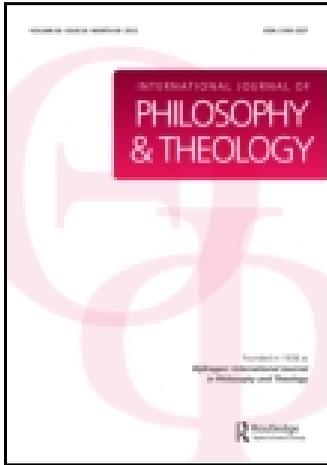


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Postmodern or late modern? On the significance of Louis Dupré's *The Quest of the Absolute*

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The latest book by Louis Dupré, *The Quest of the Absolute*, is the third and final volume of a trilogy on the intellectual history of modernity. It follows *Passage to Modernity* (1993) and *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (2004). Elegant writing and remarkable erudition go hand in hand with a deep insight into the objectives, achievements and deadlocks of the Romantic movement. It is not possible to look into the overwhelming variety of issues and figures that come to the fore in this book and the trilogy as a whole; instead, this article focuses on Dupré's central claim as to the development and significance of modern Western culture, starting from a specific question that time and again recurs as a key motive throughout the three volumes of his trilogy: are we postmodern or late modern? Dupré's answer that we are dwellers of a late modern era rather than inhabitants of a postmodern age is dependent on his definition of modernity as a still ongoing 'event that has transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter'. Since we are still standing in the midst of the event of modernity, shaped by the evolutionary process of and the strains and tensions within and between its three waves (humanism, Enlightenment, romanticism), Dupré underlines the necessity to move from hermeneutic to ontological questions. He even explicitly pleads for the rediscovery of a symbolic religious language in a tentative search for its ontological dimension and for a source of significance beyond the realm of human mind. The main question, however, is whether contemporary Western man is still capable of such a rediscovery.

Keywords: hermeneutics; ontology; modernity; romanticism; Enlightenment; humanism

The latest book by Louis Dupré, *The Quest of the Absolute*, is the third and final volume of a trilogy on the intellectual history of modernity.¹ The first volume, *Passage to Modernity* (1993), dealt mainly with the genesis of modernity (and its further evolution resulting into the unstable synthesis of the Baroque). Locating modernity's beginning earlier than the Renaissance, he traces its fundamental principles to the late fourteenth century when the combination of nominalist theology in England and early humanism in Italy caused the cultural explosion of the traditional, pre-modern worldview.² More than a decade later, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (2004) was published. There he underlined that the Enlightenment, in spite of its one-sidedness, has become an essential part of modernity and remains an everlasting factor in Western culture until today.³ Whereas the second volume focuses on the period between 1648, the year of the end of the Thirty Years' War and 1789, the year of the French Revolution, the third volume portrays the Romantic movement, neatly situated in time

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(1789–1848) and space (France, England, Germany). Meanwhile, with *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture* Dupré had written a stunning synthesis of the central ideas elaborated in his trilogy in combination with a concise exposition of a philosophy of religion of his own.⁴

Analogous to *Passage to Modernity*, *The Quest of the Absolute* equally consists of three parts. In a first part, ‘Typology of Romantic Literature’ (21–113) Dupré portrays the main characteristics and protagonists of English (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats), of German (Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Hölderlin) and French (Lamartine, De Vigny, Hugo) Romantic poetry. The second part (117–243) is a systematic discussion of Romantic aesthetics, psychology, ethics and politics. Finally, and parallel to his procedure in *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, he focuses on the Romantic attempts for a comprehensive synthesis respectively from a historical (Carlyle, Ranke, Michelet, Guizot, Scott, Von Arnim), philosophical (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Maine de Biran) and religious (Blake’s Gnosticism, Schelling’s mythology, Schleiermacher’s, Baur’s and Moehler’s theology) point of view.

Elegant writing and remarkable erudition go hand in hand with a deep insight into the objectives, achievements and deadlocks of the Romantic movement. It would lead me much too far to go into all the details and the overwhelming variety of issues and figures that come to the fore in this book and in the trilogy as a whole. Instead, I shall focus on Dupré’s central claim as to the development and significance of modern Western culture, starting from a specific question that time and again recurs as a key motive throughout the three volumes of his trilogy: do we still inhabit a modern culture or are we already dwelling in a new, postmodern period?

Postmodern or late modern?

