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# TRADITION, MODERNISM, AND APARTHEID<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In this article it is argued that apartheid, as idea-historical phenomenon, needs to be understood against the background of a short comparison between modern and premodern thought. Apartheid was, in many respects, a theoretical and practical manifestation of modernism. As such, it was by no means a modern anomaly, or a phenomenon that contradicted the fundamental assumptions of modern philosophical and political thought. The first section of this article addresses only a single aspect of traditional thought, namely the idea of being understood as circular event. Traditional thought understood being as emanating from, and returning to a first principle, namely the Good (Plato), the One (Plotinus), or God (Aquinas). The ensuing section discusses only a single aspect of modernism, namely its understanding of being not as circular event, but as a neutral, spatial, and linear grid upon which reality can be mapped. Once mapped on such a grid, according to modernism, being can be experienced as a “standing reserve” (or as an always available resource) to be controlled and used at will by the modern subject. In the third section of this article, it is argued that apartheid was made possible by the above ontological presupposition. According to the apartheid state, being could, in principle, be spatialised on a neutral grid, and thus directed and controlled from the vantage point of the sovereign subject. The concluding section focuses on the much-discredited community, the Afrikaners. Despite disclaimers among Afrikaners, the heavy burden of the apartheid legacy rests squarely on their shoulders. However, it will also be argued that Afrikaners, if given the opportunity, may provide us in future with important examples of a politics that moves beyond the spatialising and geometrising ambitions of the

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1 This article was first presented as a paper at the seminar on Radical Orthodoxy in South Africa, 7-8 May 2015, University of the Free State.

modern state. In a hermeneutical re-appropriation of their own pre-modern tradition, Afrikaners may, in collaboration with other communities, help show a way toward a traditional politics of place (rather than the modern politics of space).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Twenty-three years after the demise of apartheid, the debate on the latter is alive and well. In many respects, it is still defining the horizon within which the national debate plays itself out. Political parties across the spectrum often view their respective programmes as the final and conclusive answer to apartheid, whereas others are accused of being unable to escape the apartheid past. Apartheid thus still reigns in a strange fashion, functioning, for all practical purposes, as negative norm in the attempt to realise a truly post-apartheid society.

However, despite the heated debates on South Africa's apartheid past, we are not necessarily closer to understanding its nature, or to a better understanding of what a lasting alternative to apartheid might resemble (despite the universally acclaimed nature of the present liberal-democratic constitution). Therefore, in this article, I would like to return to apartheid, notwithstanding the fact that it has previously been addressed a million times. My purpose in doing so is a rather modest attempt to keep the debate alive, given the fact that it often regresses into political posturing and, more dangerous, a search for scapegoats from the past who are held responsible for the many crises currently faced by the country.

In this article, I will argue that apartheid, as idea-historical phenomenon, also needs to be understood against the background of a short comparison between modern and premodern thought. Apartheid was, in many respects, a theoretical and practical manifestation of modernism. As such, it was by no means a modern anomaly, or a phenomenon that contradicted the fundamental assumptions of modern philosophical and political thought. In fact, if apartheid is merely judged to be an anomaly, without investigating the fundamental assumptions on which it was built, one runs the risk of repeating these fundamental assumptions even in the very attempt to move beyond its devastating legacy. A comparative approach can at least help one understand the risks involved if its modernist nature is not understood fully.

In the first section, I will address only a single aspect of traditional thought, namely the idea of being that is understood as circular event. Traditional thought understood being as emanating from, and returning to a first principle, namely the Good (Plato), the One (Plotinus), or God (Aquinas). In this regard, I will mainly focus on the idea that both sides of the circular movement (i.e.,

the emanation from, and the return to the first principle) were understood by traditional thought to play a causative role in the creation of being.

In the ensuing section, I will again focus on only a single aspect of modernism, namely its understanding of being not as circular event, but as a neutral, spatial, and linear grid upon which reality can be mapped. Once mapped on such a grid, according to modernism, being can be experienced as a “standing reserve” (or as an always available resource) to be controlled and used at will by the modern subject.

In the third section, I will argue that apartheid was made possible by the above ontological presupposition. The apartheid state understood being as something that could, in principle, be spatialised on a neutral grid, and thus directed and controlled from the vantage point of the sovereign subject. Need it be said that this was accompanied by disastrous consequences for the many communities and traditions finding themselves subjected to the eye of the controlling state? In the same breath, I argue that even the much-vaunted post-apartheid state does not necessarily step beyond the modern ambition to spatialise being from the ahistorical vantage point of the controlling sovereign. Despite major changes brought about since 1994, post-apartheid South Africa is still infused with what Edmund Burke referred to as the modern revolutionary ambition to “geometrise” space. According to Burke, this ambition of the French revolutionaries was accompanied by disastrous consequences for the many historical communities finding themselves within the artificial limits set by the revolutionary state. The latter

boasted that the geometrical policy has been adopted, that all local ideas should be sunk, and that the people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans, but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one assembly. But instead of all being Frenchmen, the greater likelihood is that the inhabitants of that region will have no country (Burke 2015:600).

