INTERPRETING TRANSCENDENCE
An Interdisciplinary Dialogue

18 - 19 June 2015

Center for Advanced Studies
Seestraße 13 - 80802 München
www.cas.uni-muenchen.de
Thursday, 18 June 2015

09:30 – 10:00  Introductions

10:00 – 12:00  Panel 1. Sociological and Philosophical Approaches to Transcendence

Social Transcendence: Connecting Anomie and Sovereignty
Robert Yelle, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

The Work of Transcendence
Gustavo Benavides, Villanova University

Conversion and Vertigo
Daniel Colucciello Barber, Institute for Cultural Inquiry Berlin

12:00 – 13:30  Lunch Break at the CAS

13:30 – 15:30  Panel 2. Semiotic and Aesthetic Approaches to Transcendence

The Enthralled Spectator: Oblique Themes in the Discourse on Cultural Origins
Peter Jackson, Stockholm University

Smashing the Idols: A Paradoxical Semiotics
Massimo Leone, University of Torino

Transcendence and Imagination – Some Thoughts on Two Related Concepts
Katharina Wilkens, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

15:30 – 16:00  Coffee Break

16:00 – 18:00  Panel 3. Transcendence and Religious Traditions

Talking (and Arguing) with Transcendence
Ugo Volli, University of Torino

Can God be Categorized? The Limits of Theological Language in Early Medieval Philosophy
Peter Adamson, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Transcendence without Difference? Some Remarks on the Diamond Sūtra
Martin Lehnert, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

19:00  Conference Dinner for the Speakers at the Café Reitschule
Friday, 19 June 2015

10:00 – 12:00  Panel 4. Transcendence and Anthropotechnics

Philosophy's Turn to Practice as the Spectral Return of Transcendence: Peter Sloterdijk, Michel Foucault, and the Non-religion of ‘Anthropotechnics'
Ward Blanton and Yvonne Sherwood, University of Kent

The Mass Miracle: Healing in the Age of Tele-Technology
Anderson Blanton, Max-Planck-Institut Göttingen

12:00 – 13:30  Lunch Break at the CAS

13:30 – 15:30  Panel 5. Transcendence and Texts

The Immanence/Transcendence Distinction at Work. The Case of the Apostles' Creed
Volkhard Krech, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

"Immanent Transcendence". Hermann Broch and the Critique of Political Theology
Daniel Weidner, Humboldt-Universität Berlin

Adveniat Regnum Tuum: Revolutionary Paths toward Religious Transcendence in Italian Contemporary Literature
Jenny Ponzo, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

15:30 – 16:00  Coffee Break

16:00 – 18:00  Interdisciplinary Round Table: Defining and Representing Transcendence
(all conference participants)

19:00  Conference Dinner for the Speakers at the Weinbauer Gasthaus

Abstracts

Can God be Categorized? The Limits of Theological Language in Early Medieval Philosophy
Peter Adamson, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

A striking parallel between early Latin and early Arabic medieval philosophy is the application of Aristotelian logical tools to topics in metaphysics, such as the nature of the soul and of God. In particular, we find philosophers of all three Abrahamic faith traditions asking whether
Aristotle's ten categories are applicable to God - generally, the answer is no. I will look at this theme in a figure from each faith: Boethius (d. 525), al-Kindi (d. after 870), and Saadia Gaon (d. 942), and argue that their use of categorial theory in this context has to do with the late ancient understanding of Aristotelian logic, and by extension human language, as applicable to the sensible or created world.

The Work of Transcendence
Gustavo Benavides, Villanova University

The presentation will explore the genesis of transcendence from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, transcendence as produced by the postponement of consumption, the concomitant practice of storage, and the resulting intensification of labor as well as of human agency; on the other, transcendence as the utopian desire to avoid labor altogether, this being achieved by the exorbitation and/or by the transcending of agency. Since transcendence is an extreme case of metarepresentation, the processes mentioned above will be studied taking into account the human capacity to engage in metacognition, a capacity that is itself intensified as the result of those processes.

Philosophy’s Turn to Practice as the Spectral Return of Transcendence: Peter Sloterdijk, Michel Foucault, and the Non-religion of ‘Anthropotechnics’
Ward Blanton and Yvonne Sherwood, University of Kent

Two very closely related strategies for a challenging of inherited understandings of both religion and the human sciences more generally emerge from the work of late Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk. In both writers there are strong Nietzschean gestures toward “worldliness” or “immanence” of focus as a way of reconfiguring more idealizing or explicitly religious interpretations of experience. Both writers look to “practice” or “exercise” as a mode of articulating this Nietzschean focus, with Sloterdijk summarizing their respective positions as a single commitment to reading human culture as an elaborate regime of “anthropotechnics” or self-constituting practices of a human being which does not exist outside the particular anthropotechnical regime in which it finds itself.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that both the late Foucault and Sloterdijk may also be read as fomenting a return of “spirituality” and even “transcendence” as contemporary philosophical topics. Foucault makes “spiritual exercises” a kind of skeleton key for understanding the lasting value of ancient Mediterranean practices of self-making, and Sloterdijk’s recent opus, You Must Change Your Life!, constitutes a massive genealogy of ostensibly secular regimes of anthropotechnics even as it also orients itself entirely around the category of an “imperative to self-transcendence” and even as it takes figures like Karl Barth as crucial indications of the “non-religious” focus on self-transcending practices.

