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FAITH, GRACE, AND THE DESTRUCTION OF TRADITION:
A HERMENEUTIC-GENEALOGICAL READING OF THE PAULINE LETTERS

Introduction

In his letter to the Christian community in Rome, Paul describes himself as the messenger and the bringer of a happy message, as *apostle* and *evangelist*, namely of the arrival of Jesus Christ, anticipated by the Jewish prophets, both God and Man, who has lived, been sacrificed, and who has risen from the dead, and thus opened the way for everyone, Jews and gentiles, to find solace and redemption. This is the central apocalyptic event around which all of his preserved writings are organized. Something has occurred in the history of mankind, a break or caesura, and henceforth things are not the same. It is Paul who first articulates, in writing, the theological significance of the death of Christ, making this death into the core of Christian devotion. Man is now living in an intermediary time, awaiting the return of the Lord. The law itself is canceled, since “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4). And for this same reason he can write that “man is justified by faith (*pistis*) without the deed of the law”, and also that “...a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God” (2:28-29). On the basis of this affirmation of a decisive historical and moral-political event, Paul also outlines the traits of a new ethics, centered round the virtues of faith, hope (*elpis*), and love (*agape*).¹

Paul’s message is primarily meaningful only in the context of Jewish mythology, as the audacious proclamation of the fulfillment of its deepest promise. But communicating in the Greek language of a Hellenistic-Judaic Mediterranean culture, addressing himself explicitly to non-Jews, Paul is seeking the ears and hearts of a general Greek and Roman public. He is well aware of the

¹ This article is written in the context of the research project “Phenomenology and Religion”, funded by Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson stiftelse. A special thanks to Jayne Svenungsson for illuminating discussions on Paul.

controversial and even nonsensical nature of his core message. He distinguishes himself and his nascent community explicitly apart from the dominant cultural strands of his time, as when he writes in Corinthians (1.22-23): “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom (*sophia*), but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”.

In view of this message and the stance of its author, what could it mean to read these letters in a *philosophical* way, from the point of view of a philosophical, and thus a supposedly *secular* spirit? Is there such a reading that does not, immediately, and essentially, and already from the start distort its message? Or is it, on the contrary, perhaps only on the basis of such a reading that its genuine significance can be brought to bear, supposing that it is only from the viewpoint of a fully critical-reflective appropriation of the texts that whatever meaning they have can be grasped and interpreted? And is it then ever possible to decide, definitively, what constitutes the border between these spheres, the secular and the profane, as well as the skeptical and the confessional? Furthermore, what is the relation between this philosophical interpretation, and a supposedly historical and exegetical interpretation, one that is expected to take into consideration the historical context of the text?

In a contribution to the recently published volume *Paul among the Philosophers*, edited by John Caputo, the New Testament scholar Paula Fredriksen takes up this issue, in particular in relation to the philosophical intervention of Alain Badiou, in his much debated book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, which sees in Paul the precursor of Badiou’s own kind of revolutionary universalism. She argues that even though such a reading is interesting as an intervention in a contemporary political debate, its value as historical scholarship on Paul is equivalent to the imaginings of early missionaries, who believed that they had found the trinity in Chinese Buddhism and Taoism.² Her intervention highlights the principal question, if indeed we could, once and for all, delineate between an exegetical-historical interpretation and a creative philosophical appropriation. Even though I agree with her assessment of the idiosyncratic nature of Badiou’s intervention, the general nature of the problem remains, that in the end, and contrary to her suggestion, this division and its borders are essentially evasive. The problem of how to obtain adequate access to a historical text will ultimately remain an open question. Even with an expert, and even an ideal absolute, knowledge of the sources, it would not automatically follow that the texts are read and appropriated in an adequate way. For in the end every fundamental text is also an original intervention in its own right, which establishes its own space of meaning and its own history of reception, including the interpretative horizon within which we stand today.

It is important to rehearse this basic reflection at the outset. My own purpose in this regard is both limited in scope, and encompassing. I want to outline a

² Paula Fredriksen, “Historical Integrity, Interpretative Freedom: The Philosopher’s Paul and the Problem of Anachronism”, in Caputo & Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 61-73.

reading of some of the basic notions in Paul from a perspective which combines the approach of Foucault, as practiced in his last writings on the early Roman period, with Heidegger's existential phenomenology as this was used in particular in his interpretation of the Pauline letters. But I want to do this also in the more general ambition of reflecting on what it means to read a confessional text from a secular perspective, so as to bring out the meaning of the confessional content in a philosophical mode. Ideally, the purpose then is not to project a contemporary agenda onto the Pauline text, but to permit the texts to resonate in a voice that is at the same time new and yet intrinsic to itself. As a comparative context I will refer at times to Roman Stoicism, and to Seneca in particular, as a critical contrast, which can help us bring out the uniqueness of Pauline ethics in philosophical terms.

The overall structure of the text is first to introduce in general terms the meaning and relevance of Foucault's project of ancient technologies of the self for interpreting Paul. Since Foucault does not discuss Paul explicitly, I take the route of exploring the Nietzschean background to Foucault where the figure of Paul holds a very particular place. I then introduce Heidegger's reading of Paul as an alternative strategy, arguing for its remaining relevance for our contemporary situation. Heidegger does not situate his own effort in a historical context of exegetical efforts, which is true also to a great extent of the recent wave of philosophical readings of Paul. In order to place us in a more self-reflexive position in regard to the very problem of reading Paul philosophically I therefore also include a brief overview of the philosophical-theological significance of Paul in some earlier literature. Only after this detour, is it possible to return to the actual reading and interpretation of some of the basic Pauline tropes and concepts. In the end what we find is Paul as the original inventor of a technology of the self, and a new mode of subjectivity, which can be understood only in relation to its temporal-historical positioning of itself with regard to the sense of the present and to tradition.