In the concluding section, I will focus on the much-discredited community, the Afrikaners. Despite disclaimers among Afrikaners, the heavy burden of the apartheid legacy rests squarely on their shoulders. Afrikaners were certainly not the sole instigators of the modern geometrising project. In fact, during two wars of independence, they resisted attempts by the British Empire to submit them to its spatial ambitions. Nevertheless, it counts as one of the great ironies that Afrikaners also gave practical effect to one of the most apprehensible manifestations of the modern spatialising project. However, I will also argue that Afrikaners, if given the opportunity, may in future provide important examples of a politics

that moves beyond the spatialising and geometrising ambitions of the modern state. In a hermeneutical re-appropriation of their own premodern tradition, Afrikaners may, in collaboration with other communities, help show a way toward a traditional politics of place (rather than the modern politics of space).

## 2. TRADITIONAL METAPHYSICAL THOUGHT

From Plato to Aquinas, traditional metaphysical thought understood being as a circular drama centred on two principle actors, namely the Good (the first principle of being) and being itself.<sup>2</sup> The Good (or God, the One) acted as the origin (*arché*), from which being freely emanated, and the end (*telos*), to which being desired to return. Despite differences among the metaphysicians (it took centuries for a coherent synthesis to emerge), they understood the circular drama as a gift-giving event. The emanation of being from the Good (an overabundant source) was essentially a gift-giving event, whereas the desirous return to the very same source (now understood as *telos*) was experienced as being's grateful counter-gift. Both acts of gift-giving were aimed at establishing communal relationships. While the first gift manifested the desire of the Good for community with being, the second gift represented being's grateful desire for return to, and community with the Good.

However, as John Milbank and others have argued, care must be taken not to understand the exchange of gifts between the two principal actors in contractual terms. Contractual relationships aim to maximise private interests, and the enrichment of the self. According to the gift-giving drama, on the other hand, the self is placed at risk. Instead of protecting the interests of the self, the drama of being draws the self into an event excessive to the calculations of the contracting self, namely an ever-expanding community of gifts and counter-gifts. Milbank rightfully argued that the image of the spiral might, therefore, be even more appropriate

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2 Although I draw on many sources in my interpretation of the metaphysical tradition, I will largely make use of Perl's outstanding publications, and especially *Thinking being. Introduction to metaphysics in the classical tradition* (2014); his earlier and supporting publication, *Theophany. The neoplatonic philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (2007), as well as Perl's outstanding translation and commentary, *Plotinus. Ennead V.1. On the three primary levels of reality* (2015). Special mention must also be made of Schindler, *The catholicity of reason* (2013), who draws, in some respects, on Perl's interpretation; Pabst, *Metaphysics. The creation of hierarchy* (2012); H. Berger, *Metaphysics, een dwarse geschiedenis* (2003), and Verhoeven, *Het dat, het wat en het waarom. Een inleiding in de Griekse metafysica* (1996).

than the circle. Through the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts, being spirals out into processes of community formation on a “cosmic” scale (not only vertically between the Good and various levels of being, but also horizontally between beings belonging to the same ontological order). In short, an economy marked by the spiralling out of gifts functions on a level excessive to the predictive control of the contracting mind.<sup>3</sup>

At the centre of traditional ontology stood the idea that the first principle belongs to a different order than the ontological order of being. According to Plotinus, the One had nothing in common with the order of being, and could, therefore, not be counted as a being among other beings.

For it (the One) will not be included in the count with another one, or another number of any size; it will not be counted at all: for it is a measure and not measured, and is not equal to the other units so as to be one of their company; otherwise, there will be something in common between it and those which are included in the count with it, and that something in common will be before the One itself; but there must be nothing [before the One itself] (Plotinus V.5.4, 15-20).

For anything to be experienced as a being it needs to be a limited, defined thing; i.e., it must be characterised by a specific form, essence or nature. The One, on the other hand, is without limit, definition, and form.