In his preface to *The Quest of the Absolute*, Dupré raises this specific and central question in explicit terms:

Have we broken with the principles of modernity altogether? Only the future will tell. Certainly, since Nietzsche we have begun to question the foundations of modern thought. Yet is our questioning more than a fuller awareness of what it means to be modern? What will the new period bring? So far, its critique of modernity has still been derived from modern sources in spite of a new prefix to the term modernity.⁵

Already in 1993, he had raised the very same question whether we are inhabitants of a modern culture or dwellers of a new, postmodern era?⁶ On the final pages of his book on European romanticism, the answer is unambiguous: in agreement with Richard Rorty, he concludes that we rather belong to a late modern era than to a new postmodern age:

It seems best to think of Heidegger and Derrida simply as post-Nietzschean philosophers – to assign them places in a conversational sequence which runs from Descartes through Kant and Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond, rather than to view them as initiating or manifesting a radical departure.⁷

The question whether we are postmodern or still late modern is a very timely one. Recently, Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have been discussing on the impact of the prefix ‘post’ not only to the term modernity but equally to the terms secular and metaphysical. Whereas Habermas designates contemporary Western society as ‘post-secular’ and pleads for a form of ‘post-metaphysical’ thinking in terms of a re-articulation

of reason as procedural, Taylor explicitly rejects the former term and implicitly renounces the latter.⁸ In his latest books on different aspects of our era that he defines as liquid modernity, the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has been deliberately replacing the term 'postmodern' by 'late modern'.⁹ Inspired by Bauman's approach, the Flemish philosopher Herman De Dijn published the book, *Liquid Values*, the subtitle of which reads as 'politics, care and education in late modern times'.¹⁰

Obviously, Dupré is no isolated figure in stating that all critique of modernity is still derivative from modern sources themselves. But his focus to distinguish the concept 'late modernity' from 'post-modernity' is a specific one. He relates the main difference between so-called postmodernists and late modernists to their respective attitudes towards the need for ontological questions. Whereas the majority of postmodernists rejects them as either nonsensical or at least as being redundantly superfluous, Dupré highlights their utmost importance. At first sight, that distinction is something only academics will have a field day with. But I believe there is much more at stake. A preference for either of these terms entails, as I will elaborate at the end of this essay, a different view as to the role assigned to the human subject in its search for meaning and transcendence.

Definition of modernity as a process

Of course, the claim's reliability that we are still dwellers of a late modern era rather than inhabitants of a postmodern age is dependent on what is meant by modernity. The opening line of his conclusion to *Passage to Modernity* provides us with a clear and distinct definition: 'Modernity is an *event* that has transformed the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter'.¹¹ In the process of modernity, a gradual transition has taken place in the three domains of what was traditionally referred to as the Metaphysical Trinity. Classical and medieval macro-cosmos has turned into modern nature; classical and medieval micro-cosmos into modern subject; and the classical and medieval view of deified nature has disappeared, mainly due to a fateful separation between nature and super-nature.

Since early modernity began with a change in the relation of the components of the traditional synthesis, not with the exclusive dominion of one of them, that change holds, according to Dupré, a much more complex potential than is often suggested by adherents of the so-called 'Radical Enlightenment'.¹² Therefore, he considers the modern program as unfinished: 'Its completion will require a more equitable recognition of the meaning- and-value-giving function of all three of the component factors than the absolute dominance of the subject has hitherto admitted.'¹³ From that perspective, our present and future projects remain within the unfinished realm of modernity.

At this juncture, the crucial resemblance and difference between Dupré and Habermas as to the future of modernity is to be situated. In his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas had made an attempt to revalidate the original project of the Enlightenment, which in his eyes had been prematurely abandoned by the development of post-Kantian and in particular Hegelian thought. Since the original program of human and political emancipation has been retarded by Hegel's pseudo-religious theory, Habermas's aim was to restore the emancipatory spirit of Enlightenment, initially by dispelling religion from the public sphere and later (since 2001) by admitting its role, albeit subordinate to the dominion of procedural reason.

Admittedly, Dupré agrees with Habermas that the project of Enlightenment is still unfinished, but his reasons for endorsing that project are completely different.¹⁴

Habermas is undoubtedly right that the Enlightenment continues to challenge us today. We have not yet succeeded in grasping its full implications [...] But contrary to his claim, I believe that it was not so much the *execution* as the *conception* of the project that had remained incomplete.¹⁵

Their dissent of opinion as to the conception of Enlightenment has mainly to do with their definition of modernity. While Habermas more or less equates modernity with the heritage of Enlightenment, Dupré considers modernity as a complex mixture of three different waves: humanism, Enlightenment and romanticism.

