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Recovering the Sacred

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ABSTRACT *This paper tries to examine what is at stake in the various projects to "re-enchant the world", which have arisen in the face of modernity. It sees the ambition to "save the sacred" in this context. It poses a number of problems which arise for such projects, and in particular examines the notion of "polytheism" which is central to the recent book of Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus,* All Things Shining.

The process that Weber described with the word "disenchantment" is often viewed ambivalently. Something may have been gained, but something also has been lost. Those who think this often call for some form of "re-enchantment". Something like the same ambivalence, coupled with a call for retrieval, is often made in connection with the term "sacred". Something we would do well to recover has been lost along with things that we are well rid of.

I'd like to start off by making what could seem like a pedantic point about each of these key words. (All right, it is a pedantic point, but I think it might help clarify the discussion which will follow.)

I.

Let's start with the notion of disenchantment. This implies that the world prior to this transformation was an "enchanted" one. What was "enchantment"?

The first feature of this world is that it was one filled with spirits and moral forces, and one moreover in which these forces impinged on human beings; that is, the boundary between the self and these forces was somewhat porous. There were spirits of the wood, or of the wilderness areas. There were objects

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with powers to wreak good or ill, such as relics (good) and love potions (not so unambiguously good). I speak of "moral" forces to mark this point, that the causality of certain physical objects was directed to good or ill. So a phial of water from Canterbury (which must contain some blood of the martyr, Thomas à Becket) could have a curative effect on any ill you were suffering from. In this it was quite unlike a modern medical drug which "targets" certain maladies and conditions, owing to its chemical constitution.

One could sum this up by saying that this was a world of "magic". This is implied in our term "disenchantment", which can be thought of as a process of removing the magic. This is even clearer in the original German: Weber's "*Entzauberung*" contains the word "*Zauber*" (magic). But this is less illuminating than it seems. The process of disenchantment, carried out first for religious reasons, consisted of delegitimating all the practices for dealing with spirits and forces, because they allegedly either neglected the power of God, or directly went against it. Rituals of this kind were supposed to have power of themselves, hence were blasphemous. All such rituals were put into a category of "magic". The category was constituted by the rejection, rather than providing a clear reason for the rejection. It then carries on in Western culture even after the decline of faith—e.g., Frazer's distinction magic/religion. Only when Westerners attempted to make ethnographic studies of non-Western societies did it become clear how inadequate and instable this category is.

I talked about not being able to go back. But surely lots of our contemporaries are already "back" in this world. They believe in and practice certain rituals to restore health or give them success. The mentality survives, even if underground. That is true; much survives of the earlier epoch. But the big change, which would be hard to undo, is that which has replaced the porous selves of yore with what I would describe as "buffered" selves.

Let's introduce the notion of the meanings of things; what they signify in the light of our goals and purposes.

For a "disenchanted" consciousness, moral meanings can't be in things. A first reaction is to say: they're "in the head". There are problems with this, as we'll see below.

The second feature of the earlier world which disenchantment sidelined is similar in import to the first. In another way, it placed meaning within the cosmos. Only this was a feature of elite culture. I am not speaking of popular "magic" and the sensibility of porous selves, but rather of high theory. The cosmos reflected and manifested a Great Chain of Being. Being itself existed on several levels, and the cosmos manifested this hierarchy, both in its overall structure and again in its different partial domains. The same superiority of dignity and rule that the soul manifests over the body re-appears in the state in the pre-eminence of the King, in the animal realm in that of the lion, among birds and fishes in the supreme status of eagle and dolphin. These features "correspond" to each other in the different domains. The whole is bound together by relations of hierarchical complementarity, which

should be reproduced in a well-ordered state. Once again, to point up the contrast with our world, we can say that in the enchanted world, charged things have a causal power that matches their incorporated meaning. The High Renaissance theory of the correspondences, which while more an elite than a popular belief, partakes of the same enchanted logic, is full of such causal links mediated by meaning. Why does mercury cure venereal disease? Because this is contracted in the market, and Hermes is the God of markets. This way of thinking is totally different from our post-Galilean, mind-centred disenchantment. If thoughts and meanings are only in minds, then there can be no "charged" objects, and the causal relations between things cannot be in any way dependent on their meanings, which must be projected on them from our minds. In other words, the physical world, outside the mind, must proceed by causal laws that in no way turn on the moral meanings things have for us.

