

# Disembedding the Forms

Day 10

Diaries graded this week  
Content, Clarity, Correctness

## Simplified Time Line

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1450-1550	The Renaissance
1550-1650	The Reformation & Religious Wars
1650-1750	Age of Reason: Scientific Revolution/Enlightenment
1750-1850	Age of Revolution: German Idealism/Romanticism
1850-1950	Age of Materialism: Existentialism
1950-	Age of Whatever: Postmodern Thought

Today is first day of second half—  
Take a moment to sum up.

In some of your diaries—at least in the earlier entries  
—some of you say that you disagree with this or that.  
Of course you do.  
But the goal now is not to agree or disagree but to  
understand.

Understand first, then judge later.

The whole point of this course is to challenge your presuppositions to get you to think about why you think or believe what you do.

I'm more interested in your showing me that you're doing that than simply asserting what you already believe and think—

and whether what Plato or Dante or Nietzsche says matches up with that.

It probably doesn't.

I don't expect it to.

So I'm not interested in what you already think so much as I'm interested in your thinking process—

And thinking, when done right, is usually stimulated by an encounter with something strange and unfamiliar that piques your interest—

it gets you to consider possibilities you hadn't before.

it gets you to expand your horizons rather than to defend the walls of your prevailing social imaginary.

My job so far is to present this material in a way that piques your interest so that you might start “thinking” in this way.

I am generally pleased with what I've read so far in your diaries.

Most of you seem to be engaging with the material in the way I hoped you would.

So the course is about the disenchantment of the west—

You all live in the disenchanted west or in societies that have been similarly disenchanted.

You know what that's like.

My job so far has been to try to get you to understand what it is like to live in a society in which enchantment still shapes the social imaginary.

The goal is to understand how and why, starting in the West, the social imaginary slowly evolved to become increasingly disenchanted.



You can't understand that genealogy unless you first have a good sense about what an enchanted social imaginary is—

and you can't really understand that unless you have some sense of what was rich and deeply human about such societies

societies in which both the enchantment of the heath (pre-Axial)

and the enchantment of eternity (post-Axial)

played a significant role in shaping people's lives—

not just their beliefs, but their day-to-day experience as in the air they breathed.

And so when we encounter people like Plato, St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Ficino—and Shakespeare—

Our approach should be to understand what their central insights were and why they resonated so powerfully within the social imaginaries of their time.

They are all "articulators" of their respective zeitgeists.

We can enter into their zeitgeist only by trying to understand their texts as best we can on their own terms—not by comparison with what we know and think now.

All these people were great souls, great minds, great human beings—much greater than any of us will ever be.

So they deserve our respect and they deserve the kind of effort on our parts that takes them seriously on their own terms.

And so while it is harder to do it with these figures from premodern times, we are going to shift now to encounter figures whose thinking comes closer to what we're familiar with—

And that starts in the medieval period in the conflict between

### Realists and Nominalists (in the 1300s)

A Realist is somebody who thinks that the forms (or essences) are real—even hyper-real.

Nominalist just thinks they are abstractions, that they are just the names we give things, nothing more.

We're all nominalists now, so it's very hard to 'grok'  
what it meant to be a (hyper)realist

For realists like Aquinas and Ficino, form is not an  
abstraction.

Forms are Embedded Spirit

Matter is worthless dust until it's given form by the Divine Mind.

To think this way about the material world is a heavy lift for moderns because the social imaginary has changed so dramatically