Three 'waves' of modernity: humanism, Enlightenment, romanticism

As pointed out, already in *Passage to Modernity* Dupré had shown himself reticent towards 'radical' Enlightenment. In particular, he was very critical of the idea, typical of a radical conception of Enlightenment that the subject may be conceived as sole source of meaning and value. Although early humanism drastically changed the interaction of the different components of the ancient and medieval synthesis, its stress on human creativity was not inspired by an effort to destroy the possibility of a comprehensive synthesis, but rather by the promise of a new and more appropriate integration.¹⁶ It was due to a rather dogmatic attitude of the radical representatives of Enlightenment that the main questions of the moderate humanists as to the viability of the old synthesis became unshakable principles:

When early humanists placed a new and strong emphasis on human creativity, they added a secondary center to the one traditionally reserved to the transcendent source of power. The philosophy of the subject converted this center into a primary one [...] Much of its effect consisted in hardening what had remained fluid and in canonizing what had been no more than open options in the early modern period. Yet that second, less fundamental transformation continues to give the present much of its spiritual outlook.¹⁷

Why does Dupré characterize Enlightenment as a less fundamental transformation than humanism? In his perspective, modernity is a continuous and lingering *event*, the aim of which is to create a new synthesis between the three different components of being: man, world and their transcendent source. Yet, by making the subject the sole source of meaning and truth and by making reason an exclusive construction of human mind, the main goal of the most radical representatives of Enlightenment was no longer the transformation of that comprehensive synthesis, but its very destruction.¹⁸ Against that backdrop, the Enlightenment has obviously drawn too extensive and one-sided conclusions from the basic premises of burgeoning modernity, originally transmitted by early humanism. It was only when the humanist notion of human creativity merged with the conclusions of nominalist theology that enlightened thinkers were capable of detaching the subjective principle from the given order and creating an opposition between man and nature.¹⁹

Consequently, the enlightened notions of rationality, freedom and subjectivity that emerged from this evolution remained ambivalent. On the one hand, they have given us progress in science and technology, an expressive conception of art, political theories of democracy, non-authoritarian views of morality, religious tolerance and the protection of individual conscience. On the other, they remained too formal to give existential depth to daily life, had to cope with their own emptiness and potential destructiveness, even with a feeling of self-alienation.²⁰ Following in the wake of Hegel, Dupré circumscribes

Enlightenment as essentially a dialectical movement, bearing the seeds of crisis deeply in itself, torn between pure insight and faith, between formal objectivity and essential content, between a self-expressive concept of culture and the painful awareness that culture is always leading a life of its own, making it difficult for people to recognize it as a form of self-expression. Therefore, his central claim is that, without taking into account the struggle between these opposite currents, it remains unintelligible how Enlightenment could ever have resulted in romanticism.²¹

This reading of Enlightenment as internally divided allows Dupré to give pride of place to romanticism within the event of modernity:

Contrary to the view that romanticism was a minor obstruction, however, I regard it as an important conclusion that follows from earlier premises. Romanticism incorporates what the Enlightenment had acquired while also transforming its meaning. The desire for political, social, and religious emancipation, to which it gave voice, had existed through most of the eighteenth century; but the Romantics extended it to a vision of an ideal that beckoned but remained forever beyond reach.²²

Hence, according to Dupré, the Enlightenment's transformation of humanism was less fundamental in the sense that its belief in reason as the sole source of meaning could not but provoke an anti-rationalist reaction so as to restore the spiritual content of the subject which had come to occupy a central place in the modern concept of rationality. Due to the inner tension, present in the conception of Enlightenment, he feels obliged to give as much attention to anti-rationalist thinkers such as Herder, Shaftesbury, Rousseau and Fénelon in his overview of the main protagonists of Enlightenment as to the canonized rationalists of that period.²³ *Pace* Isaiah Berlin, he refuses to consider these anti-rationalist philosophers as representatives of Counter-Enlightenment. Instead, Dupré sees the Romantic era as the period in which the awareness of inner tensions between subject and object, the finite and the infinite, implicitly present within the Enlightenment, explicitly manifested itself as a search for the beyond, a quest of the Absolute: 'In various ways, all early Romantic poets experienced a desire, a *Sehnsucht*, for an unreachable ideal. The term *infinite*, so often used as a predicate of the unattainable object of those aspirations, betrays both its surpassing and its indefinite nature.'²⁴

