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**Participation: a philosophical and theological puzzle**

The concept of participation has a long and complex history. It is also inextricably linked to other cognate issues like the nature of universals, analogy, perfect being theology or the problem of evil. I envisage the mini conference as an exploration of the metaphysical tradition of ‘participation’ (i.e. in the sense of μέθεξις rather than κοινωμία). It is a central concept of Thomism and yet marginal in much post 17<sup>th</sup> century Western philosophical thought. Like many core - and ostensibly familiar - concepts in philosophy, it is deeply puzzling. Elucidating both its history and possible relevance today for both philosophy and theology is the challenge.

Plato famously presents the physical cosmos as ‘participating’ in the ideas (*Phaedo* 99c6ff). In the *Timaeus*, the world of becoming is a ‘likeness’ of its intelligible archetype. In the Republic V 480a or the Symposium 211c we find the celebrated ascent to ‘absolute beauty. The various terms in Greek for participation are not much clearer than their English counterparts but the term has been taken since (especially through the enormous influence of the *Timaeus*) as expressing the connection between sensible and intelligible world – the visible ‘*kosmos aisthetos*’ as the ‘*eikon*’ of the ‘*kosmos noetos*’. Aristotle, in rejecting the language of participation, dismissed this as merely a poetic manner of speaking. *Metaphysics* (987b7-14; 991a20-22; 1079b24-26). Unlike Plato’s relatively inchoate and suggestive theology, Aristotle has a clear conception of the Divine mind. The God of Aristotle is a final cause and not an efficient cause of the physical cosmos. Moreover, the Aristotle’s deity is not the basis for any exemplarism. It is with the Neoplatonists, however, that we find a clearly *causal* view of participation, whereby the imperfect domain is dependent upon a perfect transcendent source for its being. The idea of ‘participation’, through the influence of Neoplatonism, was a pivotal aspect of late antique and medieval thought, e.g. Avicenna, Maimonides and Aquinas. The distinguished American Thomist W. Norris Clarke S.J. (1917-2008) offered the following definition:

Participation (in the order of real being)= a structure or order of relationship between beings such that they all share in various degrees of fullness in some positive property or perfection common to them all, as received from the same one source: all finite beings participate in existence from God. A Neoplatonic (not Aristotelian) doctrine adapted by

Aquinas to express his own essence/existence metaphysics. *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysic*, Notre Dame, 2001) p.318.

The idea of the world participating in its transcendent source is criticized explicitly in the modern era by various figures. Consider Francis Bacon:

For as all works do show forth the power and skill of the workman, and not his image; so it is of the works of God, which do show the omnipotency and wisdom of the maker, but not his image: and therefore therein the heathen opinion differeth from the sacred truth; for they supposed the world to be the image of God, and man to be an extract or compendious image of the world; but the Scriptures never vouchsafe to attribute to the world that honour, as to be the image of God, but only the work of his hands; neither do they speak of any other image of God, but man. (*Bacon, Advancement of Learning, book II, Works, ed. Spedding and Ellis, III, p.349.*)

Bacon is claiming that for the Christian the world is like an artifact, like the ‘work of his hands’ but, (sc. God) like an artifact, and need not bear any relation of likeness to its source. His target may not be explicitly Neoplatonic but it fits well. In the Neoplatonic account of participation, the effect bears the image of cause. Plotinus thinks of the cosmos as a mirror-reflection of the divine rather than as a picture or artificer-image. The polished metal mirrors of the ancient world (*katoptra*) were murky by modern standards. Nevertheless, as A.H.Armstrong often remarked, the language of reflection suggests intimate and unmediated relation of becoming to Being: the closeness of the image to its archetype and thus the presence of the Divine in the physical cosmos. The lower is an image, shadow, dream or trace of the higher: ‘sensations here are dim intellections: intellections there are vivid sensations’ (Ennead VI 7 (38) 7.30-31). Thus, for Plotinus there is continuity between sense and intellect. Vision is not a metaphor for a Platonist! Rather, sensation and intellection belong on a continuum.

It is upon such a metaphysical basis that Augustine can say ‘*Aspice quae vides, et quaere quem non vides*’ in his *Sermon 126* ‘Look at what you see, and seek what you do not see’, and link this to St Paul’s reference in Romans 1.20 of the invisible things of Creation. Augustine is drawing on the Platonic doctrine of creaturely participation in the Divine intellect: visible beauty and order point to its invisible source.

Anselm follows this line of thought in Augustine when he argues for Perfect Being as the basis of degrees of perfection. The existence of

imperfections presupposes a principle of perfection that is self sufficient: unlimited being itself. These a posteriori reflections are not, of course, unrelated to his conceptual argument for the ‘id quo maius cogitari nequit’.

