false finality or definitiveness is ascribed to God’s act of creation, and, consequently the fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos tend to be played down.} \text{\textsuperscript{158}}
\]

From this starting point, Levenson carefully traces the theme of primordial chaos and its association with the waters of creation, touching upon most of the Biblical passages explored above. However, his stress (as the title’s reference to divine omnipotence indicates) is on the present situation of humanity given this creative background. It is, at heart, an existential stress. What are humans, especially those in a covenant relationship with the Creator, to make of this concept of life resting upon a chaos brought to heel by God’s ordering?


\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., xi
The habitable, life-sustaining world exists now only because of God’s continuing commitment to the original command. Absent that command, the sinister forces of chaos would surge forth again. The biblical drama of world order is defined by the persistence of those forces, on the one hand, and the possibility (or is it an inevitability) that God will exercise his vaunted omnipotence to defeat them, on the other.\footnote{Ibid., 16}

For Levenson, the precarious nature of human reality, most especially exemplified in the very real drama of Israel’s covenant relationship with the LORD, finds its (literal) ground here, at the very creation, which rests – tentatively it seems – upon the \textit{a priori} condition of the chaotic waters. He continues arguing that, “In each case [of preceding biblical commentary], the confinement of chaos, rather than its elimination, is the essence of creation, and the survival of ordered reality hangs only upon God’s vigilance.”\footnote{Ibid., 17} Most interestingly for the connections to be drawn between Levenson’s and Balthasar’s concepts, the former speaks not only of a divine preservation of the ordered chaos by way of covenantal providence, but also proposes that, in times of Israel’s distress, the “covenant relationship includes the possibility that God’s congregation might activate their Lord’s dormant mastery through their cultic action, and thus actualize those nearly discredited creative wonders.”\footnote{Ibid., 26} As will be demonstrated later, individual/personal sin serves as the activating agent of catalyzation upon this \textit{a priori} possibility for evil/chaos, and Balthasar essentially argued the same conclusions from a negative standpoint. However, it is finally time to
turn to Balthasar himself and his understanding of primordial chaos as that very a
priori possibility for evil’s substantial existence.\textsuperscript{162}

Balthasar first proposed a link between primordial chaos and the substance of
evil in the seventh volume (according to the English-language division of publication) of
the first section of his central work, the Triptych: *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological-
Aesthetics, VII: Theology of the New Covenant.*\textsuperscript{163} In light the "Mystical Realism" explored
in the previous chapter, it is not surprising to find a quote from Irenaeus acting as the
stepping off point for Balthasar’s logic as he approaches the mystery of the Passion, and
in particular, Jesus’ experience of death and his subsequent descent into *Sheol:

\[\ldots\] in this ‘visio mortis’ the whole fruit of the redeeming
Cross was seen together. That is to say, sin in its pure state,
separated from man, ‘sin in itself’, in the whole formless,
chaotic momentum of its reality was seen by Jesus; and
with it, the ‘remainder that could not be absorbed into the
Father’s work of creation, because he had left man freedom
to decide for or against God -- the unfinished part of
creation, that it was left to the Incarnate Son to finish: and
the Son, obedient to his mission, is led by the Father now
into the state of existence of this sin that remains: ‘He
descended to the lower parts of the earth to see with his eyes
that part of creation which was inactive’ (*Irenaeus, Ad H 4 22,
I).*\textsuperscript{164}

\textsuperscript{162} In an interesting Patristic parallel, May offers the following explanation of Hermonoges’ (3rd
century) theology of creation: “Matter itself, before it’s ordering, is without qualities, neither corporeal
nor incorporeal. It is also neither good nor evil, although Hermonoges derives evil from it. But matter
cannot be essentially evil, otherwise God would have been unable to create anything out of it. It even
bears in itself the demand to be ordered by God. As matter is infinite, God has only partly formed it.
Through this forming, it is undergoing a change for the better, but even the ordered cosmos is still a
mirror and a copy of matter in its original unformed state. *Hermonoges seems to have considered the
traces of the original disorder of matter remaining in every created thing as the specific ground of the evil
present in the world.*” May, *Creatio*, 142 (emphasis, mine).


\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 233
As discussed in the previous chapter, Balthasar posited two aspects to the Passion: one active and one passive. Dying and *being dead*; the latter, he lamented, too often overlooked in an overly comfortable “rush to Easter Joy” on the part of many Christian theologians.165 If the active aspect of the Passion involved the abstraction, assumption, and removal of the substance of the world’s sin to Sheol (via a very real death), the essence of its passive aspect (being dead) is a mute stare at that deep darkness Christ himself deposits in the act of descending. Here, then, is the “where” in the liturgical proclamation about the “Lamb of God, who takes the sin/s of the world”.

If the human body of the Logos stares, with “corpse obedience”166, into the darkness of his own eyelids, the human soul of the Logos contemplates, in a Passion-passivity, this “visio mortis”. The nature of this deadly sight is elucidated by Balthasar with the very language of primordial chaos under discussion. In a dense, single volume study of the *Triduum* published within the year as the passage just considered from the *Theological-Aesthetics*, we find a further exploration of the substance of this “visio mortis”. Thus, in *Mysterium Paschale*, we find that:

> The object of His vision [is] the second death which, itself, is one with sheer sin as such, no longer seen as attaching to a particular human being, sin incarnate in living existences, but abstracted from that individuation, contemplated in its bare reality as such (for sin *is* a reality). In this amorphous condition, sin forms what one can call the 'second chaos'.
(generated by human liberty) and that, in the separation between sin and the living man, is then precisely the product of the active suffering of the Cross. [...] The object of this visio mortis can only be the pure substantiality of 'Hell', which is 'sin in itself'.

Besides containing one of Balthasar’s strongest statements in favor of a non-privative, model of substantial sin (“for sin is a reality”), this passage also makes explicit his view that the substance of this sin, its quiddity, is connected to the primordial chaos of creation. Just as creation, before divine ordering, is a miasma of disorder, so humanity’s creation, this “second chaos”, is an “amorphous” chaos caused by the misuse of freewill. When taken in conjunction with what was said above in the *Theological-Aesthetics*, with its mention of the “remainder that could not be absorbed into the Father’s work of creation, because he had left man freedom,” Balthasar has now firmly established his opinion that there is a direct relationship between sin and pre-creation chaos. Arguably, this relationship is being presented as the metaphysical *a priori* possibility for the re-entrance of chaos into the (otherwise ordered, “good”) world, by way of the disordering effect of individual sins.

Before exploring the ontological weight given to human freedom in the relationship just proposed, and in order to further cement the connection between the primordial chaos of pre-creation and the “second chaos” of sin, one final work of Balthasar’s must be considered. Again, as with the previous two works, this particular passage examines the relationship between these two states of chaos by way of an exploration of a central Balthasarian motif, Christ’s Descent into Hell. In the fourth (of

---

167 Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 173
five) volumes collecting his essays on various theological topics, one finds a 1970 piece, tellingly titled “The Descent into Hell”: probably his fullest treatment of a subject appearing throughout his oeuvre. Here, Balthasar employs the early Christian typological reading of Jesus as Jonah to explore the issue:

Christ’s being dead and his being in the abyss of the sea are one and the same thing: Sheol (Hades, underworld) and tehom (the abyss of the sea) are normally seen together as part of the same range of images in the Old Testament. This illuminates the reference to Jonah in Matthew 12:39 [...].

Beyond the initial linking of the waters with the shadowy realm of Sheol, Balthasar continues to draw connections between this Hebrew “tehom” and other primordial themes from the religious imagination of 1st and 2nd Temple Judaism. Confirming the results of the afore-written Scriptural analysis, he also identifies tehom-Sheol as the very locus of that chaos whose inchoate power(s) God must first subdue in order to create life and land dependent upon mundane, tamed waters:

Another theme closely bound up with this in a mysterious way, though not identical to it, is the theme of the connection between the sea’s abyss (as the rebellious power of chaos resistant to God, tehom…) and Christ’s baptism, where his immersion in the river Jordan bespeaks a first ‘cultic’ anticipation of his definitive baptismal immersion in the abyss of chaos:

Having introduced the first traditional and Scriptural account of Christ’s encounter with water, his Baptism by John, as symbolic of his final, definitive interaction with the same

---


169 Ibid., 403

170 Ibid., 406
force, Balthasar can turn his attention to the particulars of this later, fuller “immersion”,

his descent into hell:

This basically gives a positive answer to the dispute about whether the dead Lord descended into the farthest reaches of hell, to ‘chaos’, or not... According to Irenaeus, Jesus looked at chaos. According to Gregory I, he ‘walked through the uttermost depths of the abyss.’ The Odes of Solomon venture the sublime formula: ‘the depths were teeming with the abundance of the Lord,’ 171

Readers are now faced with a direct opposition to the picture of the primordial waters “teeming” with the dragons and sea serpents described in the creation-through-subjugation themes of several Psalms and sections of Genesis, Job, etc. Now, following this second divine encounter with the second chaos, all of creation, even the unformed remainder that had existed since God’s original act of ordering, that anticipatory space devoted to the potential reentry of disorder, is “teeming” with salvific grace. In point of fact, the threatening waters of death (Leviathan, Noah’s Flood, etc.) have not only been fully ordered by the Passion, but ordered in such a fashion that they have become the very means of accessing the salvific value of that Passion, through “the waters of Baptism.” Based on such speculations, Balthasar once went so far as to refer to the post-Descent Sheol, now properly dubbed “Hell,” as a “Christological space,” echoing, in many ways, the question posed by the Psalmist, “Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.”172 It is from the perspective of this bold, but clearly Scriptural,

171 Ibid., 412-413

172 Psalm 139: 8-10
proposal that Balthasar would pursue yet another of his theological speculations that, like the theory of substantial sin, excites strong reactions from both supporters and detractors: his hope for (but certainly not certainty of) universal salvation and apocatastasis. After all, if hell is the traditional eschatological destination for those who definitively reject Christ, it is also, according to Balthasar, already Christified by his presence there in his descent and, in fact, it is the very product of his sui generis experience of measuring the farthest boundaries of creation and chaos.

