

TRANS-FORMAL MEDIATION IN RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY

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Responsibility implies the capacity to respond. Where no such capacity exists, there can be no direct responsibility.¹ The Latin *re-spondeo* means to bind *oneself* to a relationship by promising something in return for something else. A sponsor commits *himself* to be answerable for another, to stand surety and provide warranty, or to give witness. In so doing he takes up a position, and so responsibility is inherently reflective. Existentialists are wont to say that authentic choice requires us to bear responsibility for our own actions, but this is only half of the human story. For we find ourselves already *in situ* and must respond to what is in some sense already there. This *prius* to which we respond is not simply a condition that remains external to our choice and extrinsic to our responsibility. On the contrary, it has already entered into the very make-up of our responsibility. The prior initiative (the *prius*) to which we respond is the mingling of nature and society which makes up not only the human milieu, but which also enters into our make-up as human beings. And perhaps the *prius* is something deeper yet, or points to something of another order entirely. Our freedom and interiority are not without the interplay of limit and unlimit. It is clear that some ways of responding are available to us, others are not. We cannot simply fly, but we can learn to talk and to build flying machines; we cannot simply create, but we can participate in the process of creation that is underway, a process that is more ancient, more original, and more comprehensive than individual and collective humanity. It is towards this *prius*, this

¹ Nevertheless, we may be responsible for our inability to respond, as when security or comfort, —half-accepted, half-willed,— impedes the responsibility of an individual or a people.

prior initiative, that we must look in order to clarify the roots of the authority that calls forth our responsibility.²

We use the term “authority” most commonly to indicate an official exercise of legitimate power, but the *prius* in which its roots lie is a stratum of our life that is deeper than such formal roles. The *prius* is the comprehensive basis for our entire personal and communal existence. Responsibility and authority have moral and juridical implications, but authority and responsibility cannot be confined to the forms they take in the ethical and legal spheres. There is properly technical, artistic, scientific, and religious responsibility and authority as well. Their original meaning is evident from a variety of situations. When we consult an expert to see whether a painting is genuine,³ we want to determine whether the picture in hand is actually what it is said to be. If its appearance and reality are established to be one and the same (*autos*), we take it to be authentic. Similarly, we accept a legal document or literary text as authoritative only if it is what it puts itself forth to be, so that if its appearance contradicts its reality, it is considered to be inauthentic and unauthoritative.⁴ In a word, something will be authoritative only if it is authentic, and authentic only if it is what it appears to be —though we must add the proviso:

² In insisting so strongly on the *prius* I do not think it should be identified too readily or completely with certain philosophical positions. The *prius* has been paramount in both realist metaphysics and objectivist ontologies. Since Descartes, however, at least some realism has tended to reduce all being to entities; and objectivism has tended to relegate subjectivity to an epiphenomenon. The *prius*, it seems to me, is richer than either of these restricted philosophies can admit. For some views of my own, see “Another Look at Objectivity,” *Thomas and Bonaventure: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. XLVIII (1974), pp. 86-98; and, “Enriching the Copula,” *The Review of Metaphysics: A Commemorative Issue* —Thomas Aquinas, vol. XXVII, no. 3, issue no. 107, March, 1974, pp. 492-512.

³ There are contexts in which it is important to distinguish the authentic from the genuine, but this not one of them. One might say that God is authentic, but not that he is genuine, since the latter suggests conformity to an order that measures what is genuine. The authentic, on the other hand, discloses only its own true reality.

⁴ The False Decretals and the Donation of Constantine were in fact influential, the poems of Ossian are often lovely, a biased account of historical events (such as the standard version of Richard III of England) may have been persuasive, but in the end none of these have in truth been authentic and authoritative. They do not entitle; they are not entitled to commend themselves, even if in fact they have done so. Thus, too, a genuine will endows, a remedy prescribes actual treatment, an account explains, a law proscribes in the strong and proper sense only if each is authentic.

providing that it is properly viewed.⁵ Still, the identity of appearance and reality is only a necessary condition for authority and responsibility and not a sufficient one. The reality of the *prius* is more than a mere appearance, but it is also more than a simple fact. To call something authentic and authoritative is to say that it commends itself to us in some important way. To reach that importance we must, so to speak, pass within and even beyond appearance and fact to their significance. This import empowers the thing to be the source of that recommendation to which we are called to respond.