The contemporary debates on the rise of philosophical interest in Paul has focused primarily on the interventions of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben, who all published interpretations of the Pauline letters over the last decade.³ Badiou's book is an attempt to reclaim Paul as the precursor of a political, juridical and cultural universalism, in an explicit battle against contemporary forms of relativism, but also linking his own thought of the event

³ Badiou, *Saint Paul – La fondations de l'universalisme* (PUF: Paris, 1997). Translated by R. Brassier, *St Paul The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Agamben's study was first published in Italian, as *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Bollati Boringhieri: Torino, 2000). Translated by P. Dailey, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). In 2004, Žižek published *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). The book joins two previous studies that also relate to the legacy of Christianity and its relevance for contemporary political philosophy, *On Belief* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001) and *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York, NY: Verso, 2000).

to the Paulinian doctrine and to the possibility of a new revolutionary politics. The central concern is to delineate the conditions for what he calls a universal singularity, or universality as event. In 2000 Giorgio Agamben wrote *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, in which he returned to Paul in order to find a messianic understanding of human existence that anticipates some of the most radical moments in Walter Benjamin's thinking. In his non-confessional reading of messianic time, as the temporality of the always-to-come, he senses the possibility also of a community based on dispersal, rather than original unity. And in 2003 Slavoj Žižek joined the discussion with the essay *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, partly joining sides with Badiou and taking up in a critical manner the reading of Agamben, in particular around the issue of the how to understand the law in Paul, and its relation to love and desire. In their different ways, Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek all share a concern for a leftist political agenda in the present, where their different appropriations of Paul could be read as applicative hermeneutical attempts to reclaim the Christian heritage for a radical politics today.⁴ It was as a testimony to this renewed philosophical in Paul, that John Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff gather the contributions to the aforementioned *St Paul among the Philosophers* from 2009, which also includes original contributions by Badiou and Žižek. Together these works constitute a contemporary hermeneutic situation, where suddenly the sense and significance of the Paulinian teaching and the historical role of Paul for Western philosophical and political subjectivity and sensibility has become a focal point of philosophical energies in the present.

In all of these works there is hardly any mention of what is arguably, and in the longer perspective a more decisive event for overall philosophical approach to the New Testament over the course of the last half century, namely Heidegger's work in the early twenties, some of it in close cooperation with Rudolf Bultmann and his students in Marburg. In 1994, the editors of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe* released the material from his 1920/21 early Freiburg seminar on *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, which centers partly on an interpretation of the Letters to the Galatians and the Thessalonians.⁵ In this seminal course Heidegger sought to retrieve an understanding not only of what he described as a supposedly "original" articulation of Christian life experience, but also of human facticity as such, thus integrating a reading of Paul into the core of his analytic of *Dasein*, which was then in the making. At the center of his interest for Paul here is the mode of temporality and historicity expressed in the Letters, an

⁴ In this constellation of recent philosophical writers on Paul, we should also mention the 1993 posthumous publication by the German professor of Jewish studies and hermeneutics, Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, which were edited on the basis of his last lecture series on the Letter to the Romans some years earlier in which he brings his life-long dialogue with Carl Schmitt to its conclusion, in reading Paul back into Judaism.). Jacob Taubes, *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993). Translated by D. Hollander, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Martin Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* Bd 60, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995).

indeterminate kairological time, outside ordinary chronology, a time of expectation, waiting, awakedness, and resolve.

Besides its thematic focus, the course is also of great methodological interest, especially for our present purpose, for the way it articulates the challenge of a philosophical-phenomenological reading of a confessional text. In the introductory remarks to the course, Heidegger emphasizes that the phenomenological question of method is not a question of an appropriate methodological system, but precisely of *access*, that passes through factual [*faktische*] life experience. A phenomenology of religious life, Heidegger writes here, is not a theory *about* the religious, conceived of as an object of study in the standard mode of a science of religion, but rather as a way of entering, in understanding, the religious as a type of meaning-fulfillment or *enactment*, in German *Vollzug*. It is not a psychological theory of religious experiences, but an explication of the *meaning* of religion, which therefore does not immediately need to take sides along confessional lines. Instead the confessional, as the meaning of devotion, is itself among the phenomena to be investigated. Nor does it take a definitive stance in regard to the distinction between rationality and irrationality, as if the religious, once and for all, could be located in the latter. The phenomenological understanding, as Heidegger rightly emphasizes, lies beyond this distinction.⁶ To a phenomenological analysis belongs the preparedness to allow that the basic, organizing concepts, remain undecided. It is on the condition that we do not force a conceptuality onto a phenomenon that this phenomenon can begin to speak and have sense on its own terms. Such an explication can also permit the non-understandable to be understandable, precisely by letting-be [*belassen*] its non-understandability.⁷ Speaking in the terms of Husserl, we should try to investigate these phenomena in “bracketing” their realist, or metaphysical, implications.

In attempting to approach phenomenologically what he takes to be “the Christian”, religious experience, Heidegger then takes the exemplary case of Paul’s letters, in which he traces its basic existential comportment primarily in terms of its relation to the past, present, and future. Faith, e.g., is understood as a mode of relating to the world, from within which existence articulates its historical position. The Christian experience is a mode of living time, as he also writes.⁸ The premise for this kind of explication of meaning is that the conceptual resources of philosophy are not totally fixed in advance, but that they can, on the one hand be generated from within the problematic itself, but also that we can use and follow them as “indicative concepts”, which do not pretend to objectify their matter, but rather function as pointers in the direction of a fulfillment of a meaning. It is also important not to mix this approach with that of an *Einfühlung*, as Heidegger remarks.⁹ Rather it is a question of articulating the character of the *situation* from within which, e.g., Paul speaks to his congregation in the making.