C: Barth, Balthasar and das Nichtige

Despite his preference for the order-from-chaos model of creation, Balthasar was also able to draw the same conclusions about the substantial nature of sin by way of an ex nihilo model. I write “an”, and not “the”, in reference to this model, as it is not the normative conception of nothing with which he engaged.\(^{173}\) Instead, Balthasar

---

\(^{173}\) Christian theologians have previously explored the possible metaphysical consequences of proposing “nothing” as the both the starting point of God’s creative action as well as the ultimate definition of privative evil, but in ways far different from how Barth did so. Two prominent examples would be the naïve realism on display in the 9th century letter of Frigidus of Tours, *De nihilo et tenebris*, and in the beginnings of dialectical Scholasticism, with Anselm’s 11th century *De casu Diaboli*. The former, for example, in the course of its brief arguments, proposes that: “Is nothing something or not? If one answers ‘It seems to me to be nothing,’ his very denial, as he supposes it, compels him to say that something is nothing, since he says ‘It seems to me to be nothing,’ which is as if he were to say, ‘It seems to me that nothing is something.’ But if it seems to be something, it cannot appear not to be in any way at all. Hence, the only remaining alternative is that it seems to be something [...]. Every signifying is a signifying of that which is. But ‘nothing’ signifies something. Therefore, ‘nothing’s signifying is of that which is — that is, of an existing thing.” [http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/fridugis.pdf](http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/fridugis.pdf) [Accessed 10/15/2013]. The latter, in the course of Anselm’s dialogue, has a disciple summarize the situation to his magister in the following fashion: “I concede [...] that evil is a privation of good. But nonetheless, I regard good as a privation of evil. And just as I perceive in the case of the deprivation of evil that there results something else which we call good, so I notice in the case of the deprivation of good that there results something else which we call evil [...]. While justice is present, there seems to be such great tranquility and peace of mind that in many cases justice seems to be nothing other than a cessation of evil. But when justice departs, very conflicting and very harsh and very manifold passion besets the mind [...]. It would be astonishing if it could be shown that nothing accomplishes all these things [...]. Therefore — since the question at hand is about evil, which you say to be nothing—if you wish to teach me what I may understand evil to be, teach me first what I
approached the connection between the *a priori* possibility of substantial sin and matters of this “primordial” *nothing*, by way of Karl Barth’s unique conception of it as “das Nichtige,” or “Nothingness.”

That the explicitly Roman Catholic Balthasar should be influenced in this matter by the great Protestant founder/expositor of Calvinist Neo-Orthodoxy should come as no shock. The young Jesuit had been trained in Thomism by Erich Przywara (1889-1972), the Scholastic metaphysician whose fame during his life was based largely upon the debates held (in both public and print) with Barth over the role of philosophy in Christian faith and life. Balthasar learned so much of the latter’s theology from attendance and participation in these debates that he was soon lecturing on Barth. These lectures were not only attended and approved of by the Protestant theologian but lead to one of the first of Balthasar’s popular publications, his 1951 *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*. This early attempt by both parties to understand the other’s approach to Christianity was the result, or at least early on resulted in, a real and very lasting friendship. Hence, Mark Lindsay claimed in his detailed exploration of this aspect of Barthian studies, “‘Nothingness’ Revisited: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Radical Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust”:

---

may understand *nothing* to be. Then reply to the other arguments by which I said I was troubled about the fact that *evil seems to be something*. [Accessed 10/1/17].


176 This friendship has been both recently and exhaustively documented in D. Stephen Long’s excellent *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).
There is no doubt that Barth's doctrine of *das Nichtige* [...] represents one of the most remarkable attempts in theological history to comprehend the problem of evil. According to Barth's Roman Catholic commentator, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, by framing this problem of evil in strictly theological terms, he has taken it more seriously than any purely human experience or philosophical reflection has ever done.' (*The Theology of Karl Barth*, 231)\(^{177}\)

Whereas the standard conception of *creatio ex nihilo* (the one, by and large, endorsed by Lateran IV with its own, particular theological climate) rests on the divine *fiat*, bringing that which was not in existence (potentiality) into a state of existence (actuality), Barth's theory differs based on his own theological environment. That environment is, as the name “Neo-Orthodoxy” was meant to imply, one focused on returning to the major themes of the Protestant Reformation and, specifically for Barth, a return to Calvin and his emphasis on divine sovereignty, especially as witnessed in the act of election. However, a simple re-statement and retrenchment of historical Calvinism would do little justice to the newness, or “neo,” used by Barth in his approach to this “orthodoxy.” Sharing important traits with the contemporary Catholic *Ressourcement* movement so key to Balthasar’s theological development, “Neo-Orthodoxy” – with Barth largely at its vanguard – sought ways of exploring key Reformation tenets within the context of 400 plus years of intervening theological, historical, and exegetical developments. The clearest example of this in Barth’s work, and one that will have direct bearing on his theology of primordial *Nichtige*, is the aforementioned doctrine of predestination – or divine election.

---

\(^{177}\) Mark Lindsay, “‘Nothingness’ Revisited: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust”, *COLLOQUIUM* 34/1 (2012), 6.
For Calvin, drawing on his selective reading of Augustine’s anti-Pelegian tracts, divine sovereignty is best understood by way of the issue of salvation itself, the crucial question as to the efficiency of Christ’s salvific work. While humans may very well operate under the effects of their temporal existence, that is, under the assumption that their choice for or against the claims of the Paschal Mystery arise from the use of their own free-will, Calvin insists that the impetus of all true conversion to salvation is found only in the eternal decree of God’s divine choice. God has chosen his elect, those who will receive the benefits of salvation, those specifically for whom Christ suffered and died. God has also, according to this schema, passed over others from all eternity. While never officially taught by Calvin, many of his immediate followers (including his successor at the head of Geneva, Theodore Beza) would transform the understanding of the latter class into those actively not chosen by God: the non-elect, the reprobate, resulting in the open advocation for the doctrine of Double Predestination.

Barth’s great contribution to this particular aspect of his Calvinist heritage was to return the doctrine of predestination to the Scriptural and Patristic context of its origin, specifically, to resituate it in the larger context of Christology. For Barth, as for Paul and the early Augustine, all predestination is predestination “in Christ,” which is to say that it is Christ who is object of both the Father’s election (as “Only Begotten,” or incarnation-ally, as “Second Adam”) and his rejection (in the Passion). This refocusing of election from a purely soteriological to a Christological context, however, continues for Barth – moving back into the very act of creation itself. Here starts the introduction to the concept of das Nichtige, Barth’s cosmic/primordial alternative to the Calvinist mass of reprobate individuals.
In the third section of the 3rd volume of his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, one finds Barth’s understanding of the doctrine of Divine election as it applies to the bedrock of extra-Trinitarian reality, the creation:

Even on His left hand the activity of God is not in vain. He does not act for nothing. His rejection, opposition negation, and dismissal are powerful and effective like all His works because they, too, are grounded in Himself, in the freedom and wisdom of His election. That which God renounces and abandons in virtue of His decision is not merely nothing. It is nothingness, and has as such its own being, albeit malignant and perverse. A real dimension is disclosed, and existence and form are given to a reality *sui generis*.¹⁷⁸

That which God did not elect to create is, as a logical consequence of Barth’s foregrounding of the absolute power of divine sovereignty, that which is rejected, that which is “malignant” (a word whose oncological-ontology will be studied in Chapter 5). In short, that which a sovereign, good God chooses not to call into existence is, by that very same divine decree (or lack thereof), given its own “sui generis” shadow substance. Barth continues to explore the effects of God’s, no on this unwilled-uncreated dimension by employing the language of Calvin:

This negation of His grace is chaos, the world which He did not choose or will, which He could not and did not create, but which, as He created the actual world, He passed over and set aside [...]. And *this is evil in the Christian sense*, namely, what is alien and adverse to grace, and therefore without it.¹⁷⁹

---


¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 353 (emphasis, mine)
Just as those human individuals whom God “passed over” in Calvin’s soteriological conception of Election-to-Salvation are rendered “reprobate,” so the whole reality which God “passed over” in the original, primal Election-to-Creation is rendered ontologically reprobate. And in as much as it is that which is rejected by the good God, it is, according to Barth, the very stuff of evil and that which possess no trace of God’s will or grace.  