... the One must be without form. But if it is without form it is not a substance; for a substance must be some one particular thing, something, that is, defined and limited; but it is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing ... Since (the One) is none of them, it can only be said to be beyond them. But these things are beings, and being: so, it (the One) is “beyond being” (Plotinus V.5.6, 5-11).<sup>4</sup>

Only a few lines down in the same chapter, Plotinus added the rather strong statement: “It would be absurd to seek to comprehend that boundless nature.”

The One is beyond being and, therefore, beyond comprehension. In his masterful interpretation of the metaphysical tradition, Perl argues quite convincingly that the foundation of this statement can be traced back to an old metaphysical premise. Since Parmenides, the dominant theme of classical metaphysics is

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3 See Milbank (2001a; 2001b).

4 “Beyond being” is a quote from Plato’s well-known discussion of the Good (*Republic* VI 509b9).

the conjugal togetherness, the belonging to one another, of thought and being ... Being means, and can only mean, that which belongs to thought; thought means, and can only mean, the possession of being" (Perl 2015:8).

In fact, being and thought, in the nuanced language of Plotinus, formed a duality-in-unity. Although thought and being are different, it is simply impossible to separate them. Being and thought are one in their difference, or as Perl formulates it, "[m]ind and being are moments to each other" (Perl 2015:9). Thought is always already intentionally directed to being (i.e., the form of things), while being, in turn, is given to, or open for thought.

Based on this fundamental premise, traditional metaphysical thought drew the important conclusion that the first principle does not belong to the order of being, because it is impossible to think or conceptualise the Good as a delimited thing next to other things. In fact, because the Good does not belong to the order of being, it simply does not exist in the ordinary sense of the word. It transcends the realm of existence altogether (without, and this is also important to add, the Good being identical to nothing, for the latter, as the shadow of being, is still dependent on being. To enter the realm of the Good, one needs to transcend both being and non-being).

How does one give voice to "something" that transcends both being and non-being? Traditional metaphysical thought's preferred mode of "communication" was complete silence. Only in, and through silence can one "say" the beyond of being and non-being. But, as a heuristic device, it may be enlightening to make use of images, such as the image of an unlimited abundance of light. The latter may prevent one from falling into the habit of thinking about the Good as a limited something, a being among other beings. However, more often, traditional metaphysics used the image of the sun to describe the first principle. Plato, for example, made ample use of the sun image in many of his dialogues, of which the best known are key passages from the *Republic*; Plotinus followed in his footsteps with his reflections on the One in the *Enneades*; Aquinas also made effective use of this image in his reflections on the nature of God as *Ipsum esse subsistens*. They nevertheless took care not to understand the metaphor literally as a reference to a specific thing. Plotinus, for example, explicitly cautioned against its use, for the image of the sun might still suggest that the first principle is a limited being (Perl 2015:121-2). It is, therefore, better to use the image of abundant light, according to Plotinus, because it helps one understand the One not as a being among other beings, but rather as the enabling condition for being to exist at all. For light as such makes it possible for being to be disclosed. "Since, then,

unity is a precondition for multiplicity, no multiplicity can be the absolute first principle” (Perl 2015:106).<sup>5</sup> If the first principle is indeed identified with any being, even the highest, most powerful or sovereign being, one runs the risk of denying its radical difference from being. Such a denial may have disastrous consequences for the nature of the circular drama itself. I shall return to this crucial point below in my discussion of modernism.

This raises an important question. Does the traditional emphasis on the difference between the first principle and being imply that metaphysical thought plunged us into a dualism? Such, at least, is the claim often made by its (postmodern) critics. This, however, misrepresents the position taken by traditional metaphysical thought. The fact that they do belong to different orders does not imply that their relationship is dualist by nature.

If traditional metaphysics did think about this relationship in dualist terms, it would have implied that we could map the Good and being on the same ontological continuum, representing opposite ends thereof. However, this misrepresents the position taken by traditional metaphysical thought. A dualism is only possible when two instances are mapped onto the same ontological order as opposite ends thereof. Since the first principle and being did not belong to the same ontological order, it was simply impossible to map (or spatialise) them on the same continuum. It’s like attempting to read a dualism into the relationship between apples and black holes. This is simply impossible, because apples and black holes do not belong to the same ontological order, even though apples may have black holes. With apples and pears, however, it may be a different story, because one can prefer pears to the exclusion of apples, only because they both belong to the same ontological order of fruit.