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁸ Ibid., 82

⁹ Ibid., 88.

To this situation belongs precariousness, that it is without certainty, that he does not speak from within knowledge, but from within hope, wakefulness, apprehension, etc. In this way Heidegger works himself towards the meaning of the Pauline discourse, as characterized by a temporal horizon of the *parousia*, not primarily as a theological dogma, but as a horizon of lived meaning. It requires that we set aside the traditional interpretations, as well as the dogmatic explications, and listen out instead for an experience taking shape.

Only from the standpoint of such an understanding is it possible to develop, also in a *critical* sense, the meaning that is realized here. Just as phenomenology in its Husserlian sense presupposes a bracketing of the dogmatic and realistic interpretation of phenomena in order to experience their meaning, so Heidegger also works in relation to the fulfillment of a religious existence. We then set aside the question of dogma, and permit the meaning of the explication to unravel itself. The premise here is that religious dogma is rather to be seen as the posterior elaboration of the themes as they are first articulated. Furthermore dogma can also be critically assessed in relation to a tentative explication of the meaning of the phenomenon in question. This strategy is highly visible in his reading of Paul, who is not seen as speaking in a theoretical-dogmatic way in the first place, and also inversely, that it is only from within Paul's articulation of Christian life experience that the very genesis and significance of subsequent dogma can be interpreted.¹⁰

Heidegger's reading of the Letters could thus be said to work on the basis of a certain idea of a secular and critical reading, a reading that brackets or simply discharges the belief-content and the explicit dogmatic component. Still it is not critical in the fundamental sense of questioning the very foundation of the Pauline ethos. Rather it seeks, through phenomenological re-activation of its enactment-meaning, to bring it to a kind of secularized articulation.

A general problem with many of the recent philosophical interpretations of Paul, including that of Heidegger, is that they fail to take into account the extent to which an implicit theological bias has colored the perception of Paul's historical significance, especially in regard to the relation between Christianity and Judaism. It is only in the more recent research on Paul that the full width of this problematic has become visible within the academic community. Before developing my more specific readings, I would like to rehearse certain elementary facts about Paul and about the reception of his Letters in Christian theology and New Testament Studies.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹¹ For a good short survey of recent trends in Pauline scholarship in this regard, see Ben Witherington III's "Contemporary Perspectives on Paul", in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, J. Dunn ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 256-269. For the new image of Paul in relation to his Jewish context, see Christer Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (London: SCM, 1977), and E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977). A study from the viewpoint of Jewish studies and more post-structuralist thought is Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994). A good

A central concern in much research on Paul and early Christianity, from the late 19th Century onward has been concerned with trying to understand and conceptualize the logic of the transition from the first situation in which Paul composes his letters, where the small, dispersed and still very tentative Christian groupings were struggling to constitute themselves into more stable congregations, or assemblies, *ecclesiae*. Three centuries later the social-religious movement for which he worked had coalesced, through various twists of fate, and manifested most forcefully by Constantine's militant conversion, into the one and only state religion of the Roman Empire. From there on the Catholic Church started its development toward a global moral-political institution, its organization partly molded on the power structure of the empire. Paul's later notability in this development depends entirely on the letters, and the fact that they were included as a central part of the New Testament, constituting the first preserved written sources of Christianity. It is the Letters that literally create the specific Christian *interpretation* of the event of Christ's life and death, and his subsequently proclaimed resurrection, after which the meaning of the law and ethical comportment is transformed.¹²

But already in mentioning the law and the appropriate relation to it, we enter precarious hermeneutical ground. For it is precisely around the articulation of the specifically Pauline, and the supposedly "Christian" understanding of the law and its relation to how the law was perceived, enacted and upheld in the Jewish communities at the time, that the main thrust of Paul's teaching lies, as well as the controversies surrounding its interpretation. What does Paul really teach about the law? What does he mean when he says, as also quoted above, that no salvation comes from the law, but only from *faith*, from *pistis*, as the central thesis in Romans (3:28) reads, and which became a cornerstone both for Augustine and for Luther? And what does it mean that we should not look for the circumcision on the outside, but for those circumcised in spirit (Rom 2:28), whereby everyone can rightly claim to be a Jew and to live by the law? What is the law, what is faith, and what is the nature of the new supposedly more universal community for which Paul is making himself the spokesman? It is

summary of contemporary research on Paul, and also on the history of Paulinian scholarship is provided by the Swedish expert on New Testament exegesis, Magnus Zetterholm in his *Lagen som evangelium? Den nya synen på Paulus och judendomen* (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur, 2006). For a recent ambitious attempt to write the complex story of Christianity and Judaism, see also James Carroll's popular overview *Constantine's Sword: The Church and Jews: a History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001). It gathers many of the more recent critical historical and theological sources that seek to reconsider and reevaluate the birth of anti-Semitism in early Christianity, as a result of inter-Jewish rivalries, and the ruthless policies of the Roman empire.

¹² For this reason it is not misleading to say that Christianity as we know it is in a sense Paulinianism, and that Paul should rightly be seen as the "second founder of Christianity". The quotation is from Wrede in his book *Paul* from 1907, cited by James Dunn in his preface to the *Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), s. 2.

difficult even to begin to interpret these statements without becoming implicated in complex theological battles and controversies, where the history of the violent and ultimately catastrophic relation between Christians and Jews is implied from the very start, and thus again some of the most profound political traumas of the West, the repeated pogroms over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust and the construction of Israel and its aftermath.