From hermeneutics to ontology

The transformation of the relations between the idea of the self, the cosmos and transcendence has not come to rest in our own time.²⁵ We are still standing in the midst of the *event* of modernity, shaped by the evolutionary process of and the strains and tensions within and between its three waves: humanism, Enlightenment, romanticism. In that perspective, Dupré's trilogy mainly focuses upon the central ideas in these three waves, leaving their economic, social and political applications in the hands of economic, social and political historians.²⁶ However, since Dupré's interest is mainly a hermeneutic one, the project of his trilogy differs from that of the history of ideas on which it so heavily relies. His central question is, therefore, a hermeneutic one: how to interpret the shift that occurred in the process of modernity in the light of our thinking, feeling and valuing today?²⁷

But the ambition of Louis Dupré's trilogy reaches even beyond the level of hermeneutic questions: 'Inevitably a reflection on modern culture must move beyond hermeneutic questions to ontological ones.'²⁸ Indeed, the final question remains whether and

how new cultural symbols, new conceptions and attitudes that emerged in certain periods have affected the nature of being? Put differently, how do we have to describe the relation between the historical and the eternal status of philosophical questions and answers? Even if we are fully aware that the ideas and categories we think with and the metaphors we make use of are definitely time-bound, may we still believe that ideas have a permanent character as well?

If that question gets an affirmative answer, the distinction between a hermeneutical and an ontological project eventually evaporates. Referring to R.G. Collingwood's and Ernst Cassirer's approaches to the historical evolution of cultures, Dupré concludes that:

If Being becomes disclosed in time, then the passage of time itself is more than a subjective quality of consciousness: it possesses an ontological significance. This position runs counter to Parmenides' thesis, today publicly abandoned but often still tacitly accepted, that Being *is* and becoming *is not*. It responds affirmatively to the question Heidegger raised at the end of *Being and Time*: 'Is there a way which leads from primordial time to the meaning of Being?'²⁹

Both in the introductions and the conclusions to *Passage to Modernity* and *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, Dupré underlines the necessity to move from hermeneutic to ontological questions. In that perspective, he reads romanticism as directing modern thought to previously unexplored existential and ontological depths, looking for meaning in the emptiness left by Enlightenment's critique of traditional beliefs. In particular, Dupré sees in Romantic poetry an ontological significance that is mostly absent from Enlightenment literature. Hölderlin, Novalis, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, Hugo and Lamartine in his best moments, they all delve into the mysteries of life and death that earlier generations of Enlightenment literature had largely neglected.³⁰

This search for ontological deepening, pre-eminently present in Romantic literature, was equally manifest in the three domains, in which Romantic thought had tried to achieve a comprehensive synthesis: history, religion and philosophy. Moreover, Dupré underlines here the parallelism between the Romantic period and our contemporary situation to reopen the question of human boundaries and of what transcends them.³¹ The same as historians today proclaim the end of 'the end of history' – especially since Poetin conquered the Krim and thereby revived remembrances of the Cold War – Romantic historians around 1848 cautioned that history had not come to an end and that expectations of the future had to be measured by historical precedents.³² Romantic thinkers' preoccupations with the role of incarnation and its relation to transcendence, the revival of Gnosticism (Blake), the return of mythology (Schelling) equally mirror contemporary interests, related to what is circumscribed by philosophers and sociologists as 'the end of the classic secularization thesis': the role of incarnation and its relation to transcendence (Gauchet, Taylor, Vattimo), the revival of Gnosticism (Blumenberg, Jonas, Voegelin, Lilla), the return of mythology (Blumenberg, Kolakowski). And all these questions, intimately related to religious issues, inspired many young Romantic thinkers to build a new ontology.

In the wake of Romantic idealist tradition, contemporary philosophers equally return to the Hegelian tradition, albeit from a different, double perspective. Starting from Croce's title of his essay, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel?* (1907), they have concluded that, whereas the majority of his conclusions are dead, all his questions remain alive. Even if Hegel's answers have become untenable, his questions

remain as challenging as ever. Hardly any philosopher endorses his central ontological thesis that the universe is the embodiment of a Spirit whose essence is rational necessity.³³ But this refusal to accept the core of Hegel's ontological answers does not imply the complete abandonment of an ontological search of the Absolute. Against that backdrop, Louis Dupré time and again summons up for a new quest for ontological deepening, a new episode in the ever recurring quest of the Absolute.

