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TRANSCENDENCE: WHAT ON EARTH ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

ABSTRACT

Within the scope of contemporary discourses on transcendence, this article presents and critically discusses the four models of transcendence that have been identified by the Dutch theologian Wessel Stoker. Two questions guide the discussion, namely whether our thinking of transcendence is any more than an unconscious way of being caught up in certain hard-to-shake spatializing and/or representational schemas, and how far we can interpret/translate the various phenomena of transcendence in terms of modal transformations of the quality of our responses to the world and to others, setting aside all onto-theological constructions referring to a beyond. To answer these questions, an argument is developed and motivated for relocating reflection on transcendence, and at the same time, pointers are formulated that should be considered in pursuing an interdisciplinary understanding of transcendence.

> After all, for all its authority and prestige, the word "transcendent" is a relative term: It depends on what is being transcended, and there is a long list of candidates – the subject, the self, the sensible world, beings, even beings themselves – and so there is nothing to stop us from wondering whether it is to be added to the list as still one more thing to be transcended (Caputo & Scanlon 2007: 2).

> The world we live in with our thoughts, passions, delights, and whatever stirs the mortal frame must surely take on a deeper meaning. Songs are more than longitudinal sound vibrations, sunsets more than transverse electromagnetic oscillations, inspirations more than the discharge of neurons, all touched with a mystery that deepens the more we contemplate and seek to understand (Harrison 1985: 273).

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the conference "Religion and Postmodernism 4: Transcendence and Beyond" at the Villanova University, Philadelphia, USA, in 2003, John Caputo[1] and Michael Scanlon[2] posed the question, "Do we need to transcend transcendence?" That is, as it were, to set the dynamics of this word loose upon the word itself![3] It is a question in contemporary theological debates[4] that, in my opinion, should be taken very seriously[5] for various reasons, the most important being that it does not only fundamentally determine and permeate the integrity of all God-talk, but also is a normative concept in character that determines one's orientation in life – and indeed "stirs the mortal frame" (Harrison 1985). Therefore, the question is asked: Transcendence – what on earth are we talking about?

It is not possible in this paper to engage the entire broad scope of contemporary discourses on transcendence.[6] My (limited) aim is twofold: (1) to identify current models of transcendence and (2) to formulate pointers that, in my opinion, should be considered in pursuing an interdisciplinary understanding of transcendence. In addressing the first aim, I shall focus mainly on an unpublished paper by the Dutch theologian Wessel Stoker (2010). For the latter aim, I shall turn to an earlier publication by the American

1 David R Cook, professor emeritus of Philosophy, Villanova University.

2 Josephine C Connelly, endowed chair in Theology, Villanova University.

3 What does the word *transcendence*, on which the dynamics of the "word itself" should be set loose, entail? In classical theism, transcendence is understood as a condition or state of being that surpasses physical existence and in one form is also independent of it. It can be attributed to the divine not only in its being, but also in its knowledge. Thus, God transcends the universe, but also transcends knowledge (is beyond the grasp of the human mind). Although transcendence is defined as the opposite of immanence, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive (cf. Flew 1979:328; Van Huyssteen 2008:1099). The unavoidable question then is: Can humans experience and know a transcendent God?

4 According to Caputo and Scanlon (2007), the contemporary debate is thrusting in two distinct directions, namely "hyper-transcendence" and "post-transcendence". The former could be formulated as the question whether we need a transcendence that is ever more beyond, a still more transcendent transcendence (e.g. Levinas, Marion, Kearney). The latter could be formulated as the question whether we should put transcendence behind us (Vattimo, Caputo, Schrag). Does the concept go far enough or does it go too far? An exciting line of reflection within the "post-transcendence" trajectory is panentheism (eg Moltmann, McFague, Clayton).

5 Of course, there are those that do not agree, like Catherine Keller, who sees it as an impossible attempt, like trying to make water wet (Caputo & Scanlon 2007:2)!