Moderns think of mind as an epiphenomenon of matter—

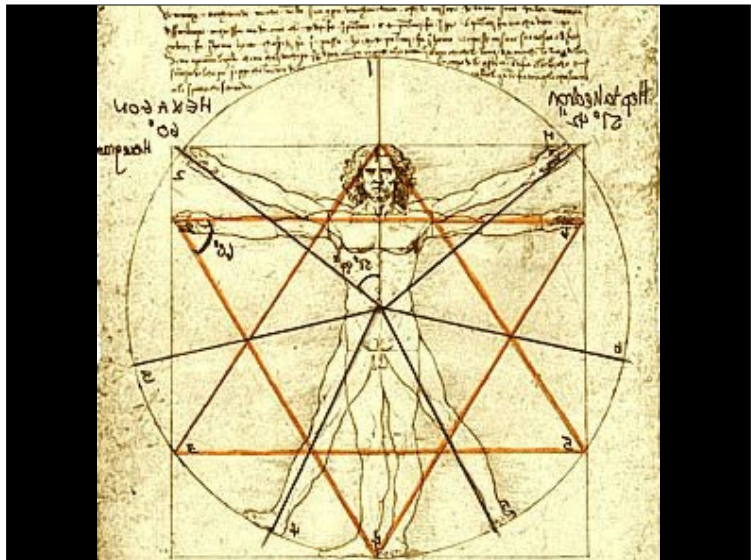
Premoderns thought of matter as an epiphenomenon of Mind—God's mind.

And this is doubly true when we think of the place of the human being in the cosmos.

Humans now are relatively insignificant talking animals on an insignificant cinder in a fathomlessly vast universe.

Back then Humans were potential gods—the measure of all things

At the center of all things—microcosm of the macrocosm



They saw their moral task as to realize or Liberate Form

Axial ascetic disciplines not an end in themselves  
They are about spiritual transformation  
Theosis—the transformation of the human into divinity

This idea of theosis is quashed by the Radical Reformation  
Idea of human as divine considered spiritually prideful.  
For Reformers it's all about the sanctification of ordinary life.

Reformers lean toward the Nominalist camp that emphasizes God's power and freedom.  
Not interested in Greek philosophy, which they tend to think of as incompatible with biblical revelation.  
(We'll talk more about Fideism on Wednesday.)

So why science?

Starts with the deconstruction of The Great Chain of Being by Nominalists and Reform theologians

Goodbye Aquinas; Hello Scotus and Ockham  
Then Luther and Calvin



For the Realists, the forms were the hidden code, even if they were directly perceived only by mystics and inspired artists with second sight.

For Aquinas the forms were embedded all around us in the sense world,  
but he agreed that in ordinary consciousness we only infer their being there in human thought as abstract universals.

Nominalists were empirically minded skeptics.  
They argued that most people didn't have a direct experience of the divine forms embedded in nature, and they questioned whether they existed at all, and whether it was useful to think of essences in this way.

The flaky artists and mystics can believe what they want, but for *normal* people the idea of 'universals' existing as the embedded forms as they exist in the Divine Mind was at best debatable.

And weren't logically necessary.

So dump them.  
Ockham's Razor  
(K.I.S.S.)

There was also a theological reason to get rid of the embedded forms.

Because God's mind is so deeply implicated in the sense world, he's working 24/7 to give the world its form and to sustain it—

He's too hemmed in.

God seems to be as dependent on the world as the world is dependent on him—

He can't take a break or the whole cosmos goes 'poof'.

The Nominalists and Voluntarists wanted to free God from that obligation.

Their idea of God's freedom and power was so robust, and their idea of the transcendence of God so pure, that they thought that his creation of the world required a radical separation from it.

World over here

God way, way, way, over there

Nominalists argued that Aquinas's system didn't respect the divine transcendence enough—and was borderline pantheistic.

They argued that God was too big a deal to be in the least bothered with the problems of his creation after he created it—

God: Huh, oh, that. How they doin down there?

He created humans, gave them freedom and rationality, and left them to their own devices.

If God plays a role in saving the world, he does it out of his infinite freedom and benevolence, not because the system requires it.

So you liberate God from his creation by getting rid of the embedded forms—

Creation is no longer understood as participating in the divine mind—

it's just stuff now—

nothing mysterious about it—

what you see is what you get.

goodbye 'aletheia'

Taylor says

"in nominalism, the super agent who is God relates to things as freely to be disposed of according to his autonomous purposes. Nominalism wanted to free things from their essences."

And so the world freed from the essences becomes  
just inert, very unmysterious and profane 'stuff'—  
no longer shot through with the divine—  
no longer disclosive of Being.