What is the relation of eternal objects to traditional universals or Divine ideas? Augustine in *On Eighty Three Different Questions*, qu. 46.2. notes that in Latin the Platonic Ideas are called ‘*formae*’ or ‘*species*’. These, he tells us, are *logoi* and explicitly identifies them with immutable forms within the Divine mind. These are the archetypes of the created order. (cf. *Free Choice of the Will*, book 2.) The brilliant early medieval thinker John Scot Eriugena developed a theory of the ideas as creative energies rather than abstractions, i.e. ‘*causae primordiales*’ (cf. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, VI,10,17.)

### **The legacy of Participation?**

Outside scholasticism, it is difficult to find much explicit reference to participation after the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Does it become part of what C.S Lewis famously described as the ‘discarded image’? It is a central concept for the theologian Richard Hooker (1554-1600) and the remarkable hymns of Charles Wesley (1707-1788). It was important for the Cambridge Platonists: John Smith writes of:

God is the First Truth and Primitive Goodness: True religion is a vigorous Efflux and Emanation of Both upon the Spirits of men and therefore is called a participation of the Divine nature. John Smith, *Select Discourses* (Cambridge 1859), p.390.

Jonathan Edwards insists in full Platonic vein:

as there is an infinite fullness of possible good in God, a fullness of every perfection, of all excellency and beauty... And as this fullness is capable of communication or emanation *ad extra*; so it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that it should be communicated or flow forth, that this infinite fountain of good should send forth abundant streams, that this fountain of light should diffusing its excellent fullness, pour forth light all around. And as this is in itself excellent, so a disposition to this in the Divine Being must be looked upon as a perfection or an excellent disposition; such an emanation of good is, in some sense, a multiplication

of it. (J. Edwards, "Dissertation," *Works* 8:433)

The language of the communication or emanation of the Divine diffusing its 'excellent fullness' is unmistakably the language of participation. Somewhat later, S.T. Coleridge (1774-1832) writes of the symbol as: 'the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative' (Coleridge, *Statesman's Manual*, p.30). Coleridge clearly builds on a conviction that the symbol has an ontological foundation. Even Baudelaire seems to assume something quite close in a beautiful sonnet when he writes of:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
 Laissant parfois sortir de confuses paroles;  
 L'homme y passé a travers des forêts de symbols  
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers (*Correspondances*)

In Jonathan Edwards and S.T. Coleridge we are with in clearly Platonic tradition. Amongst philosophers who are not so clearly 'Platonic' and avoid the language of participation, we can find hints of the idea. In Leibniz's *Monadology* there is the famous theory of limited participation of each monad in the Divine perfections (*chaque substance simple... est... un miroir vivant perpétuel de l'univers*) and Hegel's concrete universal looks a version of participation - linked to his theological dimension of his *Logik*: the process of the Divine mind unfolding in the world. A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947) uses the terms 'ingression', 'inclusion', 'realization', and 'functioning'. These are all expressions for eternal objects in existing finite items. The same eternal object can have differing modes of ingression. Is this a version of participation? Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) is a recent philosopher who wrote much about participation and 'metaxy'. Paul Tillich (1886-1965) would be another writer who explicitly employs the terminology of participation his theological writings. Thus when we look more carefully, the apparent erosion of the language of 'participation' looks more like a transposition or transformation.

In conclusion, the findings are rather puzzling. The *Begriff* 'participation' seems to have fallen into relative desuetude since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Yet philosophers and theologians repeatedly turn to the idea, even if sometimes coining new terms or developing the idea in directions that Plotinus or Aquinas would have barely recognized.

## General Questions

1. Is there a full doctrine of creation in the Platonic-Neoplatonic sources or merely what G. Reale calls ‘*semicreazionismo*’? How do the commentaries on *Genesis* relate to the *Timaeus* commentaries?
2. What are the metaphysical foundations of analogy? What does participation imply in relation to recent debates about univocity and analogy in the narrative of secularization?
3. Divine Ideas: if the ideas are divine, how can their plurality relate to the simplicity of the Godhead? If they mediate between the intelligible and the sensible worlds, are they not themselves mediating items – at once eternal and proceeding- created objects but divine? How does the idea of eternal abstract objects relate to the will of the God of Classical Theism?
4. Does participation entail an unacceptable dualism between the physical world (*kosmos aisthetos*) and the Divine mind (*kosmos noetos*)?
5. Is participation unavoidably linked to ‘emanation’ or pantheism?
6. Does Divine omnipresence mean more than simply the conjunction of omnipotence and omniscience? How does the idea of participation relate to questions of Divine presence or the ‘location’ of spirit?
7. What is the relevance of recent debates about ‘instantiation’?
8. Does evolutionary theory rob the idea of participation of any meaning in contemporary thought? If the higher rises from the lower in nature, what sense can we make of the idea of finite beings in a dependent causal relation to an *ens perfectissimum*?
9. Is the idea of participation inextricably linked to unacceptable political theories – of hierarchy – mirroring the cosmic *gradatio entis*?
10. Does the idea of absolute plenitude diminish the sense of human creativity?
11. Does the theory of participation, with its claim that dependence is an imperfection, saddle Christian theology with static and sterile conception of God as an impersonal *ens perfectissimum*?
12. What are the implications for the problem of evil?