L'entre-deux: between remembrance and hope

However, Dupré's trilogy remains first of all a hermeneutic one. His hermeneutic approach paves the way for an awareness of the need for ontological deepening. The ontological questions are raised, but never answered. Dupré masterfully discusses the main responses of his romantic protagonists to the challenges, inherent in the project of Enlightenment, but he himself does not feel obliged to give an answer to contemporary challenges. Even with regard to his main concern, the threatening disappearance of transcendence in today's world, he refrains from giving a definite judgment:

Today modes of 'low' transcendence are often filling the place previously occupied by the high transcendence of God. Primary among them may well be the aesthetic experience. Like religion, that experience integrates the various aspects of our world within a single coherent vision that radiates with a glow of transcendence. The aesthetic transcendence, like the religious one, opens a new, symbolic dimension in the real [...] Whether that suffices for rendering existence meaningful is a question I do not have to answer in this book.³⁴

Perhaps, the underlying reason for postponing an answer is simply that we are living in an epoch where answers are not available or, if so, always remain tentative and immensely fragile. At most, we can keep alive the search for the Absolute. The challenges which the Romantics had to cope with are still today's challenges; without question, we share their unrest and their deep uncertainties. Therefore, we are equally looking for subtler languages (the term is Charles Taylor's who borrowed it from Shelley), while being even more conscious than our modern predecessors of the predicament that our answers cannot but remain tentative.

No longer can we believe in the Hegelian project and the ontological result of his attempt to overcome modernity's tensions and contradictions. His *Phenomenology of Spirit* was as a Romantic voyage of homecoming, a homecoming of the human mind, eventually recognizing itself in the Absolute Spirit.³⁵ We feel more familiar with Hölderlin's hesitations, both in his poetry and in his novel *Hyperion*. Whereas Josiah Royce still could read Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an intellectual *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Dupré subtly remarks that '*Hyperion* is a Romantic *Bildungsroman*, but one so different from *Wilhelm Meister* that the two can hardly be compared.'³⁶ Equally in his most profound religious poetry (*The Only One; Homecoming; Patmos*), Hölderlin at once confesses the hope of finding the name of God and counsels us to be patient. *„Nah ist / Und schwer zu fassen der Gott / Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das rettende auch“*. Our voyage of homecoming still continues as a long night of waiting:

No more than Goethe or Schiller was Hölderlin Christian in the traditional sense. Yet more than them, and perhaps more than any other poet, he has justified the errances of the religious pilgrim in a post-Christian age: between remembrance and hope.³⁷

This tentative openness to the transcendent, to the sacred is indeed omnipresent in contemporary Western culture. We are currently living 'l'entre-deux' (Dupré borrows this term from Lacoue-Labarthe en Nancy), between being and nothingness, faith and reason, remembrance and hope. So many authors testify to this open space, 'the Jamesian open space, where one can feel the pull in both directions. To stand there is to be at the mid-point of the cross-pressures that define our culture.'³⁸ Obviously, it is not at this juncture of cross-pressures that there is a gap between those who 'prefer a new prefix to modernity' and those who believe that its critique of modernity has still been derived from modern sources. Both alike are dwelling 'between remembrance and hope'.

As already stated, the main difference between so-called postmodernists and late modernists is related to their respective attitudes towards the need for ontological questions. Whereas the former reject them as either nonsensical or at least as being redundantly superfluous, the latter highlight their utmost importance. Dupré is not the only philosopher who draws attention to the role of ontology in this, at face value, merely terminological discussion. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski claims in his essay, *Metaphysical Horror* that hermeneutics, insofar as it examines meaning, which is supposed to be included in human activity and in human history, is not and never can be ontologically neutral.³⁹ The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, strongly inspired by the Romantic heritage, designates his major essay *Sources of the Self* an essay in retrieval, looking for the deeper sources of what he calls a moral ontology.⁴⁰ Discussing the role of ontology with, among others, Jürgen Habermas and Gianni Vattimo, both Taylor⁴¹ and the American philosopher Stephen K. White defend a specific form of 'weak ontology'.⁴²

Weak ontology

Already in 1977, Louis Dupré had called Kant's philosophy a dubious heritage with regard to the study of religion.⁴³ As to the study of ontology, the impact of Kant's transcendental philosophy equally seems to be ambiguous. Therefore, in order to clarify the complexity of the term 'weak ontology', I shall relate its genealogy to three different interpretations as to the status of metaphysics in Kant's philosophy.