Thus, a certain picture may commend itself to me as a van Goh. I may accept it as such because of features in it that I take to be signs of the master: certain brush strokes, the relation of line to colour, particular mixes of colour, perhaps the way the theme is addressed. These internal evidences serve as the inherent authorization for my judgment. I may also want to rest my attribution upon external evidence: upon a signature, a bill of sale, a letter to his brother, an eye witness. In the search for the author my judgment will be authoritative if, in addition to its being true, I can marshal credible evidence and reasons in its support. The picture can then be said "authoritatively" to be "authentic" because its "author" is, indeed, van Goh. Judgment, painting, and painter are found to be in a line of origination, of priority and posteriority. The judgment and the painting are grounded in the appropriate *prius*, the painter himself. Of course, the spectre that haunts such attributions is the possibility of imitation. Internal evidences can be misread or copied, signatures can be forged, bills of sale miswritten and letters misleading. In such a matter, imitation excludes authenticity and undermines authority.

⁵ "Properly viewed." The appropriate meanings of appearance and reality are not obvious here. There are authentic realities (such as the historical Jesus) whose appearance at first seems to contradict their reality. And conversely, there are false and base things that openly flaunt their vile nature, for evil does not always hide, it may be shameless. Both of these are mysterious. How can the good sometimes at first appear worthless when it is actually worthy of our respect and love? The answer may be found in the flawed character of our own response, but non-human things seem to conspire with us in this darkening. A more appropriate response (as, for example, of faith in the person of Jesus) may require us to go beyond the ordinary goodness of things. Then, too, how can evil show itself nakedly and yet draw us towards it? In addition to the flawed response, the traditional metaphysical account of evil as privation-in-a-subject locates an ultimate and indispensable reliance of evil upon the reality and goodness inherent in its subject. So that evil is inseparable from that deception by which it claims as its own what remains forever opposed to it. This appropriation of the good by evil is the radical violence that is the primal obscenity. Thus, even the Holocaust put itself forward as a "solution" to a "problem," and so rested upon a supposed claim to both the "truth" of its hate-driven diagnosis and to the so-called "reality" of the alleged "problem." Responsibility, then, is not simply taking a position, nor is it simply bearing the consequence of that position; it is also the taking of a position that is consonant with the good order of that which is deepest and most comprehensive in the nature of things.

In other matters, however, imitation is not only permitted; it is required. A mimic depicts a famous person insofar as he imitates voice and gesture as closely as possible.⁶ We reproduce a scientific experiment in all of its essential details in order to achieve the original results. If the results differ from what is expected, we re-examine the steps of our reproduction in order to see whether we have deviated from one or another detail or ignored one that we had thought to be inessential. The tolerance in such a matter is not great and deviation from those limits spells failure.

On the other hand, imitation does not call for such detailed and exact correspondence in other situations. Theatrical *mimesis* is more flexible and creative. An actor portrays a character well by bringing his own personality into the service of the role. The role is a *prius* to which he must respond by investing it with his distinctive personal qualities of voice, gesture, sensitivity, style, and energy. Nowadays we prefer the term “interpretation” to “imitation”, because it explicitly acknowledges the creative response by which the actor brings the role to life, responding to the possibilities within it and bringing his own energy and skill to the task. Something similar may be said of the conductor who “faithfully” interprets a score. We speak, too, of “authoritative” readings of poems which bring out more than we had thought possible; of “inspired” renditions of choreography; and of “definitive” operatic performances. The degree of freedom needed is set by the nature of the role, text, or score, and by the mode of the art.⁷ The tolerance permitted in the reproduction of an experiment is not only less than the freedom demanded in the interpretation of an artistic work, the latitude of each is different in kind. The meaning and reality of the results of an experiment seem to be available to us through the reproduction of their genesis by means of an exact and regular repetition. The performance of a role or composition, on the other hand, requires an effort that lies beyond careful reproduction of the necessary limiting rules, cues, and precedents. The shape of the meaning and reality of an artistic performance stands in need of a

⁶ Similarity of appearance is supportive, but it is not necessary because what is being mimicked is action and not shape or colour. The mimic may emphasize or even caricature the personage, but he provokes laughter just insofar as the audience does not lose a thread of likeness and possibility between the mimicry and its intended object.