We can see how elite theory and popular sensibility interpenetrated and strengthened each other. The high theory was easier to believe in a world of enchanted sensibility. And the theory itself could draw on some of features of popular lore, giving them a new rationale and systematic form.

We can't go back. Mainly because the enchanted world is a matter of experience. Our buffered selves can't return to "porous" status.

But there is, nevertheless, a pervasive sense that something has been lost.

Now what do people seek who look to "re-enchantment"? In a sense, it is the same fundamental feature, but differently conceived. In other words, they bridle at the idea that the universe in which we find ourselves is totally devoid of human meaning. Of course, instrumental meaning can be attributed to various features of our natural surroundings, in virtue of their serving or impeding our organic needs, but any human meaning must be simply a subjective projection. By "human meaning", I mean what we try to define when we identify the ends of life, through judgements like: this is really meaningful as a way of life; or this life is really worth living; or this form of being is a real fulfilment, or a higher way of being, and the like. Derivatively, we can attribute human meaning to the things that surround us because of their role in these ends or purposes. A statement like Thoreau's "in wildness is the preservation of the world" (from his lecture "Walking", 1861) is such an attribution of meaning. It is the kind of statement which proponents of re-enchantment often want to make.

This sense of loss was frequently expressed in the Romantic era. Take Schiller's poem, "The Gods of Greece":

Da der Dichtung zauberische Hülle
Sich noch lieblich um die Wahrheit wand,
Durch die Schöpfung floss da Lebensfülle,
Und was nie empfinden wird, empfand.
An der Liebe Busen sie zu drücken,
Gab man höhern Adel der Natur,

Alles wies den eingeweihten Blicken,
Alles eines Gottes Spur.

(When poetry's magic cloak
Still with delight enfolded truth
Life's fullness flowed through creation
And there felt what never more will feel.
Man acknowledged a higher nobility in Nature
To press her to love's breast;
Everything to the initiate's eye
Showed the trace of a God.)

But this communion has now been destroyed; we face a "God-shorn nature":

Unbewusst der Freuden die sie schenket,
Nie entzückt von ihrer Herrlichkeit,
Nie gewahr des Geistes, der sie lenket,
Sel'ger nie durch meine Seligkeit,
Fühllos selbst für ihres Künstlers Ehre,
Gleich dem todten Schlag der Pendeluhr,
Dient sie knechtisch dem Gesetz der Schwere,
Die entgötterte Natur.

(Unconscious of the joys she dispenses
Never enraptured by her own magnificence
Never aware of the spirit which guides her
Never more blessed through my blessedness
Insensible of her maker's glory
Like the dead stroke of the pendulum
She slavishly obeys the law of gravity,
A Nature shorn of the divine.)

And so what seems wrong with total disenchantment? What makes people seek re-enchantment? Now the complaint which one finds again and again in what I will call loosely the "post-Romantic" period targets a reading of our modern condition in which all human meanings are simply projected. That is, they are seen as arbitrarily conferred by human subjects. None would be valid universally. Universal agreement on these meanings would result from de facto convergence of our projections. Thoreau's statement about wilderness would have to be read as one such subjective projection, rather than claiming validity for all human beings.

But this projectivist outlook doesn't follow from disenchantment in the double sense outlined above. True, human meanings are no longer seen as residing in the object, even in the absence of human agents. These meanings arise for us as agents-in-the-world. But it doesn't follow from this that they are arbitrarily conferred.

There is a massive slippage in the reasoning here, which has frequently accompanied the modern turn to the subject. In the field of epistemology, this turn (Descartes, Locke) first of all generated a view of knowledge as a correct portrayal of external reality residing in the mind. But this reflexive turn to examine our experience, carried through more fully, ended up dispelling this illusion. Our grasp of the world is not simply a representation within us. It resides rather in our dealing with reality. We are being in the world (Heidegger's *In-der-welt-sein*), or being to the world (Merleau-Ponty's *être au monde*).