6 See the excellent collection of essays in the volume by Caputo & Scanlon (2007) in this regard, which includes papers by Jean-Luc Marion, Gianni Vattimo, Richard Kearney, Sallie McFague and Calvin Schrag.

philosopher-theologian Philip Clayton (1997).[7] In the back of my head, I shall keep the penetrating and clear questions that David Wood (2007:170) posed at the Villanova Conference regarding reflection on transcendence:

- Is our thinking of transcendence any more than an unconscious way of being caught up in certain hard-to-shake spatializing and/or representational schemas?
- How far can we interpret/translate the various phenomena of transcendence in terms of modal transformations of the quality of our response to the world and to others, setting aside all onto-theological constructions referring to a beyond?

2. MODELS OF TRANSCENDENCE

> There are some … who think we can discover a pure form of transcendence (the pure gift) as the pinnacle of a series of reductions. Others … see this as a misuse of phenomenology for theological ends. When we run out of intuitions, what is to stop us simply grafting onto phenomenology the results we would like to see it validate? It would be like dropping fish from the market into the fisherman's nets as they haul them in (Wood 2007:182).

For October 2010, the Institute for the study of Religion, Culture and Society, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, organized a small conference on Transcendence.[8] The conference formed part of an interdisciplinary research project on "Culture and Transcendence". For this conference, Wessel Stoker prepared a working paper for all the participants. In his working paper, Stoker (2010:1 et seq.) takes as his general vantage point an understanding of transcendence as referring to "going beyond limits". With regard to religion and spirituality, broadly viewed as experience or reference to the absolute or the unconditional,[9] Stoker states, "The issue here is a certain relationship between heaven and earth, or between 'here' over against 'beyond'" (Stoker 2010:1).

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7 In his "God and contemporary science", Clayton (1997) focuses on and argues for a re-think of divine and human agency in the contemporary theology-science debate. I have found his argumentative style and broad scope of interrogation and integration extremely insightful, and gratefully have made use of it in my line of argumentation on transcendence.

8 It would be an interdisciplinary group consisting of scholars from the fields of Philosophy of Culture, Philosophy of Religion, Aesthetics, Politics and Social Philosophy.

9 For Stoker (2010:1), the transcendent – depending on the world view – can be viewed as God, the Absolute, the Mystery, the Other, or the other as alterity.

He subsequently distinguishes and discusses the following four types of (religious/spiritual) transcendence[10] that have developed in Western culture:

- **Immanent transcendence;** that is, the absolute is experience in and through the mundane. God/the absolute and human beings are connected directly – despite their alienation – since people have an immediate awareness of (or openness for) the absolute. In conquering this alienation, human beings discover something that is identical with themselves even though it transcends them infinitely. It is something from which human beings are alienated but from which they can never be separated. According to Stoker (2010:2), such an understanding of transcendence can be found in the works of Schleiermacher, Hegel and Tillich.[11]
- **Radical transcendence;** that is, the absolute is the wholly other and sharply distinguished from mundane reality. God/the Wholly Other and human beings are seen as radically different. The encounter of the human being is an encounter with a stranger. The initiative or movement towards human beings comes from God/the absolute. According to Stoker (2010:2), such an understanding of transcendence can be found in Kierkegaard, Barth and Marion.
- **Radical immanence;** that is, the absolute is sought no longer outside the mundane reality. Both realities converge, with the absolute emptying itself in mundane reality. The "here" and "beyond" can be so closely associated that the one pole, that of transcendence can be neutralized and only immanence seems to be left. According to Stoker (2010:3), such an understanding of transcendence can be found in Altizer, Mark Taylor and Vattimo.
- **Transcendence as alterity;** that is, the relation between transcendence and immanence is no longer viewed in opposition. The inexpressibility of the Other – similar to radical transcendence – is emphasized but in a different manner. One has to learn to think beyond this opposition whereby the wholly other can appear in every other. According to Stoker (2010:3), such an understanding can be found in Levinas, Derrida and Irigaray.