⁷ In free art forms, spontaneity counts for much and the authority of the setting, role, or score is minimal (as in free theatre, free dance, and improvised jazz). Still, the authority, however minimal, is there insofar as anything prevails which has been decided upon before hand (the *prius*). In those sports which have formal rules (contests and games) there is, of course, no imitation at all; but there is conformity to rules, and therefore acknowledgement of some *prius* as authoritative.

variety of ways in which it is to be expressed. Reproduction may tolerate slight imprecision, but interpretation celebrates free variation as the disclosure of further meaning and reality. The forms that meaning assumes in reproduction and performances are different, and so are the ways in which meaning relates to actual existence. The relation between the universal and particular features of the experimental results permits us to render the universal or common elements in explicit formulas (with the proviso that the general laws are approximations). No such formulas can be disengaged from the particular elements of an artistic performance. The meaning shown in and through a great stage performance is complete with respect to the presentation of the role, i.e., it is satisfying. But the meaning is not exhausted by a single statement of it, no matter how great. In the experiment, it is not that the original meaning is exhausted by each repetition so much as that the shape and existence remains much less variable and the variation are scientifically uninteresting.⁸ What remain unexhausted, of course, no matter how often the experiment is repeated, are the consequence and implications of the experiment. What remains inexhausted no matter how often the role or score is performed is the possibility of new disclosure. The primary moment of an experiment is discovery and not confirmation, how ever necessary the latter is. The primary moments of performances, on the other hand, are just each taking up of the role anew, within the limits of the role and perhaps of one or another tradition.

We have said, then, that responsibility is the capacity to respond in some way to a *prius* which is the seat of authority. A *prius* commends itself to a respondent for some sort of identification or assimilation: by conformity, interpretation, or acknowledgment. The *prius* is to be accommodated in some appropriate manner in and through the response.⁹ Authority and responsibility are joined in a mutual career; each has inscribed within it the superscript or echo of the other. For if authority is to elicit a human response, it must in some way anticipate and manifest that response. Moreover, the expectation must be recognizable to the respondent, who may recognize it as a paradigm to be imitated, an ideal to be lived up to, or a

⁸ The pressure of particularity upon scientific generalizations is far greater than most laymen realize. Still, the particularity, while necessary and accommodated in the statistical character of the laws, is not positively significant. It may, of course, point to suggestive anomalies.

⁹ Cf. the conception of *aedequatio* considered as a flexibility and creativity similar to the proper meaning of *mimesis*. The accommodation is not entirely dissimilar to the "fit" recent empiricists have talked about, though not in the context of the verification of theoretical propositions.

right to be acknowledged. From the side of authority, a certain configuration becomes exemplary only because exemplification is manifestly intended. Paradigms are not simply isolated forms-in-themselves; they define themselves with reference to that for which they are paradigmatic. Moreover, the reference is not only a potential relation to an external respondent; it is an aspect of their own being. I have called it a superscript. From the side of responsibility, the response must be built upon and contain within itself the recognition of a certain rectitude¹⁰ on the part of the authority which leaves the response free and yet under a certain determination.

The response, then, is anticipated and determined by what is inherent in the authority, and not by what the respondee *in fact* is. To be responsible is to respond freely in a determinate manner, that is, out of an obligation that remains whether the response in fact assents to it or not.

The character of the obligation, whether it is conditional, or unconditional, technical or moral, etc., will vary with the nature of the authority. The response anticipated in the authority itself does not determine the respondent that make one response rather than another in fact. The relationship between authority and responsibility is not a transitive relation in which something is altered by another. One being may, indeed, re-shape another. As authoritative, however, an author makes available for a respondent determinations which engage him in a relation of mutuality in which he is not altered by those determinations. They are determinations of reflection in the Hegelian sense.¹¹ The ancients spoke of spiritual goods attained through immanent (i.e. non-transitive) activity.

