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THE IDIOM OF SPIRIT: DISCOURSE, HUMAN NATURE, AND OTHERNESS

A Response to Philip Clayton and Steven Smith

Philip Rossi, S. J.

In a context where key “modern” conceptualities no longer hold uncontested sway, Philip Clayton and Steven Smith offer us proposals for construing “[the] spirit” in categories which they present as both philosophically plausible and theologically significant. Although the differences between the two papers, both in substance and style, are worthy of extended discussion, my comments will focus just on those points in which I find them in striking convergence. One reason for attending to their convergence is that even though “spirit” has been no more than a peripheral topic of discussion in philosophy for much of this century, the philosophical landscape has recently seen changes and shifts which seem to open space again for a category of spirit. In these circumstances, it thus seems that an important initial task for a philosophical retrieval of spirit is to locate itself with respect to the range of philosophical options currently available. This task of “philosophical location” seems especially incumbent, moreover, upon any construal of “spirit” that hopes as well to engage the multiple discourses of current theology. This is so because the theological landscape has also changed¹—and the transitions which have started to become visible in each discipline also affect those parts of the terrain of inquiry in which a philosophical articulation of spirit will most likely take abode: the often quite precarious terrain where philosophy and theology have variously co-habited, contended, or even attempted co-dominion.

Within this terrain, there are a number of sites which I see both papers identifying as a specific common ground on which a philosophical construal of “spirit” can be located. My comments on the common ground staked out by these proposals are offered from a perspective which is, in the main, sympathetic to much of what they

ambition with respect to a notion of "spirit." This common ground is situated around four coordinates:

First, in their efforts aim to fashion an idiom of "spirit" that will be mutually intelligible in and for philosophical and theological discourse(s);

Second, in their location of an important part of that intelligibility by reference to the dynamics of an embodied, social, and historical human existence. Both papers reference their projects—and the categories to be shaped in it—to the dynamics of an embodied, social, and historical human existence; these dynamics attend especially to the relational form of human subjectivity and to the relational forming of human intersubjectivity in interaction with a world; I note here that this is itself a central part of the contested terrain of the modern condominium of philosophy and theology.

Third, in their taking account of striking contributions (positive and negative) made by thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Levinas to articulating the relational forms of human subjectivity as a resource for conceptualizing "spirit"; and

Fourth, in their recognition that, if we are at all to speak philosophically about such matters—about subjectivity, relationality, and spirit—we cannot but do so metaphysically, i. e., that our talk about such matters requires the systematic articulation of the constitutive categories and the fundamental character of what we affirm as real and true and good and beautiful. Both papers thus speak in philosophical idioms not so long ago considered part of the "dead" language of metaphysics—but both do so, however, aware that the very project of metaphysics has been a contested conceptuality, for both philosophy and theology, within "modernity", and that it remains all the more so in a our so-called "post-modern" context.

Yet as I try to move with each proposal along the lines they have sketched out with respect to these four coordinates, I find myself wondering (which, *pace* Steven Smith, I'll not yet try to claim as an authentic motion of "spirit"!) whether these are precisely the directions along which I would recommend striking out in order to bring us closer to places where our contemporary philosophical and theological conversations could begin to resonate more fully with the language [or should it be languages?] of the "spirit." Let me try briefly to express what these "wonderings" are as a way to further discussion of each proposal.

1. As I read both papers, it seems to me that both Smith and Clayton acknowledge that, in a world of plural philosophical and theological discourse, no single idiom of "spirit" may be mutually intelligible to all. As a result, the project of construing spirit philosophically must rely on identifying which forms of discourse and which discourse communities it hopes, both now and in the future, the idiom of spirit to address. My wondering on this point, however, is not so much about which communities of discourse Smith and Clayton seek to engage in conversation about the spirit now, but more about how they might envision engaging those forms of philosophical (and other) discourse and, perhaps even more crucially, those forms of social and cultural practice which seem in principle closed to an articulation of "spirit" in any idiom. My point of reference here is to the work of thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Michael Buckley, Louis Dupré, George Steiner and, more radically John Milbank, each of whom has delineated ways in which we are situated—indeed ways in which we situate ourselves—within a widely pervasive dynamic of modern/post-modern culture that enables and encourages us to perform, in Taylor's words, "spiritual lobotomy" upon ourselves.² In these circumstances, there certainly can be little doubt for many of us that there is need—even desperate need—for the breath and the utterance of the Holy and of the human "spirit."