Key formulation in this respect are the passages from Romans quoted above, of how Christ is “the end of the law” and that justification from faith, in combination with the transformation of Jewishness into an “inwardly” condition, through “the circumcision of the heart”. We should recall also the famous passage from *Galatians* (3.28), essential not least for Badiou’s reading, which draws the conclusion from this doctrine: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. It was partly with reference to these and other formulations in *Romans* and elsewhere that a general consensus eventually formed, already in the second Century, that Christianity represented something fundamentally different from Judaism, where the latter came to be equated with the rule of the Mosaic law, whereas Christianity represented a new step and era in the development of humankind, marked and brought about by the sacrificial death of Jesus, and consumed in a new pact between man and God through the belief in the resurrected Christ. After having first emerged as a reform movement within Hellenistic Judaism, explicitly preoccupied with the question of how and to what extent it could expand and include non-Jews, openly declaring its wish to include the gentiles into an expanded Jewish community, Christianity rapidly found itself in a structurally antagonistic position vis-à-vis Judaism and the Jewish congregations, more so than in relation to the Empire. And in this violent process of de-semitization of Christianity, propagated not least in the influential writings of Ignatius in the following generation, Paul’s formulations, *Romans* in particular, became the basis of a historical rejection of its Jewish roots.

Textually this antagonistic theologico-political construction stands on loose ground. We need only quote the continuation of the passage from Galatians on “Nor Jew nor Greek...” to see this. For in the very next line Paul writes: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Gal 3.29). The letters contain numerous such statements, that all confirm that at least for Paul, it was clear that the *ecclesia* he sought to establish was an expansion and development of the Judaic faith, indeed its fulfillment, as anticipated by the prophets, to include also gentiles, not a rejection of Judaism as such. To put it more poignantly: Paul’s message was not simply an unanticipated event of universalism set over and against a previous particularism, as is again implied in Badiou’s and Žižek’s readings, but the releasing of the potential and prophesied community on the preserved basis of an earlier, specific and situated promise. But what happened in and through the rising tensions with existing rabbinic Judaism was the emergence of an antagonism, which requires a detailed separate sociological and historical analysis and explanation to sort out, but in which some of the formulations in the Letters served the purpose of

strengthening the ideological differences to the point of open hostility, in which the Christians found gradually growing support from the Roman empire.

These tendencies can then be followed through numerous Christian writers over the centuries. For Luther, to mention the most decisive and ominous writer in this respect, *Romans*, and its interpretation of the relation between law, faith and grace was the core of his whole critical theology, which toward the end of his life, included an outspoken anti-Semitism. For the Hegelian theologians of Tübingen, Bauer in particular, who tried to interpret this development in a more secular historico-philosophical terminology, the doctrine of the Romans was a testimony of the world-historical logic whereby Christianity as the truly universal religion grew out of the particular and enclosed Judaism, which was destined to perish as a religion over the course of history. Christianity represented the new and transformative possibility, precisely by having opened itself up to each and everyone, man and woman, Jew and gentile, slave and freeman. And the Christianized subject is the universalized subject *par excellence*, which has left all old tribalisms and particularities behind.

It is important to keep this theological-political background present, and to remain vigilant in regard to its historical inheritance, and its symbolic and at times also concrete sacrificing of Judaism and Jews for the sake of Christianity's presumably higher principles. In the very affirmation of Christianity as the universal religion, a certain rejection of its own origin is always already in operation. In his book on Paul, Badiou at times stumbles inadvertently into this whole ideological territory, discovering almost as if for the first time, the birth of a supposedly genuine universality in Paul, beyond particulars. But this trope is of an old date, and burdened with Hegelian metaphysics of an inevitable universalization of spirit, and also of earlier interpretations of the historically necessitated sublation of Judaism in the early Church fathers.

Also in Heidegger's reading there is a problematic theological-political undertone, but a less obvious kind. Heidegger is not repeating the Hegelian tendency to restore Paul as the representative of the universal, on the contrary his reading is animated by a more Kierkegaardian and explicitly anti-Hegelian sense of the facticity and singularity of life, and of the kairlogical sense of time. But in his way of framing the interpretation in terms of a quest for an "original Christian life experience" he too, inadvertently repeats a theologico-philosophical gesture of emphasizing the uniqueness of the new congregation in relation to its Jewish background.¹³

From a very different angle comes the approach to Paul in Nietzsche's writings on Christianity. His reflections on Paul and Christianity are rarely mentioned in the contemporary readings on these matters. Yet, they are well worth rehearsing in the general context of what it means to read Paul philosophically, and I would

¹³ For a recent critical assessment of Heidegger's reading in this regard, see Ward Blanton's, *Displacing Christian origins : Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

even say that they are essential when the issue is the possibility of something like a Foucauldian reading of these texts. For it is Nietzsche's writings on these topics that establish the philosophical-critical platform for the very way in which Foucault sets up his problem in *The History of Sexuality*, and thus for the possibility of something like a Foucauldian reading of Paul. In *Anti-Christ*, written during the very last months before his final collapse, Nietzsche staged his most virulent critical confrontation with Christianity. Here he depicts Christianity as "the war to the death against the higher type of man". And in a vitriolic summary of its spiritual character, in a style that borders - as in all of the writings from the last years - on a kind a grotesque parody, he writes that: "Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life; it has depraved the reason even of the intellectually strongest natures by teaching men to feel the supreme values of intellectuality as sinful, as misleading, as *temptations*"¹⁴ In the words of the *Genealogy*, it is the epitome of *reactive* value-formation.