Now it is in just this realm of intransitive, reflective realities that we find the relation between respondent and author, between responsibility and authority. The respondent is free to accept or reject the paradigm, but his freedom does not consist simply in the alternative that he can let the paradigm influence him or not. In accepting it he does not submit to the kind of determination one finds in the physical order, and in rejecting it he does not resist such influence. He is free, rather, precisely because the milieu in which acceptance or rejection takes place is not the domain of such determining causality. The initiative itself is not a transitive causation, alter-

¹⁰ I have chosen this Anselmian word in order to encompass forms of authority and responsibility that are fully ontological.

¹¹ That is, as he develops them in the opening pages of the doctrine of essence in the *Science of Logic*.

ing and transforming the respondent. That is why response (as distinct from reaction) is required for responsibility. The paradigm does not flow in from an external source (*in-fluens*). It must, rather, be taken up by the respondent and make his own. In so doing, he may transform his being, making, himself technically more skillful, morally more upright, or humanly more sensitive. The traffic between respondent and authority is intransitive, reflective, and spiritual.

To say that the authoritative relation is reflective and spiritual is not to say that it is a *mere* ought, purely and simply ideal. Hegel's understanding of actuality and rationality may be challenged, but he saw correctly that actual responsibility is elicited by actual authority. The ideal needs to be grounded in the way things in some original sense are —if it is to be authoritative. Moreover, responsible freedom is not escape from order, but the actual fusion of order and creativity that has as its genuine result a new order. It is inadequate to take the one term (authority) as a merely ideal prescription and the other (responsibility) as the power which realizes the ideal. The juncture of the two realms would then remain arbitrary, and reality would be handed over to a factuality indifferent to the richest possibilities. Authority makes available a paradigm for action, and so it must contain an ideal (the superscript) which indicates what does not yet exist and which will come about only in and through the action. But actual existence is also required, and not only by those forms of authority endowed with institutionalized power. On the other hand, the actuality cannot be a simple fact. Hobbes to the contrary, authority is not simply “command enforceable”. We protest that someone exceeds his power, acts contrary to his mandate, transgresses his authority, and we appeal to an order that is not merely at his or our disposal. The ancients grounded the ideality, i.e. formal and final causality, in the actual, —but in the factual—, order of being. It is this actual rightness that is the *prius* of authority and responsibility. An authoritative paradigm is not simply an ideal, formal pattern. Its authority arises out of actuality, out of the way in which things in some sense already are.

The interplay of authority and responsibility usually occurs in accord with familiar forms: red light (stop!), Rx (fill!), pp. (softly!). When a judge applies the law, he finds the form in the body of the law that “fits” the facts of the case and which is suitable to serve as a determining principle leading to a resolution of the conflict. Nevertheless, this requires of him a particular judgment which is grounded in that good order that is more basic than the legal forms themselves. And, indeed, every judgment must be resolved ultimately into some

trans-formal contex.¹² Authority and responsibility, of course, are not restricted to an official relationship, nor are they confined to the application of well-worked out routine formulas. Authority and responsibility reach beyond offices, forms and formulas to the seat of good order itself. That is why non-compliance with some authority can be serious and constructive only if it is for the sake of a better order. This may require the transformation of existing forms. The authority and responsibility for such a transformation are grounded neither in the old nor in the new form, for they are opposed to each other. The trans-formal ground, however, cannot be an indeterminate common basis of both. Such an underlying subject of continuity could permit the change but it could not sanction it. The ground must possess a trans-formal determinacy. But this is precisely the proper character of actuality.

Transformation may be a delicate and dangerous moment in the relation between authority and responsibility. Crimes have been committed and frauds perpetrated in the name of some alleged trans-formal value. Indeed, some trans-formality is the mere absence of form: antinomianism, nihilism, utopianism. But static formalism sometimes denies genuine authority and responsibility, too: inertia, reaction, privilege. It is both risky and unavoidable to “read the signs of the times”. Authority may insist upon its power to command, and responsibility may present itself as simply opposed. The power of the actual then gives way to the fact of power and its arbitrary exercise. Yet authority and responsibility in their genuine character implicate each other in an intransitive, reflective, spiritual relation. That relation has its seat in a determinate, actual --but not factual-- order. Since both old and new forms are rooted in this same original ordination of beings, we can begin to assess the old and new forms in terms of transcendental values that are appropriate to being as such. It is not the task of metaphysics alone to assess particular transformations, but it is called upon to show whether there is a ground (justification) and what its character is. Hegel found the justification of actuality in its rationality.¹³ Thomists celebrate the seat of authority as *Ipsum esse subsistens et intelligens*. They ground formalities in *actus essendi*, and ground *actus essendi* in that rightness of being that

¹² See “Enriching the Copula”. Cf. also St. Thomas’ doctrine of judgment in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*.