As is evident, evil most certainly exists for Barth but its manner of existing is the problem. It has no divine mandate to exist and, hence, cannot be considered part of creation. It does, however, exist (in the very act of being rejected), and to this extent, is ontologically speaking, substantial. Seemingly in response to presenting such a novel, and admittedly confusing, model of creation as it relates to that which is evil, Barth concludes this section of his Dogmatics, in an almost catechetical fashion, attempting to lend a bit more clarity to this shadow realm he proposes:

If God Himself were not the primary victim and foe of nothingness, there would be no reason for the unyielding recognition that (1) nothingness is not nothing but exists in its own curious fashion, (2) that it is in no way to be understood as an essential attribute of divine or creaturely being but only as their frontier, (3) that we are capable of knowing nothingness only as we know God in His self-revelation, (4) that nothingness has its being on the left hand of God and is grounded in His non-willing, and (5) that it is evil by nature and therefore we cannot regard or grouped it in any sense with God and his creature.  

---

180 Balthasar employed this Barthian language and approach, to matters of sovereignty and sin in sections of Mysterium Paschale explored early in this chapter, especially in describing the ‘visio mortis’ of the dead Christ, “In this presentation, Hell is a product of the Redemption, a product which henceforth must be ‘contemplated’ in its own ‘for itself’ by the Redeemer, so as to become, in its state of sheer reprobation that which exists ‘for him’: that over which, in his Resurrection, he receives the power and the keys.” Mysterium Paschale, 174 (emphasis, mine).

181 Ibid, 360.
This dissection of the concept of *das Nichtige* into the five statements Barth feels comfortable affirming provides a unique look at the specific elements of the theory which would influence Balthasar’s understanding of sin. Of particular interest in this regard are the 1st, 3rd, and 4th clauses. Each contains a core concept of Balthasar’s ontology of sin. First and foremost is the statement of its existence, its ontological weight and substantiality in direct contradiction to the privative approach explored in Chapter 2. For Barth, as for Balthasar, though the manner of sin’s existing is not the result of divine will, nonetheless, the fact of its existence is self-evident. Next, in the 3rd clause, Barth expresses what was discovered as Balthasar’s view in Chapter 3, that the mystery of its mode of existence is only made intelligible by way of divine revelation, and specifically, in the apex of all divine revelation: God’s self-revelation in the Paschal Mystery. Finally, in the 4th statement by Barth, one finds echoes of Balthasar’s use of “chaos” as explored previously with evil as that substance which is resistant to God's providential ordering of a primordial state.

Perhaps just as telling are the two statements from this catechism of Barth’s on *das Nichtige* that do not echo in Balthasar’s ontology of sin. In the 2nd clause, Barth seems to be anticipating, and silencing in advance, any accusations of dualism. Nothingness, however primordial or radical, is in no way logically or ontologically essential to divine or human nature. Balthasar, having even less tolerance for any hint of Hegelian concepts of God’s dependence on antithesis in order to achieve actuality, feels no need to take up this defensive line of Barth’s. However, in the 5th and final clause, Barth pushes his preemptive defense against accusations of dualism to the point of proposing that humans “cannot regard or group [nothingness] in any sense with [...
God’s creatures.” As will be outlined immediately below, in the examination of Balthasar’s direct theological interaction with the theory of *das Nichtige*, this radical rejection of any regard able relationship between Nothingness and human nature does not give human freedom its due in actualizing said Nothingness into substantial sin.

Balthasar’s estimation of Barth’s conception of Nothingness, as expressed in *Church Dogmatics*, was both positive and negative nature. In the former case, Balthasar seems to have found here, in Barth’s *das Nichtige*, the clearest contemporary theory proposing an *a priori* condition of possibility for disorder and disintegration at an ontological level. This condition of possibility, when activated – as will be discussed below – by man’s misuse of will, becomes the basis for, if not the very substance of actualizing that which is contrary to God: sin. In his aforementioned *Theology of Karl Barth*, Balthasar affirms:

> [For] Barth, evil was [...] primarily that to which God, in his wisdom, has said ‘no’ from all eternity. It is that which God has passed over and rejected and forbidden to his creatures, and this eternal divine “no” to vanity, which makes it what it is, confirms and corroborates his eternal “yes.” Through God’s eternal “yes”, the being and truth of creatures takes on substance and reality; in like manner, through God’s “no,” the nonbeing and untruth of evil and vanity takes on substance and reality [...] From God’s standpoint, evil is that which should not be. When man opposed this eternal decree, then he gives being to what should not be.¹⁸²

Here one encounters Balthasar using “substance” to describe Barth’s Nothingness, lending support to the thesis at issue. In Barth’s theology of creation, a young Balthasar had found the modern language he needed to properly resource the Pauline and early

Patristic soteriological themes he had found lacking in most contemporary Catholic understandings of sin and atonement.

It was not, however, simply the young Balthasar that found footing in Barth’s theology of Nothingness comfortable enough from which to begin his own prolific theological speculations. Turning to the very last work that would see publication in 1988, Dare We “Hope that All Men be Saved”? – with a Short Discourse on Hell, one finds Balthasar still operating from this Barthian premise. In a brief reflection on the nature of the demonic, he claims:

\[\ldots\text{the men who are led astray by those powers lend the powers something of their own reality. The sins committed by men are something real, which, as it were nourishes and concretizes the deceiving powers, and precisely this thing, being both somehow real and invested with that reality by man is committed to self-destruction.}^{183}\]

Again, the language here confirms the basic premise being argued, that for Balthasar, human sin is only conceivable as the actualization of an \emph{a priori} ground of a primordial nature. However, it is this very issue of the actualization of an \emph{a priori} substance (in this case, Nothingness) that also lends Balthasar’s reading of Barth’s theory a critical or negative view. This is made most clear in his longest sustained treatment of the subject, in \textit{Theo-Drama, Volume III - Theological Dramatic Theory: The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ}, from 1978.\(^{184}\) Therein, one reads that the “theologoumenon of ‘Nothingness’, however, which is not explained with reference to creaturely freedom (of

\[^{183}\text{Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Dare We Hope...}, 137; (emphasis, mine).}\]

choice), but is seen as arising from the mere denial and rejection of what is 'chaotic,' ‘alien,’ and ‘hostile to God,’ is untenable.”

Balthasar realized that the notion of “nothingness” as the root of sin, however much of an important step in correcting problems that the privative tradition had brought about in the Christian conception of sin, remains, without proper treatment of human freedom, a failed enterprise. While Barth had given evil and sin its theological due in restoring it to that class of things with ontological value (however odd that mode of existing), by distancing it from human nature, he has also rendered it abstract from real human experience.

Barth concludes that mere man is in no way equipped to face the dynamism of 'nothingness'. He does not even know what is sinful about his own deficiencies; he only comes to believe in sin in the light of the Cross. From this perspective, Barth can finally say that 'nothingness' is only 'what has been excluded from God’s influence, a fleeting shadow, an ever-receding boundary. We cannot deny, however, that what Christ bore and overcame on the Cross is 'evil'; and evil’s mysterious power to overwhelm the spiritual creature can only be called into actuality by the creature’s freedom. It is to this next step, then, in the equation of evil, the element of human freedom, understood by Balthasar as the catalyzing agent of this a priori condition of chaos-nothingness, which must be examined next.

---

185 Ibid, 484. Interestingly, in light of the role F.W.J. Schelling will play in the next chapter’s analysis of Balthasar’s concept of activating the a priori via human will and freedom, this particular passage continues his critique with, “It was produced as a way of re-Christianizing German Idealism [...] and one has to admit that it has a certain magnanimous consistency.”

186 Ibid., 484. Emphasis, mine.
In conclusion to this exploration of the *a priori* conditions of Balthasar’s theory, one can legitimately ask: is sin, then, a re-creation of a primordial substance over which the God of the Hebrew Scriptures once created bountiful order, or is it (showing hints of the privative tradition) a result of the de-creation of a particular essence called into the act of existing by God’s “fiat”? Given his favor of the chaos model, as outlined above, I strongly believe it to be the former. And if Balthasar is claiming that humans create something (not, in this case with divine sovereignty, from nothing), this helps solve a serious metaphysical concern, one born of the odd relationship of making great use of one, while seemingly ignoring another dogmatic formulation from the same Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV.