Why has the philosophical secularization of humanity as regimens of practice conjured the spectral return of traditional notions of an imperative of self-transcendence? What, moreover, might our diagnoses of this moment imply for ongoing work on philosophy, religion, and the turn to practice?
Conversion and Vertigo
Daniel Colucciello Barber, Institute for Cultural Inquiry Berlin

In this paper I propose that difficulties surrounding the interpretation of transcendence may be understood as indexing a double-bind. Transcendence provides a means of exceeding a secular, developmental, colonial narrative. Yet transcendence also invokes a Christian, supersessionist narrative that conditions the secular coloniality that is meant to be exceeded. It seems necessary, then, to articulate the logic that connects Christian supersessionist and secular developmentalist narratives, and in doing so to articulate that which exceeds this very logic. I propose that this may be done by way of conversion (the logic connecting these narratives) and vertigo (what exceeds this logic).

The Enthralled Spectator: Oblique Themes in the Discourse on Cultural Origins
Peter Jackson, Stockholm University

In this essay, I am borrowing the critical notion of the “enthralled spectator” from film historian Tom Gunning in order to explore its applicability to recurrent themes in the archaeological discourse on cultural origins. Behind this notion lies an inclination among in-group members to imagine themselves as profoundly different from those thought to exist outside of the willing suspension of disbelief. The enthralled spectator remains the victim of an illusion, cut off from the wonder of insight and exposure characteristic of a fully emancipated rational consciousness. In accordance with the envisioning of cinema’s first audiences as being passively submitted to an all-dominating apparatus, prehistoric archaeologists have been prone to infer a similar lack of agency and symbolic sophistication among early humans from an archaeological record that simultaneously demonstrates traits of behavioral modernity. By clarifying how this long-term imaginative capacity is being reiterated rather than scrutinized in modern scholarship and popular culture, an attempt is made, firstly, to resolve certain lingering paradoxes in the discourse on cultural origins, and, secondly, to reconsider this mythically flawed anthropology as an object of historical study in its own right.

The Immanence/Transcendence Distinction at Work. The Case of the Apostles’ Creed
Volkhard Krech, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Treating religion as communication, semantics is at its ‘surface’, while the immanence/transcendence distinction belongs to its syntax. This distinction might even be understood as the religious code. However, syntax and semantics have to be mediated within religious communication. The paper will try to shade some light on the interaction between syntax and semantics in the Apostles’ Creed as a case study.

Transcendence without Difference? Some Remarks on the Diamond Sūtra
Martin Lehnert, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Buddhism and Mahāyāna teachings in particular often appear to refer to notions of transcendence in terms of immanence, or rather: locate the difference between
transcendence and immanence within “suchness” (tathāta) or the “realization” of the unity of nirvāṇa and saṃsara – to name only two related concepts – without clarifying how to observe and to recognize such unity. With special regard to the Diamond Sūtra (Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā), the paper aims to discuss the Buddhist notion of suchness (tathāta) as a paradoxical concept of transcendence-without-difference, a concept that refers to the cessation of any discrimination including the possibility of distinguishing immanence and transcendence.

Smashing the Idols: A Paradoxical Semiotics
Massimo Leone, University of Torino

The evolution of monotheism within a polytheist culture is strictly connected with the institution of the dialectics between monolatry and idolatry. On the one hand, a divinity among the others becomes the center of an increasingly exclusive cult. On the other hand, the progression of this exclusivity unfolds parallel with the stigmatization of any alternative veneration. The establishment of monolatry is substantiated both in sacred texts, which designate the only god, forbid the others, prescribe the legitimate cult, and condemn deviations, and in liturgy, where any reference to a multiplicity of transcendence is carefully avoided. The liturgical work of monolatry, however, is not only positive. It consists in a regulation of the signs of cult, but it entails also a destructive tension. So as to establish monolatry, determining the formulae for the evocation of the only transcendence is as central as destroying any sign that contaminates it by the representation of a rival divinity.
The paper will bear on paradoxical representations of this negative work.