10 Stoker (2010:3) refers to H Kunneman's (2005) indication in his "Voorbij het dikke-ik, bouwstenen voor een kritisch humanisme" of a shift from vertical to horizontal transcendence, culminating in ethical values in which respect for the other is central. To Stoker, this perspective is too general to do justice to the concept of transcendence.

11 In citing examples (eg Schleiermacher and Hegel, Barth and Marion etc) of each of the following types of transcendence Stoker distinguishes, he explains that, although they greatly differ in their ideas, they can be grouped together since they exemplify a specific approach.

According to Stoker, in our understanding of transcendence, it is important to make such distinctions for two reasons. First, our views of transcendence are normative in character and determine one's orientation in life. Second, certain forms of transcendence have a critical function with respect to culture. Stoker (2010:5) subsequently adds an important qualification to make sense of the types of transcendence he distinguishes, namely that of *form* and *content*. To him, the types of transcendence are to be viewed as forms or open concepts (like a pattern or template) that are then filled in by content. The form is an indication of the way in which the relation between heaven and earth or between the beyond and the here is understood, whereas content refers to the specification by an author (that is the way in which the author unfolds his/her specific understanding of the relation).

In my opinion, the idea that our views of transcendence are normative in character and indeed determine one's orientation in life, and that they have a critical function with respect to culture, as Stoker argues, can be supported wholeheartedly. The critical question that spontaneously arises is the following: Can the credibility of the normative character of views of transcendence be pre-determined, and if so, how? Put differently: Can guidelines/pointers be formulated for the pattern or template within the contemporary theological discourses to evaluate such "form" (type of transcendence, that is, the way in which the relation between heaven and earth, or between the beyond and the here, is understood) and thus precede the specification (that is, the content) by an author? In my opinion, such guidelines/pointers not only could assist us in making sense of a complex notion such as transcendence, but also should be a welcome and necessary exercise in credibility. It can also assist us greatly in addressing Wood's initial two questions and his critical remark that, when we run out of intuitions, what is to stop us simply grafting onto phenomenology the results we would like to see it validate?

3. POINTERS FOR AND THE RELOCATION OF REFLECTION ON TRANSCENDENCE

How can we theologically rethink the relation between "heaven and earth", "the beyond and the here"? Is the re-thinking and revision of this relation an absolute necessity and that important? Are the types of transcendence that Stoker distinguishes theologically helpful in this regard? What are we to make of the very influential designs of transcendence that we find (to name but a few)

* with the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1974), namely his exciting and impressive formulation of the challenge of entering into a "non-intentional thought of the ungraspable" to "escape

from ontological idolatry" to the primacy of ethics in the encounter of the (O)other;

* with the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney (2007:51 et seq.), namely his delightful post-metaphysical poetical perspective on the "possibility of God" as the more than the impossible;

* with the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion (2007:17 et seq.), that is, his graceful address of the word "being" as an "idol" that he – following Levinas – sees as a trap or screen or mirror in which we envisage ourselves, not God, and therefore attempts to think God "without being" – a God transcending our conceptions of the possible and impossible that confine God within the horizon of being and human conceivability;

* with the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (2007:44 et seq.), namely his radical effort to overcome humanity's alienation in traditional transcendence in which "what is our own" has been turned into an alien force and power; therefore, we need to get beyond it to learn how to dwell rightly upon the earth – an effort that he motivates from the idea of incarnation as a divine kenosis in which God abandons his eternity and pitches his tent among us even as we set about learning to savour the dwelling of God in flesh and time?