Balthasar’s commitment to the *analogia entis* is at the root of his use of the transcendental properties of Being (arising, as they do, from the same metaphysical setting as the *analogia entis*), which in turn are at the foundation of his most central theological composition; the *Triptych*, with its transcendental (that its, coextensive) structuring around examinations of “The Beautiful,” in the *Theological-Aesthetics*, “The Good,” in the *Theo-Dramatics*, and “The True,” in the *Theo-Logic*. This commitment to the coextensive nature of these would be at risk if, as I am proposing, Balthasar’s understanding of sin is one of real substance. For how can one still maintain the basic law that everything that exists is “good” (or “beautiful” or “true”) if that which is under consideration, sin, exists substantially? It cannot. However, if this substance is of *human creation* (or re-creation), bringing into actuality that which lacks/removes the ordering of God (*tehom*-ic chaos), or that which does not arise from the Divine creative “Yes” (Barthian *nothingness*), then the metaphysical problem is avoided. Balthasar maintains
his insistence on the importance of the transcendental as the base of his style while also maintaining, from theological speculations pursued in said style, that sin is, in fact, a thing of substance.
CHAPTER FIVE

The a posteriori Mechanism of Substantial Sin's Instantiation:
Schelling's Freedom and Blondel's Action

If, as proposed, Balthasar locates the “prime matter” of sin within a primordial setting, he does not by so doing, remove the element of human choice from acting its part as the principle of evil’s “individuation” essential for substantial sin’s incarnation. If evil is rooted in a primal chaos or Barthian nothingness, both having been subdued by God in the act of creative ordering, humanity remains standing before Leviathan’s cage knowingly playing with the lock.

In the fourth volume of Theo-Dramatics, Balthasar describes the relationship between these two, the a priori and a posteriori aspects of substantial sin:

Everyone knows that the powers of evil are not simply alien and external to him; everyone knows that there is a shaft in him that reaches down to the deepest abysses. Thus he stands in a baffling solidarity with the powers and superior forces of negativity [...]. 187

Words such as “deepest abysses” call to mind the Hebrew tehom, while Barth's dialectic finds its own particular echo in the use of “negativity,” both presented, in the last chapter, as the murky foundation in which at least one pylon of human nature, free-will, is forever fixed. The passage continues, allowing Balthasar to explore the elements that constitute the nature of that will and in the process introduce a theme that reappears throughout his many works, the complex relationship between freedom and power. In a rare speculation on the demonic, from his Theo-Dramatics, he states:

They are powers: evil is always connected with power, with acquiring power over available, natural energies in things

and in man’s mind, in order to achieve dominance [...]. Man
can detect the interrelationships between freedom, power,
and evil. He knows from his own experience of himself that
evil in the world comes from freedom, a freedom that uses
whatever power is available […]. In discussing evil we need
to start with finite freedom.\textsuperscript{188}

The late Edward T. Oakes, S.J., so central to introducing Balthasar’s work to the English-
speaking world and defending attacks against its orthodoxy, went so far in his masterful

*Pattern of Redemption* to propose that this attempt at analyzing the meaning of human
freedom was the keystone of the whole Balthasarian edifice, including (if not
culminating) in his conception of sin as a substance. In his examination of Balthasarian
soteriological motifs, he boldly proposes:

It is the great principle of Balthasar’s entire *Theodramatics*
that ‘the creation of finite freedom by infinite freedom is
the starting point of all theo-drama’ (*Theo-Dramatics II,
271*), but the antinomies that inevitably result from their
juxtaposition can only be resolved by the ‘wondrous
exchange’ that took place when Jesus Christ was ’made into
sin’ for our sake – the central moment in that theo-
drama.\textsuperscript{189}

In order to better understand the anatomy of Balthasarian freewill and
subsequently, to better envision the pathology behind this actualization of an evil
substance (kept, otherwise, in a state of passivity by the original act of divine ordering),
an examination of two of the most formative and persistent philosophical influences on

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid, 137.

And, likewise, ”In answering this [interplay of freedoms] question, Balthasar has reached the apex of his
theological achievement, for I regard the last three volumes of the *Theodramatics* as the culmination and
capstone of his work, where all the themes of his theology converge and are fused into a synthesis of
remarkable creativity and originality, an achievement that makes him one of the great theological minds
of the 20th century. Here, more than anywhere, is where his work should be judged.” pg. 230.
Balthasar in this area is necessary. This examination should clearly demonstrate that Schelling, and his conception of authentic human freedom (requiring an evil option as an object of choice), and Blondel, with his examination of the spiritual mechanisms at work in the individual subject’s actualization of choice via action to, come together fruitfully in Balthasar’s synthesis.

A) Schelling’s Freedom

Balthasar’s relationship with German Idealism, and with the work of F.W.J. Schelling (1775-1854) in particular, is evident throughout the whole of the former’s massive oeuvre. As early as his third volume, exploration of apocalyptic tendencies in German literature, originally undertaken as a doctoral dissertation and reworked for later publication as Prometheus: Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Idealismus, the reader finds Balthasar claiming that Schelling’s contribution to the subject of freewill should be considered “the most titanic work of German Idealism.” And such appreciation would barely wane as Balthasar entered into his more mature, systematic work: the volumes of his Triptych. Schelling is referenced over 130 times throughout the course of the Theological-Aesthetics, the Theo-Dramatics, and the Theo-Logic, making him one of only a handful of other authors to feature prominently in all three sections.

This Schelling-Balthasar dynamic was, in fact, one of the earliest aspects of Balthasarian scholarship to be pursued at length in English. A good decade before

---

Oakes’ aforementioned *Pattern of Redemption* presented any manner of a general (let alone in-depth) survey of Balthasar’s work, the Swiss theologian’s relationship with German Idealism was already being explored. This is a bit more understandable when taking into account that Balthasar was still actively writing, over five years away from death, with at least eight major works left to write, including three volumes of the *Triptych*. Thus, while those who would attempt a wide-angled view of the Balthasarian “system” would wait (especially upon the completion of his *Theo-Dramatics*, with its promise of eschatological conclusions to earlier soteriological proposals), those scholars whose interests leaned closer to the construction of genealogies of influence had already begun their work.

Among the latter group, within those early works that treat with the direct and indirect uses of Schelling (not simply in Balthasar, but in many modern and contemporary Catholic philosophical circles), one of the earliest, Thomas O’Meara’s 1982 *Romantic Idealism and Roman Catholicism: Schelling and the Theologians*, remains an excellent source on the subject. Therein, the reader is reminded both of Balthasar’s admitted admiration for Schelling, as well as given a hint about the origins of the latter’s peculiar but appealing style. As O’Meara points out, with a quote from *Prometheus*:

> Perhaps the lasting and diverse influence of Schelling upon Roman Catholic theology was due to the intersection in his own life of the loftiest systems of intellect with the mystical exploration of the divine abyss. Von Balthasar writes ‘he’s really an apocalyptic figure for whom all is arranged around revelation, around the disclosure of mystery, around breakthrough into the mysteries of God. From this magical and visionary style [...] emerges the fact that he is a prophet and a poet. (Prometheus, 206)’

---

But just what did this “apocalyptic poet,” probing the mystery of the “divine abyss” via his unique style, propose that would catch the ear of a young Swiss Jesuit and stay with him throughout his theological career, influencing many of his own speculations? In short, it was the nature of evil as revealed in the exploration of human freedom, especially as presented in his 1809 masterwork, Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom.\(^{192}\)

Following close on the heels of O’Meara’s work, Allen White’s rich commentary on Schelling’s masterpiece, 1983’s Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom presents the reader with the following bold proposal, one that reveals just what Balthasar found here to catch his attention and hold it for decades to come:

All other explanations either deny evil or attempt to explain it as imperfection. To do either is however "to be in conflict with the authentic nature of evil." For even the simple consideration that it is man alone, the most perfect of all visible creatures, who is capable of evil shows that its ground can in no way be lying in lack or privation.\(^{193}\)

Once again, Balthasar found a non-privative model for evil, one that spoke of its possessing an “authentic nature,” in line with his own developing thoughts on the

\(^{192}\) Schelling, F.W.J. Philosophical Inquires into the Nature of Human Freedom. Translated by James Gutmann (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press), 1936.

\(^{193}\) Allen White, Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 120-121. Given the rest of the passage, with White linking Schelling’s speculation on evil to his dissatisfaction with the privative theory (and the mirroring of this in Balthasar’s work), it bears repeating in full – including its own quotation from Schelling (Freedom, 27): “As to proponents of privation theory possible response to Schelling’s positing of radical/real evil, he has the following to say in anticipation: It may be objected that what is positive in evil, in so far as it is positive, is good. Evil does not disappear in this way anymore than it is explained... if that element in evil which has being is good whence comes the wherein it has its being, the basis which really constitutes the evil?”
And so, logically, one must ask what Schelling’s conception of evil actually was.