Adveniat Regnum Tuum: Revolutionary Paths toward Religious Transcendence in Italian Contemporary Literature
Jenny Ponzo, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Catholic religion proposes a set of values implying self-transcendence in the name of a dimension which is superior to the individual. Such a transcendent dimension is often represented as “Heaven” or as the “Kingdom of God”. To reach it should be the Catholics´ supreme goal. The Church, basing itself on the Bible and on its tradition has elaborated a well codified style of action for the individual to attain it; however, the orthodox idea of following the laws and the ritual path traced by the Church is hard to find in post-Vatican II literature. On the contrary, many novels seem based on an intense questioning on how humans should act in order to reach such kingdom or to bring it about in this world, on how and when will the evangelical promises be fulfilled. What prevails in Italian narratives is therefore a hard individual quest for such a fulfillment, involving the subject both on an intellectual/semiotic level (a tormented effort to interpret, to understand the Scriptures) and on a pragmatic level (the attempt to perform an action that finally makes the fulfillment happen). In most cases the way to transcendence is “revolutionary”, or because it implies the reversal of the Church´s positions (Silone 1968, Testori 1975), or because it passes through the breaking of the earthly order and the irruption in ordinary life of “exceptional” states (Troisi, 1986).
Talking (and Arguing) with Transcendence
Ugo Volli, University of Torino

Transcendent is that which by its essence is not of this world, cannot be touched nor seen, is not a thing. This is the demanding definition of God introduced in Western culture from Judaism. But how is it possible to have a relationship with such a transcendent God really? The Jewish response, different from the Christian and Muslim, is: through language. The language determines the creation, which happens by means of verbal imperatives. Linguistic is the Revelation: speech becoming text, Scriptures. Through language some biblical characters (from Adam to Cain, from Abraham to Moses, from Jonah to Job) may seek to give God their case, that often stands against Him: justifications, communications, requests, questions, often real arguments or lawsuits, as also recently told Elie Wiesel. Language can perform this function as a bridge with transcendence because it is itself a bearer of transcendence: the bar that separates and unifies signifier and signified is the strongest carrier of transcendence in human life.

"Immanent Transcendence". Hermann Broch and the Critique of Political Theology
Daniel Weidner, Humboldt-Universität Berlin

During the 1940ies, the novelist and essayist Hermann Broch developed a political anthropology which tries to understand the political condition of man in a disenchanted world and especially to understand the temptation of totalitarianism as a political religion. His reflections connect the fact of modern slavery and exclusion, as developed later by his friend Hannah Arendt, with the tradition of political theology following Carl Schmitt. Broch's idea of a renaissance of sacrifice thus prefigures recent political theory and allows a critical discussion of the discussion of transcendence e.g. in Agamben. Moreover, due to their rhetoric nature, they reveal major literary strategies and figures used to address transcendence.

Transcendence and Imagination – Some Thoughts on Two Related Concepts
Katharina Wilkens, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

In a recent publication entitled Imagination – Ästhetik – Religion (Wilke and Traut 2014) scholars of religion discuss techniques, spaces, politics and histories of the imagination in various religious traditions as a link between transcendence and immanence. In my contribution on spirit possession and exorcism I reflect both on the therapeutic technique of incorporated imagination as well as the possibility of transcending space and time in performances of collective historic-cultural imagination. Thus, in my argument imagination does not only fulfill the function of "thinking the un-thinkable" - transcendence, but also encompasses communicative and transformative functions which can be analyzed historically, sociologically, psychologically and semiotically.
Émile Durkheim, despite his recognition in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* of piacular rites as moments of collective effervescence, established an exclusive opposition between ritual, as the occasion for the strengthening of social norms, and *anomie*, which he defined in *Suicide* as the absence or attenuation of those norms. Conversely, Giorgio Agamben, in *State of Exception*, pointed to the positive role played by rituals of transgression—or “Festivals, Mourning, [and] Anomie”—in the constitution of sovereignty. In a long article discussed by Agamben, Hendrik Versnel characterized the excessive mourning that occurred at the death of the Roman prince Germanicus as an example both of “anomy” and of those rituals of inversion that, like the Greek Kronia and Latin Saturnalia, may represent a return to the primal chaos that is also the fount of sovereignty. Both Agamben and Versnel indicate an aporia in Durkheim’s theory, an aporia addressed already by Georges Bataille’s emphasis on transgression as the sign of “souveraineté” and Roger Caillois’s connection between festivals and crises in kingship. Drawing on Durkheim’s predecessors and contemporaries, such as Pierre Proudhon and Gustave Le Bon, and on a wider range of scholarship on rituals of liminality or inversion from Victor Turner and Natalie Zemon Davis to Bruce Lincoln, I attempt to find some order in the paradoxical convergences this literature describes among crowd behavior, transgression, authority, crisis, and revolution. The mythical representation and ritual enactment of the return to a state of nature that is identified with a chaotic, because limitless, sovereignty can be found not only in ancient religions but also in its scholarly redescriptions.

**Contact**

Attendance is free, but subject to registration.

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