The general figure behind this nihilistic evaluation, according to Nietzsche, is the *theologian*, who comes in many shapes, also as idealistic philosopher. I have found traces of it everywhere, he writes. "Whoever has theologian blood in his veins has a wrong and dishonest attitude toward all things". And the pathos that develops out of this is what is known as "faith".¹⁵ It is on this type of spirituality that he declares his "war". And the ultimate representative of this comportment is - *Paul*. In Nietzsche's account it is Paul that brings the Epicurean and Stoic Enlightenment of the late Antiquity to an end. "What he divined", Nietzsche writes, "was that with the aid of the little sectarian movement on the edge of Judaism one could ignite a 'world-conflagration', that with the symbol 'God on the cross' one could sum up everything down-trodden, everything in secret revolt, the entire heritage of anarchist agitation in the Empire into a tremendous power".¹⁶ Paul thus comes forth as a cunning thinker and politician, who with the help of a perverted set of values, infiltrates the Roman empire. In Nietzsche's interpretation, an entire culture of evaluation collapses from within as a result of what he literally speaks of as a process of infection and decay. Paul is the instrument of a kind of self-corruption of the ancient world, whereby nihilistic and reactive instincts come into power.

In the *Anti-Christ* this development and emergence of life-denying values comes forth as a kind of tragic fatality, with very loose connections to the complex historical reality of the gradual Christianization of the empire. Christianity, in Nietzsche's account, is simply the destruction of Rome and Athens by Jerusalem, contrived by Paul, as the foremost representative of priestly slave morality. In the *Genealogy*, however, he is more attentive to how the adoption of ascetic values, in a specific situation characterized by suffering and subjection, can also

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Penguin, 1968), 117, in *Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA)* 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 171.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120/175.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181/246f.

constitute a kind of heightening of life's power over itself, and how the ascetic priest in this sense is the one who provides a kind a minimal control over life, as the "ruler over suffering".¹⁷ Ascetic values - and their doctrines of sin, punishment, chastity, grace, redemption, and eternal life - are thus not only looked upon here and analyzed as a kind of necessary and useful evil, deployed by the priestly cast to maintain their control over a suffering population. Instead Nietzsche here also recognizes the close, intimate, even inextricable bond between philosophy and a certain asceticism of the spirit. Indeed, he writes here, it was only in the "leading-strings of this ideal that philosophy learned to take its first small steps on earth".¹⁸ This also explains why philosophers tend to have such difficulties in assessing the ascetic ideal in a non-prejudiced manner. Ascetic ideals are in the end different ways, not simply of degrading and destroying life, but of maintaining it. And Christianity, as he writes there, is the great treasure house of ingenious means of consolation.

Often the philosophers and scientists like to think of themselves as the opponents of ascetic-religious values, but in their most critical posture, they also betray their deeper commitment to these ideals, precisely in their conscientious intellectuality, in their remaining *belief in truth*. Thus Nietzsche can write: "That which constrains these men, however, this unconditional will to truth, is faith in the ascetic ideal itself, even if as an unconscious imperative - don't be deceived about that - it is the faith in a metaphysical value, the absolute value of truth, sanctioned and guaranteed by this ideal alone..."¹⁹

With this argument in place, the whole problematic of asceticism and ascetic ideals, to which the last part of the *Genealogy* is devoted, is placed on a new plane. Now we see that the history of religious and philosophical and scientific spirit is a shared history, to which the philosophical genealogist does not simply have a free and objective access, but in which he is also implied and implicated, in a circular hermeneutic situation, where the limits between the religious and secular, and the rational and mythical becomes more uncertain. It is also at this point that we can fully grasp the urgency and necessity of understanding the complex genealogy of human spirituality delineated in the *Genealogy*, as well as the profound difficulties involved in this task. In order to understand critically the role and fate of Christianity as a spiritual condition, it does not suffice simply to adopt a critical Enlightenment position that can reject its superstitious beliefs but also and ultimately to unearth the common bond between the religious and the philosophical, as a genealogical critical history of life as self-shaping, self-controlling, and truth-making.

It was precisely this project that Foucault picked up in his last published works, the second and third volumes of the *History of sexuality*. The problematic that guides him there, in his detailed analysis of various "technologies of the self" is

¹⁷ KSA 5, 372.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1969), 112. KSA 5, 356.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151/400.

directly taken from Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, much more so than he openly admits. For what Nietzsche continued to portray as a kind of tragic fatality of history, viz., the emergence and gradual success of Christianity as a general philosophical-religious orientation of ancient spiritual culture, until the point of being adopted as state religion by the Roman emperor in the 4th century, Foucault tried to understand from within a transformation of this culture itself, precisely in its ways of understanding, representing, and guiding itself, in other words its self-technologies. With much greater attentiveness to the historical sources, he sought to provide a sense to the how and why of the transformation of ancient culture of the body in the direction of Christian asceticism, by studying the themes of marriage, woman, boys, diets and eroticism in pre-Christian writers. That he was also aware of the ambiguity of the ascetic is clear from his methodological remark in the preface where he describes his own attempt as an experiment with oneself within the overall play of truth, so as to cultivate philosophy in the old sense, namely an *ascesis*, a self-practice in thinking.²⁰