Relinquishing the sheer beauty entailed in these designs momentarily, I would like to argue that the question on transcendence has to be relocated before an attempt is made to rethink it. Whereto and why? In my opinion, with regard to whereto, the answer presents itself spontaneously from our creature-creation relationship. If we are to rethink – as has been stated earlier – the relationship between heaven and earth theologically, we must surely take not only the Creator-creature relationship seriously, but also the creature-creation relationship. The latter cannot be articulated in its concrete fullness if it does not include the natural world, and thus the natural sciences. Therefore, it is argued that the question on transcendence should be relocated to the contemporary theology-science discourses, and specifically to the interdisciplinary spaces that open up between them. However, before relocating the question to the contemporary theology-sciences discourses, it is important to motivate the necessity for such a relocation of the question, and subsequently its revision. The "why" question can be motivated from a natural science as well as a theological perspective. On the one hand, relocation should expose the inadequacy of purely physicalistic or (reductionistic) materialistic accounts by many of the sciences of the universe (cf. Clayton 1997:96). Although it is an unacceptable, even repellent statement for many scientists that the evolution of life cannot be fully explained by neo-Darwinian theories of natural selection, it is an "unacceptability" that theological reflection should justify

continuously and passionately with credibility![12] On the other hand, should a relocation encourage theological reflection to be radically self-critical of its own historic-traditional (tainted) conceptions of transcendence (e.g. classical Western theism) in which God is placed "outside' of or separate from God's creation.[13] At the same time, many of its own discourses, for example on the relation spirit/matter or personhood are permeated (negatively) by Greek-informed dualisms (cf. Clayton 1997:98, 235, 244). Such dualisms very often conceal either negative or oppressive elements with regard to God-universe or mind-matter relations. In my opinion, on a positive note, such relocation and subsequent revision can deepen the intimate relation between Creator/creation and creature, enlighten our perspectives on extremely difficult issues such as divine agency and critically refresh our understanding of personhood and faith.

I am of the opinion that, to posit a credible understanding of transcendence, it has to be relocated as a product of theological reflection and consistent with (and perhaps even suggested by) what the sciences today have come to know and have to offer about the natural world, of being human in the world, of human cognition and personhood. I am convinced that both – that is, the combination of science and theology – provide a richer source in our quest to know "in whom we have our being". Therefore, I would like to take Stoker's indication of a pattern or a template seriously, but also relocate my reflections on it within the interdisciplinary space that opens up between theology and the sciences. Such reflection should be undertaken by the theologian (with a genuine openness) as a movement that takes seriously what the sciences have to offer and to respond to what theological reflection has to offer in a continuous movement of constructive (and critical) engagement. For example, in acknowledging the hermeneutic character of all theological reflection (that is, the width, depth and height of the scriptural witness and its cultural developments in traditions over centuries that the theologian brings to the conversation table within his/her specific historical-social context) within the interdisciplinary space, the theologian can no longer dare to claim "metaphysical immunity" or "metaphysicize" the concept of transcendence in an arbitrary manner as he/she pleases. However, the engagement should simultaneously be a critical-constructive investment in the (theological) conviction that the

12 Clayton argues that the sciences – with regard to their results – very often require an interpreted framework not dictated by the results themselves. He states, "Physics (and biology and neurophysiology) underdetermines its metaphysics; multiple metaphysical perspectives can 'interpret' the results – though some perspectives are more justified than others" (Clayton 1997:238).

13 Take the church father Augustine, for example: To him, God's essence as timeless and eternal contrasted sharply with the pervasive temporality of the physical world. The divine nature was simple and unchanging, spiritual as opposed to physical (cf. Clayton 1997:241).

scientific worldview cannot and should not be humanity's final resting point, and therefore, the theologian should not shrink or hesitate from moving the conversation beyond the realm of empirical knowledge and control.[14]

The relocation of an interdisciplinary conversation on transcendence in a post-Darwinian, post-Kuhnian and post-Popperian context spontaneously diverts the focus to embodied existence, embodied rationality, human cognition, consciousness and interpreted experience.[15] From an evolutionary epistemological perspective, this forces the theologian to make sense of the deeper biological roots of human rationality and the implications thereof, namely that our mental capacities are constrained and shaped by the mechanisms of biological evolution. In this regard, the Princetonian theologian Wentzel van Huyssteen (2007:1) states,

> Evolution … turns out to be about much more than the 'origin of species' and is a much richer process that has shaped the way our minds work, and how we know the world … (T)hat our knowledge of the world around us consists of proposals made to this environment (Van Huyssteen 2007:2).