Nature loses its divine ground. Things are just things,  
and universals are just the names we give to them.  
They have no special ontological status in the Divine  
Mind.

Taylor goes on—  
"But if this is right, then we [humans], the dependent,  
created agents, have also to relate to these things not  
in terms of normative patterns they reveal, but in  
terms of the autonomous super-purposes of our  
creator. The purposes things serve are extrinsic to  
them. The stance is fundamentally one of instrumental  
reason."

No more intrinsic purposes, entelechies, and final causes—

Opens things up for humans to look at Nature as something it can shape *ab extra*—extrinsically—for their own purposes.

Goodbye *aletheia*.

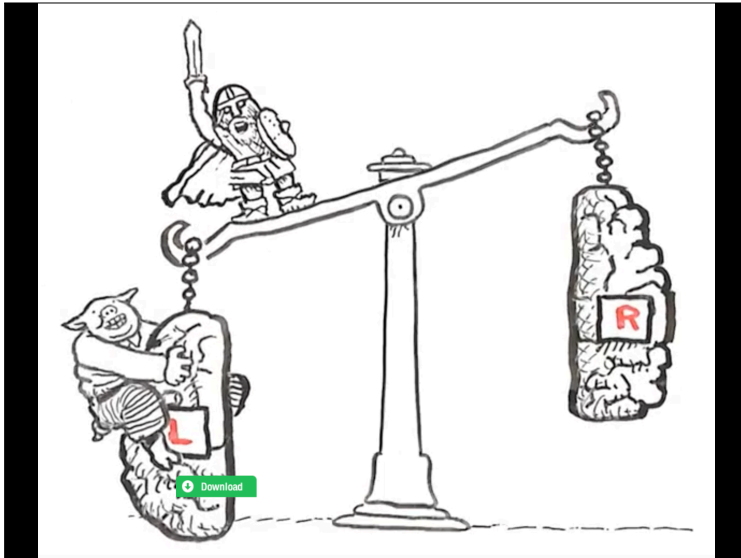
Instrumental reason is the kind of thinking that deals with efficient causes, in other words the mechanics of things. It's the practical part of the brain that solves practical problems—weighs, calculates, etc.

So Nature is no longer a locus for the sacred  
Instrumental reason has no interest in discerning the hidden spiritual mystery embedded in the sense world.

Goodbye enchantment.

All you need is ordinary practical common sense—  
and some math helps if you want to build a big dome on a cathedral.

(Where's the right brain in all of this?)



Aristotelian formal and final causality lose prestige  
But idea of form still plays a role in aesthetics and art  
But final causes start playing a diminished role in  
ethics and morality



But art and morality are just squishy stuff that's private—

serious people care about using instrumental reason to transform the world—

God gave us brains, so let's use them to make the world a better place.

—and that's a job for engineers, not artists and monks.

Let's take a break.

So we were talking about how an arcane medieval theological dispute set up the scientific revolution in the Latin West

Realists vs. Nominalists —  
The Nominalists win  
(We're all Nominalists now.)

Realists stress the intimate connection of God with his creation  
Nominalists stress the power and freedom  
—and separateness—  
of God.

On one level this is theory—on a more profound level  
it's about imagination and experience.  
(chicken or the egg?)

Since humans are created in the image and likeness of  
God, the Nominalist idea of God stresses the  
importance of human power and freedom—  
And weakens the importance of intimacy and  
connection

World over here

God over there

God created it, but has no obligations to it  
except those that he freely chooses to accept

In the same way God's freedom disconnects him from his creation, so does human freedom disconnect humans from it.

Humans feel more the separations rather than the connections—

And this feeling of 'alienation' increases for more and more people with each generation.

When the Renaissance celebrates the human being as divine, it also celebrates human individuality—

but individuality equals density of form, a density that is intensified by Love—

by both being loved and loving.

This loving on our part deepens our sense of communion with Nature, with other people, and with God.

This is the ideal, anyway.

In the old imaginary, the more deeply one becomes him- or herself, the more free he or she is.

Free because awakened from illusion, and more capable of love.

So if freedom is liberation from sin, it is at the same time liberation from illusion and estrangement from Being.