In the Collège de France course from 1981-82, on the "Hermeneutics of the Subject", in which much of the material that was later presented in the second and third volume of *The History of Sexuality* was first presented, Foucault elaborates his interpretation as the "care of oneself", *souci-de-soi*, or *epimeleia tes autes*, as the fundamental preoccupation of philosophical ethics from Plato to the Christians.²¹ Just as in the published books, the analyzes deal primarily with the Greek and Roman philosophical and medical sources, culminating in a detailed reading of the Stoics, Seneca in particular, but also Marcus Aurelius. But throughout the lectures he makes repeated, if yet marginal, references also to the equivalent of philosophical notions in the Christian sources, first of all the general concern with *ascesis*, a training of the self, but also with different ways of understanding "saving", "conversion" and "fate". In the three volumes that were published from this project, Foucault himself never reached the early Christian writers. Concerning the Roman period, the analysis is primarily based on a detailed reading of Seneca, Epictetus, Galen, Plutarch, and Rufus Musonius. There is thus no remaining Foucauldian analysis of Paul, but we know from his stated plans and also from interviews that he was working on a study of Christian writers, "Confessions of the flesh", concerned primarily with monastic practices, a manuscript which exists in the archives, but which apparently is not going to be published. The background context of Foucault's analysis in the published volumes was the received view that Christianity was ascetic whereas the heathen ancient world was permissive. This is the conception that he wished to challenge, by tracing instead the emergence and prevalence of a general matrix articulated by philosophers and doctors, circling around the cultivation of the body, of marriage, of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, all in relation to the possibility of wisdom. What he follows is the autonomous

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* Vol II (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 15.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Herméneutique du sujet* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 13: "De l'exercice philosophique à l'ascétisme chrétienne, mille ans de transformation, mille ans d'évolution - dont le souci de soi est sans doute un des fils directeurs importants...".

construction of an ethics, which invents its own rules, but which therein also manifests and initiates a form of subjectivity as a whole, of self-regulation and self-care. It is this historical process of “subjectivation” that interested him in particular. And the focus is precisely on the forms of *ascesis* – in the original sense of a *training* of the self – that should bring it about. The overall guiding motive for these technologies of the self is to achieve *mastery*, primarily over oneself, in order not to be a slave.

In this way we can see how Foucault follows a Nietzschean directive of delineating a more active from a reactive mode of value-formation in identifying a kind of active asceticism, motivated by a search for increased power over oneself. The study argues convincingly for the thesis that the philosophers and doctors had long prepared these new self-restrictive technologies of the self, in particular in relation to sexual practices. This is true in particular for Roman thinkers, who in general demonstrate a stronger tendency toward strict self-control. In Seneca in particular, we can even follow how the discourse of control and self-mastery is captured in the rhetoric of military occupation, where reason must act as the military and political power in achieving control over itself. The control and sovereignty over a territory somehow blends in these discourses with the pleasure one can take in having conquered oneself, in truthfulness and transparency, as ultimately a condition for happiness and freedom, as is clearly shown, e.g., in his Letters to Lucillus. Finally, however, the conclusion of Foucault’s study becomes that even though many of these traits prevail and are elaborated in the Christian era, the latter nevertheless marks something new, a new way of constituting oneself as a moral subject, which he then wishes to explore in a continued work.²²

Against this lengthy background, I will now finally turn to some themes in Paul, and see to what extent we can indeed take the lead from Foucault, using also the experience of Heidegger’s reading, in delineating a certain enactment-meaning of the subjectivity taking shape in these texts, thus performing an experiment with a philosophical reading and appropriation of the Letters. Several among the basic themes in Paul are similar to what we encounter in Stoic writers such as Seneca: desire, sexuality, virtue, the problem of finitude, and the relation to the transcendent or divine, permeated by the ambition to acquire the appropriate comportment, that peacefulness or calmness of mind, the *apatheia* and *ataraxia*, the non-affectedness and non-disturbedness, as also a mode of freedom, *eleutheria*. It is life-philosophy, oriented by a temporal-historical framework in mythical-literary form, focused around the cultivation of certain basic virtues, and the control of desire, that ultimately seeks a way to ensure human happiness. But in this general shared ethico-philosophical territory of a concern for the self, there are also significant differences that can help us to assess the uniqueness of Paul’s spirituality.

A key concept in Paul that at a first glance would seem to have no counterpart in Seneca or the philosophers is that of faith, *pistis*. As a virtue, it has no place in

²² Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité* Vol III (Paris: Gallimard. 1984), 274.

previous philosophical ethics. I would like to start with a few reflections on the difficult issue of the meaning of faith in Paul, as a way to enter the texts. It has become customary in the exegetical literature on Paul, and it is quite clear from the Letters that faith does not primarily refer to a cognitive comportment, it is not belief in the existence of this or that. *Pistis* for Paul comes closer to a certain sense of *reliance*. When he writes in the famous passage in Romans 1.17, that “the righteous shall live from faith”, we could still hear it as an authoritarian call for submissiveness to a given and proclaimed law. But beyond that we can also see how a subjective comportment is being articulated, whereby the stress on faith, is rather a call for bringing the meaning of the law back to a certain subjective enactment. Faith here is not belief in the Lord, but rather the *reliance* on a divine order as a mode of comporting oneself toward reality as such. If we are to understand religious life as a technology of the self, this suggested sense of *pistis* is fundamental. *Pistis* is then primarily seen as an existential-subjective comportment, not a cognitive one. From this perspective we can also begin to see how it begins to overlap with the stoic sense of *ataraxia* and *apatheia*. The distinctive meaning of this comportment becomes available for a philosophical interpretation once we see how it resembles, and in this very resemblance differs from the stoic doctrine of learning how to live toward fate. What Paul is articulating could thus be read as a way to live one’s hopes, desires, and expectations, so as not to lose one’s orientation, not to become depressed, to remain open to the future, also before loss and disappointments. Faith is thus a name for *relying* on life as such.

It is from such an interpretation of faith that we can begin to receive also in a different tonality the meaning of a second fundamental concept in Paul, namely grace, *charin*. Grace is a name for the *gift* of being justified in one’s existence. It is something granted those who live their lives in *pistis*, in reliance. What faith reveals in relation to the law, Romans say (3.20) is that there is sin, *hamartia*, in other words that we have already mistaken ourselves, and that we can no longer voluntarily bring about our own salvation. This salvation can then only be the result of a gift from outside. It is in these formulations that Paul can be said to invent and articulate a kind of subjectivity that we do not find in any of the philosophical writers. Since it is so deeply couched in a mythical-metaphysical framework, in his interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ, it is very difficult to interpret freely in a philosophical sense. This goes in particular for the idea that our lives should henceforth repeat the Christian movement of suffering, death, and resurrection, and of thus ultimately overcoming death, that somehow there is an event which has totally transformed the very condition of life and spirituality forever.

