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A review essay of Thomas Carlson's *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human*, 2008. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. xi + 236 pp. \$35.00 ISBN: 978-0226093154

In *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human*, Thomas Carlson seeks to accomplish at least four, seemingly discrete tasks: The first is to move forward with his "apophatic analogy." In his earlier text concerning the human image, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, he describes the ways in which we cannot access, through language or thought, a secure, sure-fire way to the identification of the human subject; All we can do is think "at the limit," and Carlson wishes to make it clear that this limit is a moving target. This is the case for a number of reasons, but the one he draws the most attention to in this text is centered on the human relation to the Divine.

The second move is to reconsider what it means for the human to be made in the image of God. Carlson, who admittedly gleans a great deal from Jean-Luc Marion and Heidegger, wishes to show that we can, through a finite prediction, carve not only God into an idol fashioned by human hands, but also the human. The Human is "in the image" only in so far as she exceeds a determinate, entirely radical finitude, and is thus, similar to the Divine, indefinable. If God is un-imaginable, and if the Human is in this image, then, as Carlson shows us, the images we fashion of the human must also be smashed and broken, as the human is *indiscretæ opus imaginis*, a nature without determination (33).

Thirdly, and most significantly, Carlson disarms the word "technological"—which, in his usage, seems synonymous with "the innovative," or "the active-creative"—through showing its necessary connection with the creative drive, through, and as a result of being image-bearers. The technological drive within the human is indicative of human plasticity, not, as we have perhaps assumed, part of the thoroughgoing, insidious plot of modernity to further control and domesticate the world and bring under subjection any and all of its indeterminacies. Though, at first glance, it may seem that Carlson is ultimately a defender of the technophile, he ensures us, by re-appropriating the technological within the field of the creative and indeterminate, that the technological should not be thought of as a means to human autonomy or control, but as an essential part of what it means "to be" an indeterminate image-bearer. The technological is ultimately an expression of human creativity, and though we shan't give in to the worship of the technological/creative itself (as do the technophiles), we also ought not be ever concerned that the technological is going

to take over all of humanity (as are the staunch traditionalists who suffer from technophobia). Traditionalists need not worry, for Carlson shows us that the notions of human indiscretion and indeterminacy are not new to the western philo/theological tradition. For Cusa, the human is something of an “infinite art,” and Carlson seems to succeed in unearthing a crucial link between medieval mysticism and contemporary manifestations of the human drive for the technological.

Bravely, Carlson summons the thought of some phenomenological powerhouses in order to, ultimately, prove this essential link between the technological and the human as image-bearer. Bravely, because he attempts to apply to his own thesis the thought of these phenomenological voices who have, at one time or another, taken their share of jabs at the technological, and attempted to expose its shortcomings. Carlson is not claiming to be properly Heideggerian, Kierkegaardian, or Marionian, for he is honest about their individual reproaches and warnings of the dangers of the technological, or that which might correspondingly relate to it. In the face of this, though, is Carlson’s most impressive move, as he both properly bears the image of his phenomenological predecessors, while opening up questions of the ways in which these thinkers individually appropriated and applied their own fundamental phenomenological methods to the technological.

In his first book on the human image, Carlson applies a negative theology to an apophatic anthropology. Here, and in what I outline as the fourth task, he reveals a third level of the aphophatic: a negative cosmology, an apophatic “way” of seeing the world. This seeing eludes view, picture and image, as it is directly related to the technological. We are not allowed, argues Carlson, a “worldview,” or a “world picture,” as worlds are constantly being remade, renamed, and essentially tied up with indetermination. Though the world is given in such a way that it appears to us as static and predictable, it is, after all, a part of our human project. Our project of world making, results in a new world. Similarly, Carlson appeals to Harris’ term “lexification,” to refer to how even my given body becomes a part of my human project, that which I work out according to the way in which I have been thrown into the world. This notion of “world making” seems imbued with a Sartrean notion of freedom; freedom from ever being “just that,” whether in my own skin, or in my environment. We see “in” the unseen, the un-shown, and correspondingly can never fully develop a world picture; a “worldview.” Human creativity is essentially tied up and bound within this relative indetermination.

The one detectable shortcoming of the book is one often endemic to apophaticism, and one characteristically criticized. The apophatic virtue is also its vice, which in this book seems to manifest itself in the insistent reminders that the human is indeterminate, lacking in definition and ultimately open to meaning. These reminders can, at times in reading the text, stand in the way of truly seeing Carlson’s strongest and most significant claims. It is debatable as to whether or not a claim to indeterminacy is actually a claim at all or, at the very least, an interesting one. These concerns, though, can be overlooked on the account of Carlson’s scrupulous, and remarkably close readings of those within the phenomenological

tradition, as well as his innovative syntheses, which establish (but, of course, do so dynamically) his very own technological prowess. Though emphasizing (perhaps overly, at times) human indeterminacy and infinitude, he brings to our attention that he is also aware of the radical finitude of the human; her constraints and conditions. But these constraints, ironically, are ultimately what open up the indeterminacies, possibilities, and that which is to-be-fulfilled. It is here that Carlson gives us his exclusive view on that parallactic thing we call “love,” appealing to what he considers to be the most loving act: that of giving another “the actuality of possibility itself” (216). This leaves us with the possible implication that the Divine embedding of the creative/technological is, in fact, the best shape of love that can be envisioned: the bestowing of “essence as gift,” the favoring and enabling.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” quoted in Thomas Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 209.