But this very possibility that we can be willing, complicit agents of the self-stifling of spirit makes me wonder how these proposals could be further elaborated with a view to addressing those parts of our culture—and thus of ourselves—in which imperviousness to the movement of spirit and deafness to spirit's utterance are deeply and systematically entrenched: for instance, to addressing spirit-stifling practices which seem part of a global, post-industrial, and putatively market-driven capitalism. On this point, it seems that Smith's discussion of the dynamics of "spirit" as rectifying—especially as a rectifying of relation—and of "attitude [as] ... the location at which the required energy and direction for pursuing relationship are either present or absent in a subject" (p. 220) might prove to be useful starting points for such an elaboration. The direction of such an elaboration, moreover, is one that I hope would enable at least some idiom of the spirit—and thus the dynamics of rectifying spirit—to enter into those spheres of wider public discourse which bear upon the shaping and the right ordering of a society's relational practices.

2. While my first bit of wondering may have more to do with matters which the papers do not directly address, my second one has to do with matters which they do. It's also not unconnected with my first bit of wondering, since it concerns the specific forms of philosophical discourse which both papers do engage. Two of the markers of the "spirit discourse" which they propose are the particular referencing of the idiom of "spirit" to the dynamics of an embodied and social human existence and, as part of this, to relational forms of human subjectivity: it is along these anthropological coordinates which they direct us to seek primary resources for fashioning a philosophically intelligible idiom of "spirit." This idiom, moreover, is polyglot—by design I suspect—since in it can be discerned accents that are postmodern, modern, and premodern as well. It is modern in (among other things) its turn to subject and to the anthropological; it is postmodern in (among other things) its concrete situatedness and its attention to interruption and otherness. It is an idiom, moreover, in which a key matrix for the transformative interplay of modern and postmodern is found in the intersubjectivity of language. And then there are discernable accents of the pre-modern as well, in that these proposals each seek a living—or even better, a vivifying link with—idioms of "spirit" that have been shaped in communities which still attend to idiom of spirit as it was given voice in ancient Israel and to the echoes, resonances, and transformations of that idiom in the centuries of Christian discourse.

My wondering here thus concerns the complex interplay—at once phenomenological, historical, and systematic—among relationality, intersubjectivity, and language which these proposals offer as a dynamic for fashioning an appropriate idiom of "spirit." Both papers recognize that referencing the idiom of spirit to the relational, intersubjective, and linguistic dynamics of our human existence must contend with lines of philosophical thinking that stretch at least as far back as Descartes and on their way to us have passed through (among other places) Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Königsberg, Jena, Berlin, Copenhagen, Basel, Vienna, Cambridge, Frankfurt and Paris. One intriguing sign of this common recognition is the way that Kant and Schleiermacher, both historically and systemically, serve as key reference points in each paper; and even as Clayton's paper explicitly situates itself with respect to a number of particular figures who traced these lines, Smith's more allusively casts its argument against the background of various efforts to grapple with this modern philosophical

heritage. Both papers recognize that this heritage is itself contested ground and they each seem to have different vantage points upon that contestation. But I also think—subject to correction—that both papers share one point of consensus that seems to have emerged from this heritage: the hesitancy of the modern and post-modern alike to speak of the dynamics of human existence (be it of individuals or of us in common) in terms of a “human nature.”

I don't propose to argue that the hesitancy is not well-founded: there are indeed good historical and conceptual reasons to tread cautiously in the vicinity of a concept—or, I think more accurately, a set of concepts—whose significance and function currently elicits little consensus even within “regional” circles of philosophical discourse, let alone across those circles, and, least of all, in cross-disciplinary discourse. My wonder here, then, is not so much about the absence of “human nature” as vocabulary entry in the discourse of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, relationality, and language. My question is rather about the syntax governing the use of these terms: how do (or might, or ought) we structure our use of the vocabularies of subject, person, intersubjectivity, relationality in the absence of reference to a notion of human nature which, it seems to me, functioned syntactically to place some constraint on what it makes sense to say about who—and what—we are, both individually and collectively? This, I think, is akin to the questions that Clayton raises on pp. 190-92 of his paper about the self-constituting subject—though in his discussion, the syntactical constraint on what we may say of the self comes in terms of a notion of transcendence. (Though I will not pursue it further here, it seems that some of the important relations among these notions of “self/subject,” “nature/world” and “transcendence/God” could be usefully explored in terms of how they place mutual syntactical constraints on one another.)