Recently reviving the topic of Schelling’s influence on contemporary theology by presenting it as possible common ground from which to launch further explorations into the relationship between Russian Orthodox theological trends of the past 150 years and some of Balthasar’s bolder Trinitarian proposals, Jennifer Newsome-Martin’s work stands as fine resource to mine just such a question. In her 2012 un-published dissertation for Notre Dame, *Hans Urs von Balthasar & the Press of Speculative Russian Religious Philosophy*, Newsome presents the heart of the Schelling’s idea of the nature of freedom as resting on the *reality* of evil, or as she puts it: “Schelling ultimately defines authentic freedom as ‘a possibility of good and evil.’ Freedom can only exist, then, if the genuine possibility for evil is present. Thus, freedom cannot be thought of without reference to the brute facticity of evil. [...]”

This conception of “the brute facticity of evil” would obviously appeal to a theologian who was already beginning to raise reservations over the Augustinian theodicy of privation and its effect on soteriological claims about the Paschal Mystery. Interestingly, while settling on this cornerstone, his definition of freedom (as the possibility even for evil), Schelling had

---

194 Just as some of the problems that Balthasar found with privation theory find their roots in this early and ongoing encounter with Schelling, so too his commitment to a philosophical tradition of medieval mystical realism (as outlined in Chapter 3) also finds an echo in *Freedom*, where Schelling warns that, “the abhorrence of all reality which might sully the spiritual through any contact with it must naturally blind the eye to the origin of evil too.” Schelling, *Freedom*, 30.

195 Jennifer Newsome Martin. *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Press of Speculative Russian Religious Philosophy* (Unpublished version of her PhD dissertation completed for Notre Dame University, 2012), 104-5. Her dissertation has subsequently been published as, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Indiana, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2015). I have chosen to rely on the original version of her scholarship, as it provides more information on Schelling as the common influence on Balthasar and Orthodox Sophiology, without the later overshadowing the former.
proposed that this understanding of choice is what essentially constitutes humanity’s image-hood or likeness to God (the *Imago Dei*). One can legitimately speculate that Balthasar saw here a parallel to Barth’s neo-Calvinist understanding of God as the one who elects, with his first act of election being the choice between what was to be created and what was not: the nothingness (cf. Chapter 4). Evil, therefore, for two of Balthasar’s most formative, early influences, finds the roots of its “radicality,” so to speak, in the eternal *a priori* of divine sovereignty and freedom. However, as Schelling’s Freedom is at heart not theological, but anthropological, it must be remembered that humanity, via the ontological ramifications of this *imago Dei*, remains the *a posteriori* vessel of evil’s daily “creation” via human “election”.

In stressing Schelling’s theory of radical evil, however, does Newsome-Martin end in presenting him, and Balthasar in his wake, as a dualist? After all, if evil must be present from the beginning (of at least human nature), in order that real choice be possible, has this simply led one back into the very Manichaeism that Augustine’s privative theory was created to combat? At the very start of her study, presumably foreseeing such accusations, Newsome-Martin points out that:

When Balthasar repeats, or appears to repeat, suspect elements of Schelling or Hegel, he self-consciously subverts them, ever dutifully maintaining a crucial corrective distance. *Balthasar, acknowledging the seductive appeal of these discourses, both allows them to contribute positively to his theological project while insisting that their content be thoroughly vetted.*

---

196 Ibid, 7 (emphasis, mine). It should be added that Schelling himself foresaw the accusation of dualism arising from his rejection of privation: “If freedom is a power for evil it must have a root independent of God. Compelled by this argument one may be tempted to throw oneself into the arms of dualism. However if this system is really thought of as the doctrine of two absolutely different and mutually independent principles, it is only a system of self-destruction and the despair of reason.” (Schelling, *Freedom*, 28).
But, again, one must ask: just what did Balthasar find in Schelling’s conception of evil that was worth both mining and vetting? It seems clear from any reading of Schelling’s *Freedom* that the concept in question here concerns Schelling’s proposal of a divine “Ur-ground.” As Newsome-Martin describes it:

\[\ldots\] this bitter, dark (material) principle is absolutely necessary for God self-actualization, which, much like Hegel, requires a *self-posed opposition* in order to emerge (and eventually reunify the contrary principles). \[\ldots\] At the genesis of divinity, then, is the *Ur-ground*, that indeterminate, dark, pre-mundane freedom \[\ldots\] which is decidedly non-privative.  

As Balthasar found little time for Process Theology and its indebtedness to Hegelian philosophizing of the Trinity that would involve the actualization of divinity requiring the creative, it is here that the “vetting,” takes place. By transposing this theme of an original (divine) self-actualization (of *ur-ground* to *ground of existence*) into an orthodox, if still speculative, language of the inter-personal processions within the Godhead, Balthasar is able to simultaneously avoid the twin pitfalls of Manichean dualism and Hegelian pantheism while expounding his own Trinitarian theology. In the fourth volume of the *Theo-Dramatics*, at the center of his soteriological speculation, he states:

\[\ldots\] the Father’s self-utterance in the generation of the Son is an initial ‘kenosis’ within the Godhead that underpins all subsequent kenosis… This divine act that brings forth the Son, that is, the 2nd way of participating (and of being) the identical Godhead, involves the positing of an absolute, infinite ‘distance’ that can contain embrace all other

---

197 Newsome Martin, 108-9 (emphasis, mine)
distances that are possible within the world of finitude, including the distance of sin.\textsuperscript{198}

This notion of ontological “underpinning” (German: \textit{unterfessing}), is one of the hallmarks of the Balthasarian method; almost as ubiquitous as his aesthetic approach to revelation. It is also, when filtered through two of his primary influences (Barth and Lubac), the source of his \textit{Ressourcement} of Patristic Christocentrism. This theologoumenon spans Balthasar’s lengthy career, making its first appearance in his 1957 \textit{Theology of History}, where he proposes that:

\begin{quote}
Theologically speaking the only thing that makes it possible to have history, in the deepest sense, within the space thus opened up is the fact that this space is an opening within the freedom of God... Hence, that it is itself an area of freedom: freedom of God giving space and scope to the freedom of man. Within this space man is free to make history happen [...]\textsuperscript{199}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, this passage concludes by linking his conception of \textit{unterfessing} with the other (in)famous theologoumenon of his work, the possibility of universal salvation by way of Christ’s solidarity with the dead in his descent into Hell, “[However], man cannot fall out of the space which is Christ’s, nor out of the structural form created by his life. This is indeed the 'prison in which God has shut up all in the rebellion only to include them in his pardon' (Romans 11:32).”\textsuperscript{200} But Balthasar’s fullest and yet briefest summation of this method in service of Christocentrism comes from the fifth volume of

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{199} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{A Theology of History}. Translated by n/a. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 1994), 70.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 71
\end{flushright}
the *Theo-Dramatics*, where he claims that: “according to God's gracious plan for the world, the *processio*, which includes the *creatio*, is to be fulfilled in the Son's *missio*.“

The Kingdom of Heaven, or the community of those whose substantial sins have been removed via sacramental incorporation into Christ's incarnate person (said *missio*), finds its grounding within the world made by the same Christ, as Logos (said *creatio*), which in its turn, is only possible upon the eternal ground of otherness and difference that is the eternal generation of the same Christ, as Son from the Father (said *processio*).

The centrality of this Christocentric ontology, this *unterfessing* at all levels of being back into the Godhead itself, is proven so central to an understanding of Balthasar's whole project (and novel to contemporary Catholic theology) by being the subject of one of the first English-language monographs on the theologian's work. Predating even Oakes’ 1994 work of introduction, and coming less than two years after Balthasar's death (i.e. before many of his central works had even seen translation from German), Gerard F. O'Hanlon’s *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* remains crucial for any proper understanding of the subject at hand.

This may seem surprising at first glance through the text, as it contains no reference to Schelling and his *Freedom* at all. What it does contain, however, are some of the most lucid expositions of Balthasar's ideas on the Trinitarian *unterfessing*, ones that show him putting Schelling's proposed divine development (from ur-Ground to Ground) to

---


orthodox use. Hanolan’s own thesis nicely summarizes this, “We may put forward as a hypothesis the notion that a Trinitarian event in God is Balthasar’s way of tackling the issue of God’s immutability.”

Two longer passages, unpacking this “event,” especially as it relates to our concern with the pathology of evil, bear repeating at length. First, as to the unterfessing of substantial sin finding ground for its appearance within the eternal Trinitarian difference:

It is the difference between the Father and the Son that makes possible the cross. If God were simply one he would become ensnared in the world-process through the incarnation and cross. But, because God is triune, with both poles of difference and unity guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, the difference between Father and Son can accommodate all created differences, including that extreme distance shown on the cross [...]