14 Van Huyssteen (2007:6) captures the drift of my remark regarding the dynamics and outcome of the conversation between theology and science in the following clear formulation: "Theology is neither transformed, modernistically, into natural sciences nor rejected as nonscience. In fact, theology emerges as a reasoning strategy on par with the intellectual integrity and legitimacy of the natural, social, and human sciences, even as it defines its own powerful domain of thought that in so many ways are also distinct from that of the sciences."

15 Each one of the concepts mentioned here brings with it its own set of needs with regard to clarification, explanation and problems. Take, for example, the very general concept of "experience". Experience is characterized by transcendence (generally in a non-religious sense) and intentionality. Transcendence as transcendence of oneself to that which is other than oneself is characteristic of human existence as being in the world (Heidegger). It makes intentionality, directed at human beings and things in the world, possible (Stoker 2006:94). Experience is never simply something internal but always has two poles: the human being and his/her world(s). Experience implies intentionality, the transcendence of oneself. Intentionality is the power of minds to be about, to represent or to stand for things, properties and states of affairs. The puzzles of intentionality lie at the interface between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language. The word itself, which is of medieval scholastic origin, was rehabilitated by Franz Brentano towards the end of the nineteenth century. "Intentionality" is a philosophical word. It is derived from the Latin word *intentio*, which in turn is derived from the verb *intendere*, which means being directed towards some goal or thing (Transcendence 2009a). The spontaneous question that subsequently arises is: How is the human being, to which this worldly transcendence belongs, open to the infinite, to religious transcendence?

To me, the all-important conclusion that follows from the evolutionary epistemological perspective, is namely that

> we humans can indeed take on cognitive goals and ideals that cannot be explained or justified in terms of survival-promotion or reproductive advantage only. Therefore, once the capacities for rational knowledge, moral sensibility, aesthetic appreciation of beauty, and the propensity for religious belief have emerged in our biological history, they cannot be explained only in biological/evolutionary terms. In this sense, we clearly transcend our biological origins, and we do have the ability to transcend what is given to us both in biology and culture (Van Huyssteen 2007:4).

The foregoing motivation for the relocation of reflection on transcendence and the last remark on the "ability to transcend our biological origins" open up the exciting possibility to turn to consciousness and self-consciousness, and then to explore the analogical relationship[16] of the human mind/body (spirit/matter) with God/universe to re-imagine/re-conceptualize transcendence.

This "turn" is not something new, however.[17] Almost two decades ago, Colin McGinn (1994:113) captured the exciting analogical possibility as follows:

> We need to cultivate a vision of reality (metaphysics) that makes it [reality – DPV] truly independent of our given cognitive powers, a conception that includes these powers as a proper part. It is just that, in the case of the mind-body problem, the bit of reality that systematically eludes our cognitive grasp is an aspect of our own nature. Indeed, it is an aspect that makes it possible for us to have minds at all and to think about how they are related to our bodies. This particular transcendent tract of reality happens to lie within our own heads. A deep fact about our own nature as a form of embodied consciousness is thus necessarily hidden from us.

16 It is important to note that the analogy between the soul-body relation and the God-world relation is as old as the theological tradition itself, and in fact even older. See Clayton (1997:235) for a brief exposition of the views of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Descartes.

17 Philip Clayton (1997:233-4) states the idea of such an analogy goes back to the works of Charles Hartshorne and Schubert Ogden, amongst others. In the wake of their works, many have taken up (in various ways) the analogical relationship consciousness and God/world relation as described by Charles Taliaferro, Jürgen Moltmann, Grace Jantzen and Sally MacFue.

Add to McGinn's statement of "this particular transcendent tract of reality" the important theological statement by Van Huyssteen (2006:274) that

> the image of God is not found in some narrow intellectual or spiritual capacity, but in the whole human being … In fact, the image of God is not found in humans, it is the human.