According to Habermas, Kant is the first 'post-metaphysical' thinker. His transcendental dialectic, indebted to late-medieval nominalist revolution and devaluating not only the philosophical proofs of God's existence but all essentialist statements about man, nature and their history, introduced the separation between practical and theoretical reason which in the long run led to the distinction between the hermeneutical approach and the objectifying scientific description of reality.⁴⁴ In brief, due to Kant's heritage, metaphysical statements were replaced by scientific statements in the field of nature and by hermeneutic interpretations in the domain of human experiences. Unlike metaphysics, only hermeneutics takes into account the dimensions of finiteness and contingency of human language and thought.

There have been countless reactions, from different angles, to Habermas's concept of post-metaphysical thinking. I select two out of them. Common to these two critical reactions is that they blame Habermas himself for not taking into account the daily vicissitudes of history. But whereas in the first case, this critique leads to a full rejection of metaphysics, the outcome in the second case is a rehabilitation of metaphysics, albeit in the shape of a drastic reform.

The first reaction is exemplified by Gianni Vattimo. He utterly rejects Habermas's concept of procedural rationality as a manual for genuine communication, because it still bears the traces of ontology and metaphysics deep in itself. In the Italian philosopher's perspective, Habermas's belief in the very possibility of transparent communicability

heavily relies on the existence of an ‘inter-subjective essence’ of the subject. That is to say that the transcendental subject does not really disappear, but that it makes room for a transcendental inter-subjectivity. In his eyes, Habermas’s inter-subjective constitution of the subject does not do justice to the contingent finiteness of the subject neither to that of the process of deliberation and decision-making. Even more, by introducing a transcendental inter-subjectivity he remains profoundly linked to the classic metaphysical ideal of knowledge as the description of objectively given structures.⁴⁵

Therefore, Vattimo rejects an ethics of communication in favor of an ethics of interpretation, where all remnants of metaphysics have disappeared and friendship is more important than truth. He is pleading for a historical hermeneutics which, by doing away with the belief in truth as the mirror of reality and in the possibility of communicative consensus based on transcendental inter-subjectivity, definitely belongs to the epoch of the end of metaphysics or ontology. Only by effacing each metaphysical trace, hermeneutics will recognize its nihilistic destiny.⁴⁶

The second reaction is equally founded on the recognition of our thought and language as inherently historical. But starting from a Kant-interpretation, which is different from Habermas’s, scholars like Dieter Henrich or Vincent Descombes wish to rehabilitate a reformed metaphysical position. They believe Habermas’s post-metaphysical Kant-interpretation is wide off the mark, since Kant repeatedly underlines the importance of the metaphysical need and therefore considers metaphysical questions and the search to answer them as inevitable.⁴⁷ In their view, Kant is not the herald of the end of metaphysics, but the originator of a reformed metaphysics.⁴⁸

Moreover, Henrich and Descombes are not the only scholars who reject a post-metaphysical interpretation of Kant. Embroidering on the so-called ‘meta-critics’ of Kant (Herder, Hamann in Germany; later Collingwood and Berlin in England), who did not reject but historicized the Kantian transcendental approach, contemporary Anglo-Saxon authors like Stephen White and Charles Taylor claim that the ineradicable metaphysical need inevitably leads to metaphysical answers, however tentative and inherently historical these answers might be. Consequently, they underline the fact that metaphysics has not disappeared, but has become more fragile. We cannot but think within frameworks which are at the same time vulnerable to potential revisions. But these frameworks or basic presuppositions are, one way or another, ontologically inspired:

We treat our beliefs, theories, as over against reality, to be related to these frameworks. But all this goes on within a larger context of presumed contact with reality. The presumption can be erroneous, but never totally.⁴⁹

Their central notions of ‘frameworks’, ‘forms of life’, ‘strong evaluation’ or ‘background of sources’ testify to the fact that fundamental conceptions of the self, other, and world – in their diversity – remain necessary and unavoidable for an adequately reflective discussion on ethical, political and ontological issues, on the condition that we are aware that they always remain contestable and liable to revision. Even if we have to remain conscious that time and again they can be refined, improved and even revised, their mutual differences can never be obliterated by transposing them into argumentative terms.⁵⁰ In other words, this ‘meta-critical’ position of White and Taylor rejects both ‘strong ontology’, inherent in pre-Kantian metaphysics, and ‘the end of metaphysics’ approaches in their different guises (Habermas, Vattimo) in favor of what is defined as ‘weak or historical ontology’, an ontology in which metaphysical positions are at the same time necessary and revisable.⁵¹