Some similar working through needs to be done in this domain of human meanings. Otherwise we are living with a distorted view of ourselves.

So the issue about re-enchantment can be put this way: when we have left the "enchanted" world of spirits, and no longer believe in the Great Chain, what sense can we make of the notion that nature or the universe which surrounds us is the locus of human meanings which are "objective", in the sense that they are not just arbitrarily projected through choice or contingent desire?

Put another way, the attribution of these meanings count for us as strong evaluations. The distinction between strong and weak evaluation that I'm adverting to here, comes to this. A weak evaluation is one which depends on choices that we may not make, or our espousing ends which we may not accept. We can thus defeat the claim that something should have value for us, by choosing another end, or repudiating the one on which this value depends. In the case of strong evaluations, we cannot so release ourselves, and our attempt to do so reflects negatively on us.

Wherein does this conflict reside? A response which we understand as a strong evaluation supposes the following ontology: a) this response genuinely motivates us, it is not simply a cover, or a rationalization, or a screen for some other drive; b) it can fail to occur on some occasions or in some people, but this betokens some limitation, blindness, or insensitivity on their part; c) in other words, there is something objectively right about this response; d) we can and ought to set ourselves to cultivate this response, refine/improve our perception of its proper objects. This four-point feature represents a package, reflecting our sense that this evaluation is founded. In Bernard Williams' terms, our moral and other strong evaluations claim to be "world-guided".[1]

We require an ontology with the depth to allow there to be real differences in motivation between "altruism" and strategy, even unconscious strategy. A mechanistic account can't make room for this. The whole difference must be one in how people feel.

So "re-enchantment" in this sense doesn't undo the "disenchantment" which occurs in the modern period. It re-establishes the non-arbitrary, non-projective character of certain demands on us, which are firmly anchored in our being-in-the-world. These demands do not just emanate from us, but at the same time, they are not inscribed in the universe (or the Universe and

God) independently of us. They arise in our world. By contrast, the enchanted world was one inhabited by forces that were held to exist independently of us.

A similar point can be made, more tersely, about the "sacred". There is a strong sense of this term, which contrasts with "profane": the notion is that there are certain places (e.g., temples), times (e.g., feast days), actions (e.g., rituals), or people (e.g., priests, victims) which are sacred, and these contrast with other things in these categories which are merely worldly. In other words, the sacred is *located* in certain times, places, etc., and not elsewhere. This original strong sense of the term requires an ontology more like the enchanted world. The sacred or divine is totally non-anthropocentric.

But, in parallel with the discussion about "disenchantment" above, we can reject this strong sense without invalidating all the claims made on us by certain times, places, actions and people. On one level, as we saw above, we can see the differences between sacred and not, deeply meaningful or not, and so on, as residing in the interface of humans and world. Heidegger's sense of the "thing", and its claims on us, are to be found in this space.

From another point of view, this space is opened up by post-Romantic poetry. The reaction to disenchantment can be to find "magic" as with Novalis; or to invoke a sense of the force running through nature and ourselves, as with Wordsworth. But this has recourse to "subtler languages", which are very ontologically fluid and indeterminate. It is possible for the reader or writer of such poetry to remain in this indeterminacy; or else they can take a stronger ontological stand, say one defined by orthodox theology; but often the language will be the same. The widely varied reception of Wordsworth in the nineteenth century, from atheists like George Eliot to orthodox theists, illustrates how the poetry itself moved in a zone of ontological indeterminacy.

There is of course, another sense of "sacred", which we find in Durkheim. This has particular resonance in the French tradition, borrowing from the Catholic cultural background. Republican rhetoric often invokes the sacred (as with "*l'union sacrée*" during the First World War). In Durkheim's Rousseauian theory, the sacred, which is also the social, helps constitute us as moral beings, and is thus supremely important.