In my opinion, we have then situated ourselves theologically for the interdisciplinary conversation. Thus, in taking up the question: *Transcendence – what on earth are we talking about?*, my proposal, as a first movement of an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and sciences, is to take cognizance of the best scientific theories we have of the relationship of our mind/(self)consciousness with our bodies to identify clues/elements for structuring a theological form/template for making sense of transcendence.[18] Subsequently – as a second movement[19] – it is to explore, to undertake revision of our transcendent rhetoric, and to articulate the theological implications of these findings, and as an ongoing movement, to discern[20] theologically the ways in

18 Thus, the motivation for the "first movement" is simply taking the biological roots of rationality and the implications thereof seriously.

19 Thus, the motivation for the "second movement" lies in the pursued aim of being self-critical, of revision and credibility.

20 With the specific reference in my formulation to rhetoric, articulation and discernment, I am taking up Calvin Schrag's viewpoint on transversality. In this regard, see Schrag (2007:204ff). In my opinion, the story of Moses and the burning bush represents a fascinating text for considerations on re-thinking transcendence. In this regard, see Veldsman (forthcoming), God, Moses and Levinas on being the Other and relating to the Other. It is a perspective on transcendence from religious experience. In this article, I argue from the story of Moses (Ex. 3) that transcendence is neither his invention nor his projected intention, but is narrated as a surprising (vertical) call. The self-naming by the Caller – I will be who I will be – does not only confirm the asymmetrical stance (Holy) over against the recipient (Moses covering his face/looking downwards/afraid), but also establishes a (new) relationship embedded in an already historically established relationship (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). In self-naming, the Caller also demands acknowledgement, which requires responsibility from the recipient. The newly established relationship initially takes on an invitational character for Moses as messenger in an ethical context (oppression), but develops in such a manner that the messengers are not only transformed in making work of the call, but are destined to worship the Caller. In this narration of a testimony to transcendence, the Caller is not reduced to a third person, a "he" (as Levinas argues), but presents himself to Moses in the first person, as "I". The call of the Caller is not confined to or wrapped in an ethical obligation, although it functions in an ethical context (oppression/deliverance). In this regard, I find the critical commentary by Caputo (2007:189) on Levinas appropriate when he states, "The very meaning of our being turned to God … is to be deflected or turned by God … to the neighbour. And nothing more. The name

which God's relation to the universe, God's transcendence *also differs* from the relation of our mental properties to our brains and bodies.[21] Without doubt (!) the reflection on transcendence will ultimately move beyond the realm of empirical knowledge and control (it has to!), and will ultimately include faith and trust since – after all – beliefs about transcendence, although re-imagined in a credible interdisciplinary manner, are ultimately not "checkable" by any scientific means given the invitational character of faith. However, "on earth" it will always have to be wary of the Wood's factor, namely not to graft onto phenomenology the results we would like to see it validate. As "fishermen and fisherwomen" fishing at the interdisciplinary waters, we should become ever more self-critical of not dropping fish from the markets (note: plural!) into the fishermen's nets as they haul them in, but to "catch them ourselves" (that is, to re-think, re-imagine and reformulate our conceptions of transcendence in a credible manner) in awe and total amazement.

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of God boils down without remainder into our being turned to the neighbour, *tout court*. What then is accomplished by ethical trans(a)scendence to the other? In one very definite sense, nothing. Ethics is not for something; it is a non-profit enterprise. Ethics is all the transcendence there is. It does not buy us a ticket somewhere else. There is nowhere else to go." I think that Caputo is right to ask whether ethics is all the transcendence there is. Or to put it plainly in a positive statement, life, meaning and religion are more than morality! For example, is love not a more encompassing (relational) concept, and surely more fundamental, to the biblical message? However, Levinas's stern warning of not turning the transcendence of God into a one-way genitive still holds good – that surely will only harden into ontological idolatry.

21 Many such differences between Creator and creature have to be thought through, such as: the ontological and moral distinction between God and creature/creation; between perfection (goodness) and imperfection (fragmentation); space and time; also the statements that God is infinite, creation finite; God is necessary, whereas all other things are contingent.

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