The event of Christ, or rather the Pauline interpretation of this event, is of course the central moment of his theology, a madness in the eyes of the philosophers as he rightly notes. But if we leave aside the myth, and try instead to analyze the situation in terms of a construction of a mode of subjectivity, we may perhaps access this moment in a more reflexive sense. While the comportment of *pistis* should partly be read as a kind of existential parallel to the stoic *apatheia*, the core of this subjectivity differs from what we find in Seneca or any of the other Stoics,

precisely in a way that it transforms the inner dynamic between strength and weakness, slavery and mastery. Indeed, one of the truly creative moments in Paul has to do with how he displaces the fundamental matrix of ancient ethics, precisely in its use and understanding of the metaphors of mastery and slavery. As Foucault clearly showed, what guides ancient Greek and Roman ethics is the imperative not to be a slave, but to be a master, and ultimately over oneself. When Paul speaks of suffering in Romans 5:3 he could first seem to be close to the Stoic understanding of how to gain mastery. He writes of how we can find glory in suffering, knowing that suffering engenders patience and experience and that this then leads to hope. This insistence on the need for experiencing hardship for the sake of training and for how it strengthens the spirit would be familiar to any reader of Stoic literature. It is a position that will be forcefully articulated later by Epictetus and by Marcus Aurelius. But there is another dimension of this self-technology that is peculiar to the Pauline articulation, which can be seen from the way he then goes on to speak about sin, *hamartia*. For Seneca, and for the Stoic thinkers in general, desire is a problem primarily because it places us in the position of the slave in relation to ourselves. Desire must be mastered, not because it is evil, but rather its evilness lies in that it represents the enslaved dimension of ourselves. How then does Paul articulate this situation? In *Romans* 6:15f he describes it in the following way: Previously, he says, you were slaves to sin, but by choosing to obey the new doctrine you became free from sin, but instead you became “slaves of righteousness”, and thus you will be blessed and receive eternal life.

This passage, if any, could be taken to confirm Nietzsche’s thesis, that here the position of slavery is indeed made the basis of an ethics in a way that is entirely foreign to the ancient philosophical matrix in general, and to the Stoic sensibility. Just the idea of associating slavery with something positive would be outrageous for a writer like Seneca. Taken at face value Paul’s promise of course seems both crude and deceitful, that somehow we would not only gain happiness by enlisting ourselves as slaves under the supreme master, but also eternal life. These are stories with which one fools children and uneducated people. But taken as a technology of the self it could be read in another tonality as well. Then we sense how the drastic reversal of the traditional matrix also points to a transformation of the inner architechtonic of the subject, from autonomy to a kind of heteronomy. The subject does not pass from inner slavery to inner mastery, but from inner slavery to a free recognition of a more superior non-mastery. Both following and perverting the stoic matrix Paul can then go on to say that this community of slavery indeed constitutes a higher form of freedom, which is no longer freedom as personal mastery, but that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (*Romans* 8:21). Here we also find an originary articulation of what is commonly taken to be a modern Rousseauian-Kantian political form of subjectivation. It is a celebration of mastery through subjection, and strength through weakness, as Paul writes in *Corinthians*: that in weakness strength is greatest (12:9). It marks the birth of a way of thinking about and experiencing

subjectivity, in which strength and power are not only what is gathered and enacted, but what that the subject allows itself to become a part in and of.²³

The final moment of liberation, of the creation as such, is not something that can ever be brought about through human action, instead it can only come as a moment of grace. Or perhaps we should rather say: grace, *charin*, is the name for the incalculable happening of liberation. And the appropriate comportment vis-à-vis this possibility is hope, *elpis*. This hope is not, as Paul clearly emphasizes, a specific hope for something that we know, for then it would not be hope. Rather it marks a kind of sustained patience, a holding out in the uncertainty that something could come about. Together with faith, hope marks the second of the three principal virtues of Pauline ethics, the third of which is *agape*, God's love of the world, in which we can also take part. And in all of these comportments we can see a certain displacement of the role of mastery and slavery. In regard to the basic virtues of Greek and Roman ethical thought - justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom - the Pauline virtues clearly delineate a different structure of subjectivity. It is a subject that does not seek self-mastery over its situation, which keeps itself open to the unknown and improbable, and which celebrates love for the other and for creation as such as its fundamental comportment.

To a thinker like Seneca, or for that matter Aristotle, - and Nietzsche's critical assessment moves in this orbit - it would be outrageous to suggest that justice, *dikaiosyne*, would somehow emerge out of the practice of hope and love. For *dikaiosyne*, as one of the moral-practical virtues, is a capacity for which one must train one's natural talent, and which can only gradually be achieved. Instead Paul seems to promise it as a kind of bonus gift for each and everyone who practices what he presents as a more basic set of virtues. But what kind of subject is this Pauline subject? It is a passionate subject, open to the possibility of its own fundamental transformation, it is a subject in pain, joy, and hope. It is in that way also a revolutionary subject, which has cut the bonds to its own tradition, so as to release that tradition's most deeply concealed promises to itself. It is in this sense an "ecstatic" subject, to borrow a depiction from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. We must hear again these aspects of the Paul in order to fully read him, not just as theologians seeking confessional inspiration, but also as philosophers trying to make sense of the Pauline text. On one level this text is indeed mad, intoxicated by its own sense of urgency and reliance on the imminent transformation of the earth.