The upshot of these reflections is that a strong, anchored-in-reality-beyond-us sacred can be denied, while another, arising in the interface, can be affirmed.

II.

So much for the "pedantic" point. What can be made of it? We've been talking here about attempts to retrieve something that has been too quickly abandoned during the process of disenchantment and the decline of the sacred, while accepting that other things were rightly sloughed off in these epochal developments. The distinction between the original enchantment and what

re-enchantment achieves, between the strong sacred and the interstitial one, seems to suggest that the line between what is well lost and what must be retained is to be drawn simply between the anchored-in-reality-beyond-us ("anchored" for short), and what arises in interface between Dasein and world (for short, the "interstitial"). But some people think that this is a little too quick. I am, indeed, one of those people. I think it is important to make the distinction interstitial/anchored, but I still have an important place for the anchored. I think it is important to make the distinction interstitial/anchored—and also to vindicate the non-projective status of the interstitial—not because this neatly tells us what we should drop and what we should retrieve, but rather as a prelude to defining again what I see as the inescapable place for the anchored.

But demonstrating this inescapability is a task I want to leave for another occasion. For the moment, I'd like to look at another language in which these issues of what we should drop and what we should retrieve have been raised and discussed. This is the language of monotheism/polytheism. The reaction against narrow forms of Christianity during the last centuries has often taken the form of a defence of paganism. J.S. Mill defended the superiority of "pagan self-assertion" over "Christian self-denial".[2] Earlier, Hume and Gibbon were admirers of the ancient pre-Christian world. And, of course, Nietzsche clearly opposed the original, pre-Socratic world to the degeneration which Platonic Christianity had wrought since.

There are many ways this opposition can be stated, but I am thinking of the one which opposes the many to the one, the multiplicity of human goals to the overriding force of one super-goal which threatens to repress or exclude many of these. This case has recently been taken up in a very interesting and thought-provoking book by Bert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly.[3]

They champion a form of "polytheism" against what they call "monotheism". But it is clear that their polytheism is "interstitial"; it has nothing to do with a claim on us anchored in a reality beyond our world. Really-existing polytheism had a dimension of terror which is missing from the interstitial variety. It is not just that all gods or spirits were not necessarily benignly disposed towards us humans. Some were definitely not, and had to be propitiated, or out-foxed by trickster figures. But one also could be caught between two gods and their incompatible demands.

Take the story of Hippolytos, dragged into the disastrous love triangle with his father and Phaedra, in which he loses his life. Hippolytos is portrayed as devoted to Artemis, so devoted that he is celibate. But this too great attachment is bound to rouse the jealousy of Aphrodite, the goddess of marriage and sexual love. Her hand is visible in the love entanglement into which he is unwittingly and unwillingly drawn, and which costs him his life.

There is an ambivalence in the story. There is something heroic and admirable in Hippolytos' single-mindedness. In a sense, it aspires to go above

the human condition. For mortals the prudent thing is to "pay one's dues" to all the immortals, and navigate at our own level between the rocks they lay out for us. Perhaps a similar moral can be drawn from the story of Oedipus, whose ability to see overt reality with exceptional acuity is paid for by a blindness to the inarticulate depths (which Tiresias for his part is aware of).

Now one can easily imagine this story "transposed" into an interstitial register: the total dedication to Artemis and celibacy does violence to Hippolytos' sexual nature. "Aphrodite" wreaks vengeance in the following way. It is Hippolytos' very purity, his withdrawn unattainability, which awakens the burning desire of Phaedra. In anger and frustration, but also following a powerful fantasy of her own, she accuses him to Theseus of trying to seduce her, whereupon the angered king calls down the curse that brings about his death. One can imagine some *metteur en scène* directing a superb performance of Racine's *Phèdre* with a reading of this kind in mind.

But would the tragic dimension survive into this "disenchanted" register? Could we not imagine saying to a Hippolytos figure today: "Lighten up, old chap; find yourself a lover for your spare hours"? But surely we know this kind of tragedy well enough in our secular world. Hippolytos and Oedipus pay the price of a kind of greatness that can only come with total dedication. We can all recognize a dilemma that can arise and appear inescapable in our human condition.