The second passage goes on to locate the unterfessing of substantial sin’s removal, within that same Trinitarian difference, as viewed through an act love that only difference (kenosis) can make possible:

---

203 Another reading of Schelling, that of Slavoj Žižek in his *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), finds the radicality of evil in the distinctly human experience of the movement from *Ground* to *Existence*: “We can see how far we are from the traditional notion of lack, privation, or imperfection as the *Ground of Evil* [...]. Evil does not reside in in finitude as such, in its deficiency with regard to the infinite God – it can emerge only in a finite creature [...]. The first thing to emphasize here is the elementary dialectical point that man is the unity of *Ground and Existence* precisely in so far as it is only in him that their difference is finally explicated, posited as such [...]. In other words, from the previous indifference of the two principles, we pass to their unity – and it is here that we encounter freedom as freedom for Good and Evil.” (63-64). A similar conception of the birth of the human ego and its tendency for the suppression of “otherness” will be explored below, in the following section of this chapter, as it echoes many of the insights on the nature of evil that Balthasar inherited by way of Blondel.

204 O’Hanlon, pg. 25

205 Ibid, 27
The cross is an “emptying” in God. As such it is the extreme point of that emptying which occurs already... There is a great mystery here, in the way a temporal event can be present to God eternally, and can affect God, albeit in a non-temporal way [...]. We may anticipate how Balthasar will go about describing this change it will not be a temporal, created alteration in God. It will be real. Its reality will be grounded in the Trinitarian event which makes it possible for God to contain within himself all the modalities of love including... that refusal of love which is sin.206

With these passages from O'Hanlon in mind, one can see how Balthasar has effectively rehabilitated Schelling's conception of a divine mutability present in the 'event' of the divine development from ur-ground, to ground, of being. Instead of a temporal sounding mutability, Balthasar vests the concept in the orthodox, if speculative, language of the eternal processions of Divine Persons. But, more importantly for the present purposes, he is able to accomplish this in order to maintain, albeit in orthodox terms, Schelling’s location of the 'facticity of evil' (the subject of 'authentic freedom') within the eternal.

This relationship between Balthasar’s speculation on the Trinitarian processions and the reality of evil are on clear display in two central soteriological passages of his work. The first, from *Theo-Dramatics Volume IV*, further defines the relationship, when Balthasar declares that:

If we realize the ground-lessness of man’s free No in the face of the purely gracious (and hence ground-less) Yes of God’s love, it is clear that the expiation, the expurgation of this ground-less sin must involve a transfiguration through

---

206 Ibid, 28-29. Proof of O'Hanlon's thesis are found throughout the Balthasarian corpus; to cite just two from the *Theo-Dramatics, Volume IV*: "God the Father can give his divinity away in such a manner that is not merely 'lent' to the Son. The Son's possession of it is equally substantial. This implies such an incomprehensible and unique 'separation' of God from himself that it includes and grounds every other separation, be it ever so dark and bitter [...]" 327, and "Man's refusal was possible because of the Trinitarian 'recklessness' of divine love which, in giving itself, observed no limits and had no regard for itself. In this it showed both its power and its powerlessness, and fundamental vulnerability: the two are inseparable." 329.
suffering that is surpassingly ‘ground-less’ in a way we cannot imagine.  

The second, from a lengthy essay entitled “On Vicarious Atonement,” written shortly before Theo-Dramatics Volume IV, goes on to demonstrate how the two, Trinity and Evil, find the ultimate demonstration of their relationship in the events of the Paschal Mystery:

And, indeed, God does not overtake freedom in such a way that man’s choice is called into question from without [...] but in such a way that God accompanies man into the most extreme situation of his (negative) choice with his own divine choice. And this is what happens in the Passion of Jesus.

As always, for Balthasar, questions of theodicy in the strict sense of word/tradition are deferred to a theological contemplation of the Passion. This contemplative soteriology reveals the “facticity of evil” in all its incarnate horror, allowing for no explanation as to why it exists, rather presenting a graphic display of what it is (as we saw in Ch. III and its exploration of Pauline Realism and the Paschal Mystery).

Ultimately, by modifying Schelling’s thesis of the “facticity of evil,” Balthasar locates the metaphysical ground of sin outside of human choice (subjectivity), maintaining its object-hood, which it must in fact maintain, if human freedom faced with a real decision genuinely involves a choice between things. However, in doing so, he is also laying out the soteriological implications of this freedom... Human freedom is

---


real; to the extent that freedom is real, the evil option is equally real; but like all things, both find their ontological ground only within Divine Freedom which is seen most explicitly in the Trinitarian *perichoresis* and which is expressed economically in the Paschal Mystery, itself the means for evil’s ultimate undermining.

While Schelling’s reflections on freedom evidently inspired Balthasar’s conception of evil’s extra-human *objectivity*, a turn toward another philosopher of religion, Maurice Blondel (1861-1945), becomes necessary in order to explicate the inspiration for Balthasar’s reflection on the pathological development of evil in the realm of the *subjective*, in the individual.

**B) Blondel’s *L’Action***

Balthasar’s reliance on Blondel is asserted by no less than the former’s own cousin, (now Auxiliary Bishop) Peter Henrici, long-time Pontifical Gregorian University expert on Catholic Modernism and *Ressourcement*. In one of the earliest attempts at presenting a sketch of Balthasar’s main philosophical influences, Henrici declares to his readers that, “Von Balthasar’s philosophizing is thoroughly ‘apologetic’ in the same sense as Blondel’s... for him there cannot be any philosophy which is not oriented by its very essence toward Christianity.”209 The most telling evidence of the Blond Elian influence on Balthasar, however, is to be found in the writings themselves. Over 40 references to Blondel and his work appear throughout the *Triptych*. Almost half of these

---

references are found in the *Theo-Dramatics* alone, and a chapter is devoted to him in *Dare We Hope...?*, demonstrating that even when composing his last published work, Blondel and his method were still close to Balthasar’s heart and mind.\(^{210}\) Such a long-lasting influence is not surprising if one also takes into account that Balthasar would have developed a thorough grasp of Blondel’s method simply by fact of his key role as the German translator for the private journal (*Carnets Intimes*) that Blondel kept during the composition and doctoral defense of *L’Action*.\(^{211}\)

What then, is the essence of this Blondelian apologetic, so influential to Balthasar and upon his unique understanding of sin as substantial? It should go without saying that half of the genius of Blondel’s thesis is its bold, but careful, progression through several logical premises, revealing multiple philosophical presuppositions in its unique style. It is with some reluctance, therefore, that one looks to “summarize” either this style or the import of the subject that such a crafted style conveys; however, the nature of this particular exploration requires some attempt at summarizing Blondel’s almost sui generis (at least for its time) argument. Perhaps the task is best left to him: “All attempts to bring human action to completion fail; and it is impossible for human action not to seek to complete itself and to be self-sufficient. It has to, it cannot... The sense of powerlessness as well as the need man has for an infinite fulfillment remains incurable.”\(^{212}\)

\(^{210}\) Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Dare We Hope...?*, 114-125.


Attempting to demonstrate how central the idea of achieving ontological fulfillment, and doing so through moving beyond one’s own subjective existence, is to Balthasar’s theological project is readily demonstrable. Beauty, after all, is one of the hallmarks of his work; his *Theological-Aesthetics* being the most readily recognizable of his oeuvre. Beauty, according to Balthasar is that transcendental property of being that draws other existents into a relationship with another particular existent in question, “A being appears, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel. In appearing it gives itself, it delivers itself to us: it is good. And in giving itself up, it speaks itself, it unveils itself: it is true (in itself, but in the other to which it reveals itself).”

Beyond the centrality of an exploration of beauty in Balthasar, the concept of being’s self-diffusive property is also approached by way of his notion of the human will, a concept central to Blondel’s own metaphysical method. For Balthasar, once *being* is encountered and the classical *analogia entis* commences (in which one attempts to understand this individual and limited act of existence in its relationship to God’s pure actuality), questions of contingency arise. And, as is often the case when questions of ontological contingency arise, the mundane practicalities of this existing (in an analogous way with *pure being*) bring the concept of personal freedom to the fore of the discussion:

> In order to see the true dialectic of power in which created freedom is involved, we need rather to consider the latter’s intrinsic relation to its origin, which is the identity of absolute freedom and absolute power [...] the polar constitution of finite freedom becomes the reason why the

---

self-actualization of freedom, at its summit, must lead
irresistibly to a choice (Blondel’s ‘option’) if it is
authentically to lay hold of itself as freedom, it cannot see
itself as purely autonomous but must also realize that this is
a gift, owing its existing to some other source.\footnote{Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Theo-Dramatics: Volume IV}, 150}