Paul will eventually become the writer for the doctrinaires, for the builders of institutions, but to begin with he is the voice of the inspired exile, of the desperate critic of a tradition gone stale, and for the revolutionary and reformer. It is partly this sense of a permanent revolution that gives the text its peculiar

²³ This topic of the weakness as basis for thinking the relation to God has been developed much further by several authors in the contemporary philosophical-theological appropriation of Paul, notably Vattimo, de Vries and Caputo. See in particular the latter's *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

strength and tenacity, that it describes all of life as an attentive waiting for life, that we are living in the in-between two times, in which we must cultivate our humanity, in an atmosphere of loving attentiveness to the whole of creation in anticipation of its liberation.

Read through a philosophical lens, Paul's ethics can thus be described as an ethics of liberation through subjection, at the center of which we find a subject which has taken upon itself the law, no longer as an external set of rules, but rather as that which lives and comes to bear only through the ethical comportment of the individual subject, in faith. It does not deny the law or the legality of the law, but it refuses to accept that the subject reaches its ethical potential simply by following the law. It calls for the need to place oneself initially apart from tradition and from inherited practices. The law is cancelled, but only as such can it also be valid. This is, as I see it, is the most speculative moment of the text, and the one with the most momentous and ambiguous implications. It seems however, that the existential sense of this figure has not yet been interpreted in a satisfying way, mostly due to the confessional blindfolds that cannot think beyond the concrete Christian doctrine. As a last station of this experiment with the Pauline text, I therefore want to outline a way of explicating this constellation somewhat further, taking a lead no longer from Foucault, but rather from Heidegger's hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis in his lectures on Paul, and developing this explicitly in relation to the problem of tradition.²⁴

What is really going on in these texts in relation to inherited Mosaic Law? What Paul is doing is to give voice to a more general dilemma, which has to do with the historicity of subjectivity within the inevitable decay of tradition, and the sedimentation of language. For the Greeks, who were – as Plato once said, quoting an Egyptian priest – children, forever new beginners, with no memory of the past, the tradition as such was not a problem.²⁵ We do not in Greek philosophy come across a sense of the tradition as a weight that one has to deal and dispense with as such. There is not a sense of how the very language of morality and politics can enter into a state of decay, where the words no longer designate, and where man no longer lives in a genuine relation to his world in and through language and the law. This is very clear in Seneca, for whom the great masters of the past are simply a source of contemplation and joy, occupying a temporality of eternity. In the eternally valid truths of the thinkers and writers of the past we can find solace, and through them we can experience these binding values in ourselves. In Paul, the situation is reversed. What he is articulating and responding to is a sense of crisis in tradition itself, and thus the dilemma of the traditional as such. And what he is seeking to articulate, in his mythical-poetical language is in the end *a strategy for inheriting the law as scripture*. What this requires is then a radical break with tradition, indeed destruction of

²⁴ A source of inspiration here is Heidegger's analysis of the historicity of Dasein, as developed in *Being and Time*, part two, chapter 5. See also my own work *Enigmatic Origins. Tracing the Theme of Historicity Through Heidegger's Works* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994).

²⁵ This quotation is found in *Timaeus*, 20b.

tradition, in order for tradition to happen again. In 2 Corinthians 10.4 he writes: I destroy buildings of thought – *logismous kathairontes*, in the Latin translation *concilia destruentes*. The subjectivity which he thereby forges is one which can no longer rely on simply belonging to a tradition, to a community, and to a law. For the law has become something external and alien, a substitute for living the true legality of the law. This is at least how we could understand his point that the law is canceled, yet not replaced. The law henceforth should be a law of the heart and the spirit, in other words of something interior, bodily, situated in the singular human being, and only as such as valid and living. Yet the living spirit of the law is not something that one can simply invent and master from within a willful self-control, it will only come through a certain mode of abandonment of the self to its worldly ethical practices, in uncertain reliance, in love, hope and faith.

From this perspective we can also see how deeply misguided it is to read Paul as a non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish thinker. Instead, and this is also e.g., Taubes' point, his teaching makes sense only within the context of contemporary Judaism. He is animated by an ambition shared by numerous prophets and thinkers, not least the early Jewish mystics as documented by Scholem and others, to provide an articulation of what a living Jewish tradition could amount to. The necessity to constantly interpret the law, so as to enact the law is part of the living application of the law, a law which is also language, as the form in which man articulates his relation to himself, his community, and toward being as such. It is a bond which is always in peril of losing its force and its vitality, and which therefore has to be reinvented anew. Paul develops a mythical account of this collapse and transformation, but in its core the argument is concerned with the possibility of its continuation.²⁶

What I have presented so far is just a few steps along the way of reading the Pauline letters from the view point of Foucauldian analyses of self-technologies within the context of a hermeneutic existential ontology. By combining these means of interpretation, with a comparative eye toward contemporary stoicism, we can see how they speak to a modern sensibility, without disregarding their historical context. Instead, the idea is to perform this analysis in close proximity to modern historical-biblical scholarship emphasizing first of all the Jewish context, not the subsequent Christian theological context in which the fulfillment of Christianity as Roman state religion is always already in operation. In this direction much work still remains to be done.

²⁶ It is not incidental that it was the *Romans* that more than any other document served Luther in his attempt 15 centuries later to criticize the depravity of this institution, which by then was in a situation in certain ways comparable to Rabbinic Judaism at the time of Jesus, and it is not incidental that his initial attempt to reform this community led to its collapse, to the birth of a new Church, as well as a century long outburst of furious and devastating sectarian violence. The more intricate logic of this space of tradition in transformation would deserve many further analyses, which the present format does not permit.

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