Even if Louis Dupré never uses the term ‘weak ontology’, he undoubtedly belongs to the third group. On the opening pages of *The Quest of the Absolute*, he approvingly refers

to William Desmond's study, *Being and Between* (1995), in which the Irish philosopher explores the space between an undifferentiated concept of being on the one hand and a nominalist on the other, so as to shed light on Being's intimate strangeness.⁵² Analogous to Desmond's stance, many passages from Dupré's trilogy make it clear how modern optimistic belief in progress is intimately related to the breakthrough of nominalism on the one hand and to the enlightened notion of human creativity and autonomy on the other. The 'explosive mixture' of both aspects admitted only two opposite but in the further course of Western history interrelated choices: either putting down one's cards on the inscrutable God at the expense of human autonomy or, vice versa, on autonomous man at the expense of the existence of God. Since the nominalist separation between nature and super-nature, there seemed to be no other alternatives available.

Also regarding the problem of freedom, the separation between super-nature and nature only admitted two similar options: either putting down one's cards on unlimited divine freedom to the detriment of human autonomy or on fully free humanity to the detriment of divine freedom. Indeed, in the course of Western history, late-medieval and early-modern thinkers have crusaded against the teleological character of ontological realism, first in order to conceptualize divine freedom and later to give human creative freedom more breathing space. And it is common knowledge to what extent not only the rise of modern science but also modern anthropology have been indebted to the breakdown of ontological realism.

In realist metaphysics, by contrast, there has always been a greater sensitivity to the gap between the ideal and its concrete embodiment. Within realist perspective, progress is undoubtedly conceivable, albeit in the awareness that every form of progress is inherently limited because the ideal can never be fully realized in this world. Within nominalist perspective, the gap between ideal and concrete implementation has widened to such extent that the ideal reality – paradoxically enough – eventually became inconceivable. The original appeal to 'God's will' got gradually replaced by an as rigorous belief in human opportunities to accomplish and verify their own dreams of progress.

Against this backdrop, it is not irrelevant that the epistemological and ontological problem of the relation between realism and nominalism has recently become a central topic in much contemporary philosophy (and theology). In this respect, it is conspicuous as well that many philosophers, although criticizing the nominalist stance, do not wish to return to a pre-modern realist position but look for a mid-position between classic realism and modern nominalism, in which the relations between freedom and determinism (on anthropological level), between respect for nature and the opportunity to intervene in nature (on cosmological level) and between transcendence and immanence (on theological level) can be rethought and reformulated.⁵³ Since the difficulty to think together transcendence and immanence is intimately related to this metaphysical discussion on the connection between realism and nominalism, many contemporary thinkers explicitly ask for a new formulation of transcendence, a search – in Taylor's terminology – for 'subtler languages'.⁵⁴

It may then come as no surprise that, at the end of *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, Louis Dupré explicitly pleads for the rediscovery of a symbolic religious language in a tentative search for its ontological dimension and for a source of significance beyond the realm of human mind:

What is needed is a conversion to an attitude in which existing is more than taking, acting more than making, meaning more than function – an attitude in which there is enough leisure for wonder and enough detachment for transcendence. What is needed most of all is an attitude in which transcendence *can be recognized again*.⁵⁵

The main question, however, is whether contemporary Western man, tried and tested by the ‘cultural explosion, caused at the moment when the early humanist notion of human creativity came to form a combustive mixture with the negative conclusions of nominalist theology’ (*Passage to Modernity*, 3), is still capable of such a conversion.

Notes

1. Dupré, *The Quest of the Absolute*. I am grateful to Joris Geldhof for his pertinent remarks on an earlier draft of this article.
2. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*.
3. Dupré, *The Enlightenment*.
4. Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*.
5. *The Quest of the Absolute*, x.
6. Dupré, “Postmodernity or Late Modernity?”, 277–295.
7. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 1–2. Cited in *The Quest of the Absolute*, 338.
8. Habermas, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society”, 17–29 cf. “Jürgen Habermas & Charles Taylor: Dialogue”, 60–69.
9. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; cf. Bauman, *Liquid Fear*.
10. De Dijn, *Vloebare waarden*.
11. *Passage to Modernity*, 249.
12. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.
13. *Passage to Modernity*, 251.
14. *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 37–38; *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 16–17.
15. *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 37–38.
16. cf. *Passage to Modernity*, 5.
17. *Passage to Modernity*, 250, 253.
18. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 16.
19. *Passage to Modernity*, 3
20. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 7–17. cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, 570–571.
21. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 13.
22. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 4
23. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, passim
24. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 3 Cf. Geldhof, “Romantiek in de Verlichting? ”, 157–168
25. *Passage to Modernity*, 252
26. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 5. Here, the difference between Dupré’s and Taylor’s approach is most outspoken. Whereas Dupré focuses upon the central ideas of individuals and communities to explain the evolution of modernity, Taylor introduces the term ‘social imaginaries’ as an explanatory tool. This term refers to the way communities ‘imagine’ their background assumptions and ideals, rather than to their explicit intellectual doctrines or beliefs.
27. *Passage to Modernity*, 9.
28. *Passage to Modernity*, 251.
29. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 7.
30. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 23.
31. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 340.
32. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 248.
33. Cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, 537–571.
34. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 268.
35. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 19.
36. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 156.
37. *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 73. cf. Taylor, *Hegel*, 571 note: ‘Thus Hölderlin seems to open a perspective in which man’s freest expression follows the prompting of nature, bringing nature in a sense into the light of freedom. But this nature is not and can never become an emanation of spirit. It remains inexhaustible and unfathomable, a constant invitation to the creative activity which brings it to light.