In brief, Balthasar argues that a realization of ontological contingency automatically
implies an investigation into the limits imposed on one’s freedom by this possession of
limited being. This investigation, in turn, should bring the questioning subject into a
realization of the deep interconnectedness of ontology and freedom, of existing and
acting. In fact, such an investigation should arrive at the conclusion that, just as being
was received from an outside act of freedom, one’s being must—in like manner
imitating its cause as is metaphysically proper—actualize its ontological value in
exercising its own freedom, something only accomplished by action upon, or allowance
for, another external existent:

\begin{quote}
Although we cannot deny that finite freedom has an
absolute aspect, it has power over neither its own ground
nor its own fulfillment. It does possess itself, yet it is not its
own gift to itself; it owes itself to some other origin, thus it
can never catch up with its own ground, nor with its own
essence; it can only attain fulfillment beyond itself. \footnote{Ibid, 139. This quote, shortened of its opening line for this section, is even more telling (for the purposes of the broader study) in linking the influence of Blondel’s \textit{propulsive} aspect of being and the possibilities of this for an exploration of sin: ‘In discussing evil we need to start with finite freedom. Although we cannot deny that finite freedom has an absolute aspect [...]’ etc.}
\end{quote}

This last line strikes an immediate chord with Blondel’s work, and in fact, a similar
progression of metaphysical realizations can be found in the following passages, from a
self-realization of contingency perceived from outside of the lines of its own ontological
borders, “Once the will has been interiorized in reflected consciousness, it can no longer
confine itself therein; coming from the outside, where it draws nourishment, it returns to the outside to operate in it.”\textsuperscript{216} And, on to the consequent course of exteriorization toward (and, hence, allowance of) the other:

I establish that this freedom preserves itself only by going out of itself to submit to a heteronomy, to conquer for the will what escapes it and to throw itself into operative action. In short, the subject will keep itself intact, complete, and sincere only by objectifying itself.\textsuperscript{217}

Both Balthasar and Blondel before him share the same basic anthropology, one realized only through action. While “anthropology” is rather broad in scope, as readily demonstrated by Blondel’s lengthy and carefully argued critique of several possible answers (the immediate, the social, the political, the religious, etc.), the nature of this existential act is, for both thinkers, the imitation of its own ontological realization of contingency. The individual realizes itself only by risking a step beyond the certainty of its boundaries and encountering those of another. This movement out, this self-objectification, results in the encounter with the boundaries of an object not part of the subject’s own being. Subsequently, talk of this “self-objectification” and the realization of “the other” as the primary constituents of ontology recalls both authors’ theological grounding in Christian notions of the Trinity.

For both Balthasar and Blondel, the psycho-ontological journey continues past self-realization, through self-objectification, into (and out of) the exterior phenomenon of action. It continues for both until the eventual realization of the necessity of the

\textsuperscript{216} Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 131.

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid, 110.
transcendent option, which is the only option able to meet the seemingly ontologically inexhaustible “willing will” that constitutes a major element of our humanity.

But what happens to the individual who, though conscious of the ontological contingency brought about by another subject “making room for” (via kenosis) her own status as object, refuses to mimic her prior along this ladder of being? Who does not “[sense] the presence of another will by which one has to take one’s bearings”?

Balthasar, in exploring this very line from *L’Action*, in the course of *Theo-Dramatics Volume IV*, answers by proclaiming that, “Here, for Blondel, lies the choice between losing and gaining one’s freedom; here too, therefore, is the original locus of perversity, of moral evil in the world.”

The hypothetical person in question becomes, in the misuse of her freedom through inaction, the creator of a reality - of sin. Here is the birth of a false god of an irrational, un-living substance. Balthasar’s reading of Blondel on this point is confirmed by the latter, when he states that:

> To will nothing is to turn away from every object, in order to hold oneself entirely in reserve and to forbid oneself all gifts, all dedication, and all abnegation. One wills that being not be, but it is a pleasure to be in order to deny being: a radical egoism that would destroy everything in order to remain alone like a god.

It is of some note that the term of divinity derisively employed here is not designated “God” because the Christian conception must exclude any notion of stasis and solitude. The perichoresis, or “dance”, of the Triune Persons forbids it. And it is here, in looking

---


at the failure to act according to (and within) the matrix of kenotic-generativity, that
either authors locate the birth - or should one say “stagnation”? – of sin.

Before turning to the anatomy or, more properly speaking, pathology of sin, it is
worth revisiting how central this concept was to a Balthasar heavily indebted to
Blondel’s insistence on the experience of real existential freedom through the
allowance, and subsequent approval, of heteronomy. At the heart of his trilogy, he
rather boldly proclaims:

There is something in God that develops into suffering. This
suffering occurs when the recklessness with which the
Father gives away himself (and all that is his) encounters a
freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this
magnanimity, changes it into calculating, cautious self-
reservation. This contrasts with the essentially divine
recklessness of the Son, who allows himself to be
squandered, and of the Spirit who accompanies him.  

This passage finds striking precedence in Blondel’s own assessment of the situation
when he proposes that actualization of the self through “the will, therefore, could not lie
in any sort of jealous reserve or sacrilegious apotheosis, but rather an apparent
abdication... To act, we must in a way alienate ourselves, hand ourselves over to forces
we shall no longer dominate.”

That the nature of sin (and not just its origins, as discussed above) was of
interest to Blondel, as well, is made clear by his English-language biographer (and

---


221 Blondel, *Action*, 193. Once again, the parallels here with Zizek’s reading of Schelling, should
not be overlooked. As he states in the conclusion to his exploration of evil in *The Invisible Remainder*: “[...] in human Evil, the Ground is self-illumined, elevated to the Spirit; it takes over the spiritual principle of
egotism which strives to instrumentalize and subordinate to itself every Otherness, [...] the true spiritual
Good does not aim to dominate nature but lets it be in its Otherness.” (66)
translator of L’Action), Olivia Blanchette. In Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life, one reads the following, which sounds similar to the “mystical-realism” advocated by Balthasar:

Blondel’s approach to the Christian mystery of redemption is one of profound spiritual realism [...] What sin entails is not just a matter of imperfection or of dereliction in an order of passing and reparable contingencies [...]. For in deciding anything seriously in our lives we are also adopting an attitude toward God, using the double motion of the right reason and of a divine impulse. In sin we are abusing something ontological...

Of particular note here is Blondel’s rejection of sin as “imperfection” (i.e. privation of the good) and his understanding that if sin abuses something ontological, it must—to that extent—possess some measure of existence of its own. In short, it must itself have being.

Sin, therefore, for both Schelling and for Blondel, exists. It is a real option, necessary for freedom to be, in fact, free. It is the disorder of existence that results in the subject who engages this option of freedom – even, and most primarily, in a lack of engagement, in spiritual inertia. That Balthasar, one of the few Catholic theologians to have undertaken extensive research on and translation of, both of these philosophers, formulated a similar conception of sin’s metaphysical composition should come with little or no surprise. However, there is yet another element of these philosophers’ explorations into substantial sin that parallels Balthasar’s speculation on the subject. Schelling and Blondel share a similar language around transmission, a language identifying sin as a very particular type of ontological disease. As this language will

allow us to approach an understanding of Balthasar’s attempts to argue for sin’s substantial existence within Catholic theological discourse, we move to explore it, by way of conclusions, in the following *Epilogue*.
EPILOGUE

As noted, Balthasar’s opinion on the matter of the substantiality of sin is made most explicit in his claim that, “Because of the energy that man has invested in it, sin is a reality, it is not ‘nothing.’”\textsuperscript{223} The choice of wording should be recognized as being strongly in line with Blondel’s concept of a quasi-contagion present in causality through the relationship between subject and object. In the course of his exploration into the actual mechanism of action, he proposes that, “the agent puts himself into what he does; and what he does fashions him. The center of equilibrium of individual life moves, therefore, and transports itself into the work to which the will consecrates itself.”\textsuperscript{224} Schelling shared a similar understanding of sin as ontologically pathological. As White confirms in his study:

\begin{quote}
Human beings can choose to be guided by the principle of understanding that is common to all [...] or they can choose to be guided by the principle of will that manifests itself uniquely in every individual [...]. Those who choose the latter course upset the balance of principles, [...] perverting the natural order of subordination of will to understanding. The result is evil, the spiritual counterpart to illness in the body.\textsuperscript{225}
\end{quote}

Both Blondel and Schelling—and through them, Balthasar—endorse an act of transmission (via intent or act) from the subject to the object. This transmission, therefore, not only damages the individual subject by ultimately missing its own ontological mark, but also creates a deforming excess of \textit{mis}-, or simply, \textit{un}- used freedom. Ironically, or tragically, this excess spreads beyond itself, even in the very act


\textsuperscript{224} Blondel, \textit{Action}, 215

\textsuperscript{225} White, 121
of wishing to remain static, beyond the first conscious instance, and into the whole of
the individual’s being. Relying on the tradition of Pauline mystical realism as explored
in Chapter 3, with its proposed use of the pharmakos/i ("medicine-man/man") models
of atonement to contemplate the Paschal Mystery, Balthasar sums this up nicely as he
employs the language of sin-as-sickness in a Holy Week homily from late in his
ministry:

Can God do anything against the finite freedom he himself
has created if it stubbornly gives him a “No”? […] Those
who champion autonomy are indignant and regard it as a
theft on God’s part, a violation of our freedom. To them it is
like anesthetizing a man and cutting some organ from his
body without his permission. But is this comparison valid?
Is sin, man’s refusal to be reconciled with eternal absolute
goodness, really an organ essential to life? Is it not much
more like a spreading cancer? Can we say that God is
robbing man of anything by restoring his health?
Furthermore, if a man has become locked in a syndrome of
refusal, if he refuses to keep faith with God, can he free
himself from his own obstinacy?226

The use of the phrase “a syndrome of refusal” to refer to the individuation of non-
kenotic, substantial sin in a particular person is in line with the language of both
Schelling and Blondel as outlined above. And, indeed, with this shared language of the
pathological nature of sin’s being, we begin to draw near the heart of the matter: the
ontological nature of this substantial sin. In one of the few works to explore Balthasar’s
moral theology, “Tragedy and the Ethics of Hans Urs von Balthasar”, by Christopher
Steck, one finds confirmation of this idea of a systemic structural (ontologically
speaking) failure in the non-kenotic person:

226 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Bought at Great Price” in You Crown the Year with Your Goodness:
Sermons through the Liturgical Year. Translated by Graham Harrison. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,
1989), 78.
For Balthasar, the Trinitarian imprint is found in the fact that all creation is oriented toward the dialogical. Just as the Father expresses himself in the Son, so also every creature in some way speaks a ‘word’ which expresses what it is to the other. And in the case of the intelligent creature, the encountered manifestation of the other elicits another movement: the *ek-static* perception of the other’s address. The Triune God who created us imprinted in us a *conatus* toward free creative engagement with the other.227

Steck rightly realizes the source of sin’s manifestation in the type of “syndrome” Balthasar outlined, one that fails to follow the imprinted, almost genetically-sounding, Trinitarian *imago Dei*. And as the latter makes quite clear, “[the creature] can also refuse this reference, isolating its received power [...]. Thus isolated by the creature’s abuse of freedom, power becomes evil.228

In seeking a way toward further discourse about Balthasar’s bold proposal of substantial sin within a theological tradition that has no such language but privation (as seen in Chapter 2), I believe there is a ready-made oncological model with which to bridge this divide, to further analyze the theologian’s analysis of this ontological failure. As seen above, Balthasar himself asked whether Catholic theologians wouldn’t be better to wonder, “Is it not much more like a spreading cancer?”229

Contemporary cellular biology tells us that this ontological-oncological model finds its basis in programmed cell death, or apoptosis, a theory that proposes individual

---


229 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Bought at Great Price”, 78
cells or grouping of cells are in fact programmed by their DNA to die in order to make room for new, fresh cells.\textsuperscript{230} In his 2010 article, “The Siren’s Song: This Death that Makes Life Live”, a poetic title that would sound quite at home among Balthasarian essays and homilies, one of the foremost scholars of oncology, Dr. Gerry Melino states that “with the increased prominence of apoptosis in biological science has come a shift in our philosophical attitude to many disease pathologies.”\textsuperscript{231} I propose that a similar shift in attitude toward evil is at play here, in Balthasar’s attempts to speak of evil as substantial, as the result of a systemic ontological failure. Where he speaks of the individual person and their refusal to live according to the kenosis that allows for their own existence and the existence of the “other(s)”, contemporary oncology speaks of the “refusal” of the individual cell to do something strikingly similar. Both acts of refusal result in a new, malignant substance, one spiritual in nature – the other physical.

The history of the medical discovery of apoptosis and the paradigmatic shift in how to speak of a tumor are quite telling. They can’t help but remind the reader of the persistence of the language of privation in speaking of evil’s mode or manner of existence. For instance, one is reminded that, “The apoptosis concept, represents one of the most important milestones in cell and tissue research this century. Prior to its introduction, all cell death was considered to be the outcome of injury and to be degenerative in nature.”\textsuperscript{232} And, again, from an article documenting the discovery and

\textsuperscript{230} Gerry Melino, et al, ”The Siren’s Song: This Death that Makes Life Live” in Cell Death, Edited by Gerry Melino & David Vaux. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid, 11

subsequent presentation of this new oncological vision, we hear how this major
discovery struggled with the conventional pathological terminology of the day, with the
concept of cancer as a privation of pre-existing tissue. In writing of its initial discovery,
its authors relate that

> What had started out as three essentially separate fields of investigation of cell death, [...] shrinking necrosis in pathological tissues, [...] controllable cell death in endocrine tissues, and programmed cell death in the embryo came together to form the basis of the generalized concept on cell death that was soon to be termed apoptosis... The term ‘shrinking necrosis’ had undesirable connotations, as it suggested the new type of cell death was simply another variant of necrosis, which was clearly not the case. The name apoptosis was proposed.233

Oncology had reached the limits of speaking about the development of cancerous cells
with language that did not accurately reflect the action of said cell/cells.

In an analogous fashion, Balthasar’s attempts to present a coherent, realist soteriology
uncovered that an ontological language founded on the conceptual framework of evil as
a shrinking (a privation) of a previously good substance rang false.

> While the symptoms of cancer may (and often are) spoken of in terms of ‘eating away’, or ‘devastation’, of the tissue>organ>system>body, etc., contemporary cellular biology now proposes a language of mutation and metastasis to describe the actual mechanism of carco-genesis. In the place of privation there is now fitting language about the creation of a thing, a tumor that grows, disrupting the organs, systems, and

ultimately, life of an individual, a family, a community. One now reads that “the earliest changes in apoptosis occur in the nucleus where chromatin is compacted and segregated into sharply circumscribed masses, ... concomitant with these changes, the cell condenses, rounds up, and in tissues, pulls away from its neighbors...” This language is strikingly similar to that employed by Balthasar, as documented throughout these chapters, to outline the incarnation of a priori evil in a subject’s ontological stasis, or non-kenotic inertia, in the face of encountering the other and the other’s own claims to a share in reality.

For Balthasar, sin, this ontological tumor, is the sediment of ontological inertia. It is the non-living, spiritual substance that, as discussed in Chapter 2, can find no logical home on the Porphyrian Tree— as that which is spiritual is, at its root, that which moves ... or should move. If one speaks of the “spiritual”, one is, to that extent, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, speaking of ruah – of wind or a rushing breeze, the very breath of life. And, if one seeks to speak of the soul (anima, in its Hellenistic-Christian usage) one, to that very extent, must speak of movement (be it as simple as the growth of the vegetative soul, or as complex as the human soul’s rotation of reasoned intellection). But here the very substance of the thing in question, the substance of sin, spreads by stasis; contaminates by inertia. This becomes, of course, a contradiction,

---


235 Recalling the primordial aspects of this ontological sin, the creation of substantial disorder from the previously ordered substances of God’s providence, the following lines of Cardinal Daniélou come quickly to mind: “The ruah rouses the void to life ’as an eagle insights its nestlings forth by hovering over its brood’ (Deuteronomy 32:11). The idea here is of provoking existence, of wrestling movement from inertia, in the same way the Spirit moved over the waters and called forth from primordial nothingness all the species and varieties of Creation.” Trinity & Mystery of Existence, 32.
and, as Balthasar would have it, a contradiction much more destructive than any failure of logic:

If created freedom chooses itself as the absolute good it involves itself in a contradiction that will devour it. The formal object that informs it, which is in fact absolute self-positing freedom, is in constant contradiction with finite freedom’s pretentious claim to be infinite. This contradiction, if persisted in, is hell.236

The cosmos, set in motion by the perichoresis of persons within the Trinity, is thrown, by the accrual of this inert, spiritual sediment, into a mounting disruption of order, which, as argued in Chapter 4, is, in fact, a reentrance of the primal chaos from which goodness (creation) was called forth into existence.

Sin is an object. Sin is a spiritual substance. Sin is in need of soteriological excision. As seen in Chapter 3, this accounts for Balthasar’s reliance on the pharmakos-influenced mystical realism of certain Pauline passages. The accumulated sin of the world though all time, in a surgical sense, is removed, transplanted into a host whose hypostatic conditions render him uniquely able to assume this deadly substance and take it away (“Take him away! Take him away!” - Jn 19:15), out of humanity, outside the city gates, outside the realm of the living, into his Descent, into the infinite, preexistent, distance of the kenosis between Persons in the Godhead: a distance, Balthasar never tires of telling us, which can contain all, and burn away any substance that cannot tolerate the radiant love of its consuming fire.

236 Hans Urs von Balthasar. Theo-Dramatics, Volume V: The Last Act, 301
Bibliography


---  *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption.* Translated by [N/A]. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010.


Duffy, Kevin, "Change, Suffering, and Surprise in God: Von Balthasar’s Use of Metaphor". *Irish Theological Quarterly* November 2011 vol. 76 no. 4 (370-387).


Lindsay, Mark Lindsay, “‘Nothingness’ Revisited: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust”, COLLOQUIUM 34/1, 2012.


Pitstick and Oakes, "Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange"


Schelling, F.W.J., Philosophical Inquires into the Nature of Human Freedom. Translated by
James Gutmann. La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1936.