3. My third-and final—bit of wondering derives from the second. I perceive in the hesitancy to use the vocabulary of “human nature”—even while acknowledging the need for some kind of counterpart syntactical constraint on what we may legitimately say of our (inter-)subjectivity—a tension between the “anthropological” and the “metaphysical”—and, in the case of Smith's proposal, between these two and the “transmetaphysical”—in forging an effective and a persuasive contemporary idiom of spirit. The larger context in which I would like to place this wonder is not, however, the oft-told (and in my judgment, the by-now-tired) story of the contestability of meta-

physics and the rumors of its death; it is, instead, the shift which seems to have taken place in the locus from which metaphysics is construed and metaphysical discourse is constructed. This is the shift from “thought” and “being” (or, as some might put it, from the “rational” and the “real”) to “language” and “relation”—a shift which, though it certainly encompasses the one from “substance” to “subject,” is just as certainly not exhausted by it. This shift, as I see it, is not one of replacement, but of what we might call “focal displacement”: it is not that the systematic articulation of fundamental constitutive categories for what we affirm as real and true and good and beautiful no longer can be referenced to “being” or “thought” and or “substance”—but that these earlier focal categories for metaphysical discourse now in turn need to be referenced to new and at least equally weighty points of focus—“language” and “relation” and, perhaps most intriguingly, to “otherness” and “difference.”

My sense is that the idioms of spirit which Clayton and Smith each present are fashioned not only in awareness of this shift but as participant in it. As in the case of the hesitancy to speak in terms of human nature, my concern is not about whether such a shift—and making the idiom of spirit participant in that shift—is well founded. Modern and post-modern accounts of “the real”—even though they may not use that precise term—have made it difficult for to us avoid the importance, perhaps even the necessity, of construing it—and thus ourselves—in terms of language. As Charles Taylor has pointed out: “From where we stand, we are constantly forced to a conception of man as a language animal, one who is constituted by language.”³ To this conception of our being constituted as human by language, we are increasingly being led to add “and by relation, by difference, and by otherness.” Though it may very well be a matter of legitimate dispute whether we should (or even can) avoid going along the paths these notions enable us now to chart, prudence suggests to me that we consider ourselves as already moving on them. As a result, I think that our concern should be about the role which a (re)new(ed) idiom of spirit might play in illuminating where this shift is taking us—or, to put it in a different voice—with whether and how the spirit is with us as we move along the paths of living which we have already started to chart from this shift.

ENDNOTES

- ¹The most visible of these shifts has been in the rise of so-called "post-modernist" issues and modes of inquiry, but there are others: e. g., the internal and sometime even fractious pluralism of the long dominant and seemingly monolithic "analytic philosophy" of the English-speaking world has become far more apparent; there has been a significant revival of interest in philosophy of religion and in the history of philosophy, both previously considered shabby and disreputable in comparison to the hard-nosed and tough-minded conceptual analysis of "real" philosophy. In most Catholic philosophical and theological circles the breakdown of an Aristotlean-Thomist-scholastic "consensus"—if there ever really was one—has long been apparent and no single successor option holds sway. Similarly, as Protestant theology has moved out from the towering landmarks set down by the giants of neo-orthodoxy, paths have been staked out along almost every point on the theological compass.
- ²Taylor uses this phrase in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 520. A succinct presentation of key elements which motivate his project to retrieve a notion of the spiritual is found in his Marianist Award Lecture "A Catholic Modernity" (Dayton: The University of Dayton, 1996). For some of the other notable efforts to diagnose the roots of the current culture conditions which make possible denial and forgetfulness of "spirit" see Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Louis Dupré, *Metaphysics and Culture*, The Aquinas Lecture 1994 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994); *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- ³"Language and Human Nature," *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 246