So the message of polytheism, anchored back then, and interstitial today, would be: such dilemmas are insurmountable, unavoidable. Life under "polytheism" was not just being able "to live at the surface, to take the events of daily life and the meanings they present rather than to seek their hidden purpose, to find happiness and joy in what there already is".[4] It was also a matter of meeting the demands of the gods, whether this meant facing insoluble dilemmas, or making the necessary sacrifices. And these always fell in unequal manner, whether on the prisoners sacrificed on Aztec pyramids, or the slaves working the mines at Sounion, whether on those selected as scapegoats, or on the neglected or exploited: slaves, women, or the "widows and orphans" invoked by the Hebrew prophets. And then there were the burdens and suffering imposed on outsiders as our young men fulfil their roles by waging glorious war. Of course, all this didn't stop back then either. We can't forget that such "sacrifices" are still exacted today, when the unemployed are forced to propitiate the "gods" of neo-liberalism and the "Washington consensus"; or when we declare war on the "axis of evil".

For the original polytheism, there was no dilemma or conflict of ends here. This was just the way things were. And there is something admirable in its own way in this acceptance of the order of things, and of the legitimacy of different ways of "shining", as Dreyfus and Kelly show in their Chapter 3, particularly in their examination of Helen of Troy.[5] In order to see dilemmas and conflicts here, one had to adopt another standpoint, one of wider concern, in which the fate of the sacrificed began to matter.

This came with "monotheism". Or perhaps we should redefine the issue, as it seems that Dreyfus and Kelly themselves do on pages 177–78 of their book. The key change that took us out of the polytheist world was not just monotheism, but the Axial revolutions, which took many forms, some (like Buddhism) arguably not theist at all. The unalloyed polytheist mode of life "finds its easiest expression . . . not just [in] a pre-Christian age, but a pre-Buddhist, pre-Platonic, pre-Hinduist, and pre-Confucian one as well".[6]

The surprising feature of the Axial religions, compared with what went before, what would in other words have made them hard to predict beforehand, is that they initiate a break in all three dimensions of embeddedness that we see in the pre-Axial age: in the social order, in the cosmos, and in a certain understanding of human good. Not in all cases and all at once: perhaps in some ways Buddhism is the most far-reaching, because it radically undercuts the second dimension: the order of the world itself is called into question, because the wheel of rebirth means suffering. In Christianity, there is something analogous: our world is disordered and must be made anew. But some post-Axial outlooks keep the sense of relation to an ordered cosmos, as we see in very different ways with Confucius and Plato; however, they mark a distinction between this and the actual, highly imperfect social order, so that the close link to the cosmos through collective religious life is made problematic.

But perhaps the most fundamental novelty of all is the revisionary stance towards the human good in Axial religions. More or less radically, they all call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing, and hence inevitably also the structures of society and the features of the cosmos through which this flourishing was supposedly achieved. The change was double. On one hand, the "transcendent" realm, the world of God, or gods, of spirits, or Heaven, however defined, which previously contained elements which were both favourable and unfavourable to the human good, becomes unambiguously affirmative of this good.

And on the other hand, both the crucial terms here, both the transcendent and the human good are reconceived in the process. The transcendent may now be quite beyond or outside of the cosmos, as with the Creator God of Genesis, or the Nirvana of Buddhism. Or if it remains cosmic, it loses its original ambivalent character, and exhibits an order of unalloyed goodness, as with the "Heaven", guarantor of just rule in Chinese thought,[7] or the order of Ideas of Plato, whose key is the Good.

But the second term must perforce also change. The highest human goal can no longer just be to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing. Or else Heaven, or the Good lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here. This may, indeed usually does, involve flourishing on a wider scale, but our own flourishing (as individual, family, clan or tribe) can

no longer be our highest goal. And of course, this may be expressed by a redefinition of what "flourishing" consists in.