To know something is to perceive the divine mind in it—

To perceive the Divine Mind in something or someone is to love it—

Ergo, to know something is to love it, and loving both requires and cultivates a higher level of communion or intimacy.

So if Ignorance is the result of sin, and sin is whatever obstructs higher levels of love and intimacy—

One is ignorant to the degree that one lacks love and intimacy with the surrounding world.

Again, that's the ideal, but it's the opposite of an epistemology that stresses objectivity and disengagement.

But after nominalism wins, this 'love' epistemology no longer makes sense.

Freedom is redefined as 'autonomy'—

Autonomy stresses separation, disengagement,  
disconnection.

The price paid?

Buffering and alienation.

So this sets things up for Descartes—

And it's why I see Descartes as more of an articulator  
than a reconfigurer.

D&K give credit to Luther, but more should go to the  
nominalists and Calvin.

Descartes 'Cogito' articulates the new experience  
of alienation and separation perfectly.

*Cogito ergo sum*—

I think therefore I am.

The only thing that he knows for sure is that he has thoughts, and that he has self-awareness.

So he thinks himself into a solipsistic bubble, and now he has to find a way to prove to himself that there is an extra-mental world exists that he's connected to—





Talk about buffering!  
Talk about disembedding!  
Talk about estrangement from Being!

In the Taylor handout, he talks about  
disengagement and the mechanization of the  
world picture—  
Well, Descartes is disengagement on stilts.  
But it suits the zeitgeist of the Latin West at this  
time.

It fits in with the way that the elite social imaginary  
is already buffering.

But this traces back to the Nominalists and  
Voluntarists in the 1300s

Because Nominalism is anti-Divine Essence, it  
becomes anti-Aristotle and Plato

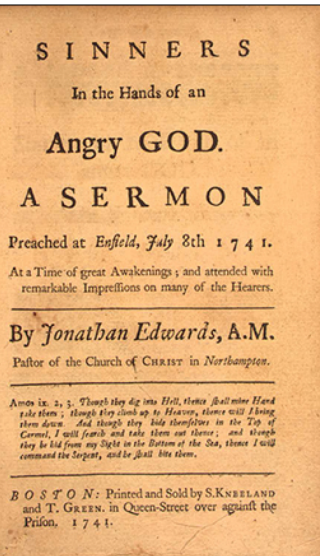
So you liberate God from his creation by getting rid  
of the idea of participation (communion)—  
And see creation as radically other than and separate  
from God.  
This is perfectly orthodox.

Aristotelian formal and final causalities lose prestige.

Nature is now imagined as a big Machine,  
Nature as Mater—mother—becomes a quaint  
metaphor.

Luther and Calvin more amenable to Nominalism  
because their theology emphasized the power and  
transcendence of God.

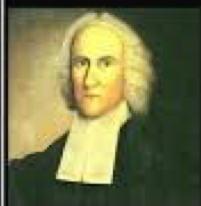
For some Calvinists their idea of God came closer to Genghis Khan—a terrifying, wrathful absolute power (Where did the loving God go?)



And unlike the Renaissance humanist idea of the human being as potentially divine—  
The radical Calvinists saw the human being as utterly depraved—  
as having zero worth

Problem of a good God allowing suffering wasn't a problem—humans are like insects to God.

Basic premise was that humans deserved to suffer; it was only because of God's mercy that a few won't.



The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider... abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire.

(Jonathan Edwards)

ixquotes.com

So the more worthless the human being, the more gracious and merciful is God for bothering to save a few humans here and there.

But it's totally random.

Only a few get saved in early Calvinism—

Double predestination:

A few—the elect—are predestined from all time for salvation

But everyone else—the unregenerate—are predestined from all time for damnation.

Not much room here for ascent to beauty drawn by Divine Love.

Not much room for the goddess of mercy and compassion



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Mary thrown out—  
Mariolatry—  
not in the Bible

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Why would this be attractive to anybody?

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Well, why do the boys in *Love's Labor's Lost* want to live so austere and without the presence of women?