Hölderlin's position is not easy to interpret. In any case it may be inaccessible to philosophical statement. And one senses that madness overtook him before his thought came to mature expression. Hegel alone was left to give definitive shape to the thoughts and insights which they shared at Tübingen and Frankfurt. But to those who want to resume the task of Hegel's generation, his too-soon-silenced friend may point a surer way.'

38. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 592. Cf. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*.
39. Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, 114–116: “‘Meaningful’ is what makes a part, or can be described in terms of, this reality which Hegel was probably the first to have identified as a separate realm of being. Insofar as it wants to examine such a “meaning”, hermeneutics is not ontologically neutral: it is bound to assume, implicitly at least, that the Mind can be understood or can reveal ‘meaning’ because it is really endowed with meaning, as distinct from conscious intentions of people [...] Unlike Hegel, hermeneutics does not need, indeed, to track down the ultimate goal of the Mind and therefore it may glory in being metaphysically neutral. Yet it is not. To assume, even implicitly, an impersonal Mind, immanent in history, a Mind of which human individuals are unconscious aids (if not serfs) and which, in an apparently erratic manner, reveals its will, is to move on the soil of metaphysics.’
40. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.
41. Taylor, “The ‘Weak Ontology’ Thesis”, 35–42; Charles Taylor, “Retrieving Realism”, 76.
42. White, “Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues”, 11–25; White, “Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity”, 808–816.
43. Dupré, *A Dubious Heritage*, 1–5.
44. Mendieta, “A Postsecular World Society?”, 3.
45. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 112: ‘Habermas’s inter-subjective I is wholly the I of modern metaphysics-science. It is the object of the human sciences and the equally a-historical subject of the laboratory.’
46. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 105–120.
47. Van Eekert, “De moderne natuurwetenschappen en de onttroning van de prima philosophia”
48. Descombes, “Latences de la métaphysique”; Heider, *Jürgen Habermas und Dieter Henrich*; Henrich, “Was ist Metaphysik – was Moderne? Zwölf Thesen gegen Jürgen Habermas”, 11–43; Henrich, “Warum Metaphysik?”, 17–25. For more information see: Geert Van Eekert, “De moderne natuurwetenschappen en de onttroning van de prima philosophia”, 17–65.
49. Taylor, “Retrieving Realism”, 76
50. Taylor, “The ‘Weak Ontology’ Thesis”, 40
51. Taylor, “The ‘Weak Ontology’ Thesis”, 35–42; White, “Weak Ontology: Genealogy and Critical Issues”, 11–25. For the difference between Taylor’s and White’s concept of ‘weak ontology’ and Vattimo’s ‘weak thought’: see White, “Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity”, 808–816 (in particular 811–814).
52. *The Quest of the Absolute*, 24.
53. The relation between realism and nominalism is for instance a central topic in John Milbank’s ‘radical orthodoxy’-theology. Charles Taylor approvingly refers to Milbank on the last pages of *A Secular Age*, although Taylor is definitely less ‘anti-modern’ than Milbank. However, also Taylor is searching for a mid-position between realism and nominalism, a search already made by the Anglo-Saxon ‘metaphysicians’, A.N. Whitehead and R.G. Collingwood in the 1930s.
54. The issue of the relation between transcendence and immanence is to be found in many contemporary authors. I enumerate at random the names of Taylor, Gauchet, Ferry, Vattimo, Nancy, Agamben, Girard ...
55. Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, 117.

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