¹³ Lest I be misunderstood on this important point, I ought to say that I do not think that Hegel identified rationality with the existing Prussian order. (If he did, he was wrong.) At any rate, I do not --by speaking of good order-- mean to endow any existing, past or future social order with authority simply because it does, has, or may exist.

lies at the root of authority and responsibility and which expresses itself in the transcendental values of being. We are not left without determinate, actual indications of good order. The domains of personal and social values are free without being arbitrary, determinate without being deterministic, and actual without being factual.

Actuality plays a role in the mediation of personal and social values. Social values are half-opaque life-forms,¹⁴ in part broadly human, in part distinctive to a given culture or community: the value of work, the importance of co-operation, the need for family cohesion, pride of nation, etc. Their authoritative presence is not easily expressed in disengaged paradigms. Yet their relative opacity is not due to a lack of meaning; on the contrary, they are intensely meaningful. Nor do they simply tolerate differences. If we consider the historical civilization, their social values have often displayed a bewildering variety of embodiments. In this they are not unlike the authority of role, text, and score which I mentioned earlier. To simply attempt to “reproduce” social values in others is to play the game of conditioning. No doubt, in the early stages of enculturation imitation by reproduction lays a useful base, but soon there must be a reaching from within towards the paradigmatic forms. These great life-forms do not merely “tolerate” individual differences nor do individuals simply instantiate these forms. They are commonalities of a different sort than abstract universals. They call for responsible embodiment; and in a variety of personal and communal ways they celebrate the re-actualization of their root-actuality. Though free, responsible *mimesis* persons and societies incarnate social values that already have within them a demand for diversity within unity, a diversity that is not only a condition for their embodiment but also required for their actual significance as social values.¹⁵ They cannot be reduced to a set and rigid form. Sooner or later the letter killeth.

Still, how does the spirit give life? We have said that values are situated in the fundamental *prius* to which individual and collective humanity is called upon to respond. In responding appropriately the values are integrated into personal and communal life. It remains to ask, however, about the way in which they are encountered. How

¹⁴ See Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Sept. 1971, vol. XXV, no. 1, issue no. 97, pp. 3-51.

¹⁵ I have in mind here only the *value* which I distinguish from any concrete social form. That is, I have in mind what in social forms is highest and best in them. This does not prevent —on the contrary, it calls for,— a typology of the perversions and a critique of existing social forms.

do they come to actuate human respondents? In brief,¹⁶ we encounter them in a shape that is more concrete than a pattern or a paradigm. We encounter them in actual life, in other persons, in institutions, history and legend, in literature and the arts, and above all in the sacramental presence of the sacred. We encounter them in what we may call paradigmatic figures, the great moral and communal heroes who live out the values in their own situations. Here again, we meet actuality, but this time it mediates itself. The original actuality of the value is mediated in and through the actual paradigmatic figures. This is the transformal mediation operative in authority and responsibility. These paradigmatic figures are not mere instantiations of values, as though we need them only to extract the universal form, the corn from the husk. They do not simply make the paradigm visible; they communicate it. Marett said of religion that it was not so much taught as caught from someone who has it. Much the same must be said of social and personal values. The paradigmatic figure is not related to the value as a particular and external instantiation to a general formula, or as a variant to a law. Rather, each paradigmatic figure displays new possibilities and fresh witness to the value in the arena for which its superscript intends it, viz., in the life-world. Paradigmatic figures vindicate the original meaning of responsibility: they give warranty. They do it by being, so to speak, concentrations of that good order that is already actual in the *prius*. They are exemplary individuals because they exemplify values. In so doing, they mediate them for others. The mediation of social values is a concrete and actual process in which the paradigm displays its continuing significance in and through archetypal persons and communities who, in embodying the value, are vindicated by it.

¹⁶ See Antonio Cua, *Dimensions of Moral Creativity: Paradigms, Principles and Ideals*, Pennsylvania State University, 1978.