Women = Softness = Decadence  
Toughness = Purity = Godliness

And for Protestants the goal is to be the opposite of the corrupt Renaissance popes—who really were corrupt.





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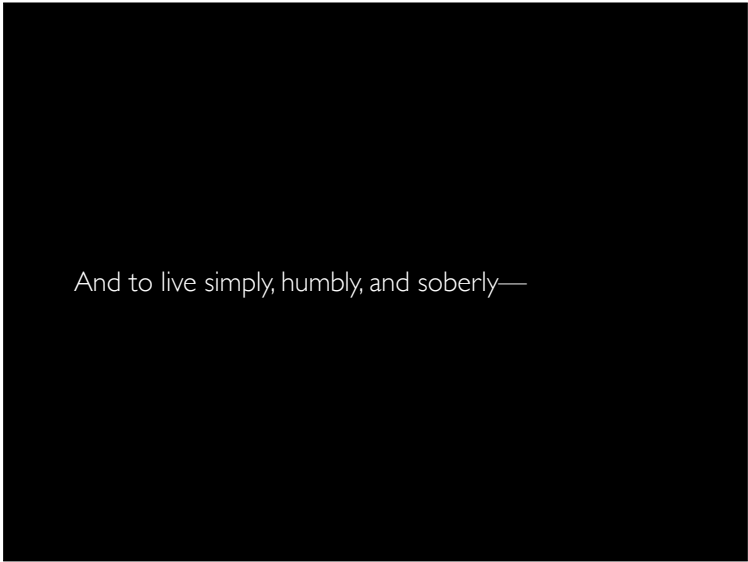
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There's an understandable goodness and dignity in that—

especially if the people in that picture are truly humble and kind—and probably they were

But so were most ordinary Catholics

It's not the ordinary folk that cause all the trouble—

It's the fanatics that rise into positions of power and the extremists who support them.

And so the Purity ideal brings with it a very aggressive, martial, macho idea of virtue and goodness.

Need to do battle for the Lord to prove your virtue.

Sound familiar?



So everybody starts demonizing everyone else  
Everybody's convinced that everyone else is going to  
hell  
So we might as well send you there

Beam-in-the-Eye Syndrome—

What modern psychology calls 'projection'

In order to think of oneself as pure, you 'project' all the repressed darker parts of your soul onto the Other.

This leads to demonization of the other—

# ANTICHRIST

the Pope of R O M E,

O R

The Romane Antichrist.

*The First Treatise.*

*The definition of Antichrist by the holy Scriptures.*



THE name Antichrist is not extant in the whole Scripture, save in the Epistles of S. Iohn, and it is taken in two senses. For either it signifieth in generall all those that in any sort calling themselves followers of the doctrine of Christ, doe contradict the same, and vnder the name of Christ, oppose themselves against him, and destroy his Doctrine, whether it be wholly, or in part. Thus it is taken in the second Chapter of the first

And so justifies annihilation of the other.

**During this period of heightened religious passion, persecution was widespread. Both Catholics and Protestants fostered intolerance. Catholic mobs attacked and killed Protestants. Protestants killed Catholic priests and wrecked Catholic churches.**



theromanroad.wordpress.com

So the ideal of theosis—the human becoming divine  
falls out—

but so does the idea of integrating faith and reason

Medieval synthesis sought to balance faith and reason  
This is reinforced by the Renaissance Neoplatonists

Medieval formula was *fides quaerens intellectum*, which  
means 'faith seeking understanding'.

Spiritual truth is like artistic truth—

Right brain experiences or cognizes spiritual truth—big or small insights  
Left brain tries to make sense of it.

Making sense means integrating it into the existing social imaginary—  
sometimes to expand it or develop it.  
(Pai renews, expands, & develops the social imaginary of her Maori tribe.)

For the Realists and the Neoplatonists there was a balance between faith and reason, right and left.

But after the Reformation, Faith goes one way, and Reason another.

Goodbye marriage of Athens and Jerusalem.

Protestants reject Athens and embrace Jerusalem.



Science embraces Athens and rejects Jerusalem—

King Lear next up.