Seen from another angle, this means a change in our attitude to evil, as the destructive, harm-inflicting side of reality. This is no longer just part of the order of things, to be accepted as such. Something has to be done about it. This may be conceived as an escape through self-transformation, or it may be seen as a struggle to contain or eliminate the bad, but in either case evil is not something just to be lived with as part of the inevitable balance of things. Of course, the very sense of the term "evil" also changes here, once it is no longer just the negative side of the cosmos, and comes to be branded as an imperfection.[8]

We might try to put the contrast in this way: unlike post-Axial religion, early religion involved an acceptance of the order of things, in the three dimensions I have been discussing.

I can perhaps sum up this post-Axial notion of higher good in terms of four features. It is defined as going beyond (whatever is locally understood as) ordinary human flourishing: long life, prosperity, freedom from disease, drought, natural catastrophe, etc. There were vocations with special higher powers before, like shamans, for instance; but now the higher good doesn't just consist of special powers; it is in some sense a goal for all human beings. This is so even if this aspect is downplayed or countervailed by notions of hierarchy. Thus for Plato, the philosophical life is not for everyone; but at the same time it amounts to the fullest realization of the nature which all human beings share. This good is our goal as human beings in virtue of the way things are—whether the demands of God, or the nature of things, or the Fourfold Noble Truth, or whatever. In consequence, the goal is endorsed by whatever higher beings, gods, spirits, or the cosmos, are recognized by the culture concerned. This contrasts with the pre-Axial ambivalence of many of these beings to human flourishing. Grounded in the way things are, endorsed by higher powers, this goal is unitary, harmonious, and inwardly consistent.

So the message which emerges from the Axial turns is heading in the opposite direction from polytheism. Dilemmas are not to be accepted as ultimate, either on the individual level, as with the predicaments of Hippolytos and Oedipus above, or on the social level, with the sacrifice of some for the good of others. Of course, the full development of these demands doesn't happen at once. Axial theories all mitigate their universalism by various rationalizations in which the social order exists for the "good" of the exploited classes and groups. For centuries Axial outlooks were the established religions or philosophies of large civilizations which still lived largely through pre-Axial rituals and myths. But another standard has been set; a new basis for critique existed, and from time to time this generated real change.

So, we have two voices. One says: face it, dilemmas and sacrifices are ineradicable from the human condition; the other says: no, we may have to accept these for now, but we can in principle move beyond them, through

becoming lovers of wisdom (*Philosophoi*), or developing *ren*, or achieving Buddha-consciousness, or being Tzadikim, or saints, or whatever.

Who is right? The stance of worldly wisdom is to say: let's see; let's look at this on a case-by-case basis. And certainly we must hope that there are many voices around who are saying this, particularly when you think of the madcap schemes that have cost so much blood in recent decades. But the question can arise also on another level, that of hope, which can also be defined as that of faith: beyond the question of what to do now, do you see a path whereby we could get beyond certain dilemmas, divisions, sacrifices, and steps you might take now to help move along this path? That is the question that insistently arises out of all Axial religions and philosophies. This question might be called the "monotheist temptation".

Of course, many of these proposed paths of hope are shallow, based on an inability to see the real joys and sufferings of human beings, ready therefore to sacrifice real human good to some abstract code or goal. Many are based on illusion. But are they all? And do those which seem freest from illusion require some kind of anchored sacred? I lean to a "yes" on this question.

So, I see us as in a kind of meta-dilemma, or perhaps better, pulled between two considerations: on the one hand, the hope of becoming better, relieving division, suffering, frustration; on the other, the danger that these hopes may lead us to crush presently existing joy, fulfilment, meaning. When I turn to Dreyfus and Kelly's book, I don't see a very different picture of our predicament. How is this?

III.

Dreyfus and Kelly marvellously bring out the meaning that emerges for all of us together in great moments of public celebration, at baseball games, or hearing a speech by Martin Luther King, or more intimately at Thanksgiving dinner. We are drawn into these festive events, we want to go along and we usually do. But there are cases when we should resist and hold back. "There is, after all, a vanishingly small distance between rising as one with a crowd at a baseball game and rising as one with the crowd at a Hitler rally."[9] It seems to all of us obviously right that we should fiercely resist going along with the second—although ironically the Nazis too were enemies of monotheism ("Jewish religion"), and loved invoking the Teutonic pagan gods and heroes, through Wagner's Ring Cycle. We all feel this because we have accepted and internalized the wider standpoint of the Axial turn. This has now widened to universality, through successive Buddhist, Stoic, Judaeo–Christian–Islamic forms, and is now codified in a secular ethic of universal rights. We refuse to go along with movements like Nazism because of the sacrificial cost imposed on scapegoats and outsiders. And perhaps also because we find this whole way of life degrading and demeaning, grounded in illusion and what Nietzsche condemned as *ressentiment*. And to think this is to entertain at least the hope

that human life can climb higher, can find forms that are more worthy. This is the hope that we can proceed along one of those paths of self-transformation that the various Axial turns sketched out.

In this sense the polytheism espoused by Dreyfus and Kelly is not the "happy polytheism" they find in the Homeric era.[10] They feel the pull of two considerations above: on one hand, they see the importance of recognizing the human meanings which arise for us, "whooshing up" through "*physis*" in common celebrations, or finely discerned through the exercise of skill in *poeisis.* And their warnings of the dangers of nihilism and the exclusive adoption of the technological understanding of being are tremendously insightful and timely. But on the other hand, they are aware of the demands of universal human rights and welfare. They are post-Axial thinkers. Welcome to the club.

Wherein then lie my differences and demurrals from their main thesis? Perhaps in the term "monotheism", which might require further specification. On one side, they come close to using this term as a synonym for "outlook derived from (at least some of) the great Axial turns", including Buddhism, Platonism, Confucianism.[11] But on this reading they are themselves "monotheists"; so that can't be right. But then the term might mean either (narrowly, that is, Hebrew-derived) monotheist, or (more broadly) Axial-derived view, *insofar as it wrongly suppresses or blanks out perfectly valid interstitial meanings*. In this latter sense, it would certainly capture a broad, even immense class of phenomena. There is no Axial-derived view that has not been defended in a form that does exclude in this sense. The fundamentalisms that beset us on all sides are there to prove this. (And in addition, these are frequently very violent, thereby going against the universal Axial standpoint they are supposed to be espousing.)

But if this is the crucial sense, then we need a better account of when and why this exclusion takes place; and this we don't yet have. Often the assumption seems to be that (at least anchored) monotheism must generate this suppression and exclusion. Their (contestable) reading of Dante in Chapter 5, along with other passages, seems to suggest this, but this needs further defence.

This very rich book opens out onto a field of crucial issues that clamour for further clarification. I hope this discussion might contribute some considerations that would be helpful in this.

Notes

1. Williams, B. (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana).
2. See Mill, J.S. [1859] (1975) *On Liberty*, reprinted in: *Three Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 77.
3. Dreyfus, H. & Kelly, Sean D. (2011) *All Things Shining* (New York: The Free Press).
4. Dreyfus & Kelly (2011), p. 177.

5. The Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner spoke in admiration of the "mood of assent" which was central to Aboriginal spirituality. They had not yet entered into the "kind of quarrel with life" which emerges from the Axial revolutions. See Stanner, W.E.H. "On aboriginal religion" (1959–63), a series of six articles in *Oceania*, vol. 30–33.
6. Dreyfus & Kelly (2011), p. 177.
7. See Cho-Yun Hsu (1986) "Historical conditions of the emergence and crystallization of the Confucian system", in: S.N. Eisenstadt (Ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, pp. 306–324 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).
8. In this sense, I agree with Shmuel Eisenstadt's formulation of one of the key changes of the Axial period, "the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders"; with, of course, the understanding that the "transcendental" order itself changes when the tension arises. S.N. Eisenstadt, op. cit., p. 1.
9. Dreyfus & Kelly (2011), p. 218.
10. Ibid, p. 100.
11. Ibid, p. 177.