The position taken by traditional metaphysicians is at once more interesting and challenging. It understood the relationship between the first principle and being in paradoxical terms. Since it does not share anything in common with being, the Good was seen to be both “nowhere” (i.e., not occupying any space in the order of being) and intimately “present” to being, so intimate, in fact, that should the Good withdraw itself, being would abruptly have ceased to exist. Aquinas stated this in unambiguous terms: “God is above all things by the excellence of his nature, and nonetheless is in all things, as causing their existence” (cited in Perl 2014:170). Aquinas thus followed in the footsteps of Plotinus, who already described the relationship between the One and being in paradoxical terms:

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5 See, in this regard, Perl’s (2015) helpful commentary, especially on Chapters 5 and 6.

It is really a wonder how he (the One), ... though he is nowhere, there is nowhere where he is not" (Plotinus V.5.8, 23-25).

And in the following chapter, in a lengthy discussion, Plotinus adds the following important remark:

So it (the One) is there and not there; it is not there because it is not in the grasp of anything, but because it is free from everything it is not prevented from being anywhere ... The things, therefore, which are in something are there where they are; but everything which is not somewhere has nowhere where it is not (Plotinus V.5.9, 13-19).

These few and rather condensed remarks bring one closer to the point I would like to raise. If one accepts the paradoxical idea that the One is at once nowhere and intimately involved with being, it still raises the question about the nature of this involvement. How exactly is the One involved in being? According to traditional metaphysical thought, the One is in a trilateral way lastingly present to being. Without this lasting (and not only momentary) presence, being would not be possible.

First, the One is the place, so to speak, where being and beings are collected into their own *logos*, unity or form. One of the many implications of this is that being is characterised "from the start" not by pure formlessness (that needs to be rectified by a form-imposing subject), but by an inner *logos* or form.

Secondly, beings emanate from the One as their efficient cause, leading to the experience of themselves as gifts from a source beyond their own doing.

Thirdly, the One is also the final cause to whom beings are drawn. In and through their return to the source, they are given the freedom to realise themselves.

This brings me to the crucial point for my purposes. Although the three moments of being ("collection into", "emanating from" and "reversion to") can be distinguished, they do not follow each other in chronological order. Rather, *they represent distinct aspects of one and the same ontological event*. It is to this end that Proclus (1963) notes in *The Elements of Theology*:

... the movement is one and continuous, originating from the unmoved and to the unmoved again returning. Thus all things proceed in a circuit, from their causes to their causes again (*El. Th.*, prop. 33).

The significant point in this context is that the creation of being occurs both in the "procession from" and the "reversion to" the One. Perl captures the essence of this:

Reversion, no less than procession, is constitutive of the effect, in that the very existence of anything consists not only in its proceeding from but also in its reverting to its cause (Perl 2007:38).

As an example of reversion, Proclus refers to three different beings, namely beings that merely exist (such as rocks); living beings (such as plants), and beings with different forms of consciousness (such as animals and people). According to Proclus, reversion takes place when these different beings “act” according to their *logos*, form, or nature. In the case of rocks, they have by nature an “appetition in respect of bare existence” only; plants also have “a vital appetite”, while animals and human beings have, besides an appetite for existence and life, also a “cognitive appetite” (*El. Th.*, prop. 39). These entities revert to the One when they act according to their respective natures, thus taking active part in creation:

All things, in performing the proper activities which are their being, are participating in the making of the world, taking part in the constitutive divine ordering of the whole (Perl 2007:78).

As far as human beings are concerned, the cardinal virtues play a significant role in the process of reversion. One takes part in the creation of being in and through the cultivation of temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence (all virtues proper to our nature as cognitive beings) on the stages of community-based institutions and practices. Of course, tradition also knew and extolled other virtues besides the cardinal virtues. For example, Proclus also emphasised the importance of prayer, which he (quite surprisingly for modern human beings) understood as a virtue vital for the practice of philosophy. The very same logic of reversion underlies his argument. Not only through contemplation, but eventually through contemplative prayer, the philosopher is enabled to return to the “thing” most worthy of the philosophical life, namely presence to the Good. In Proclus’ own words, “it is through prayer that the ascent is brought to completion ...” (cited in Layne 2013:351).

In summary, being is not only disclosed when it is received passively from the Good, but also when it actively reverts to it. Both the passive reception of being and the active realisation of being are thus important for disclosure to happen. Of course, it is always possible to underline the importance of both the passive and the active without recognising their intrinsic dependency. Such would be the case when it is argued that the reception of being is not co-involved in the creative process, but rather a mere addendum to what has already been given. However, such a response, which presupposes an extrinsic relationship between the active and the passive, is not true to the position taken by traditional metaphysics. According to tradition, the passive

and the active (and analogous to this, *theoria* and *praxis*, contemplation and action) are intrinsically related, the one always already co-implied in the other. Perl captures this well when he mentions that the event of being is characterised neither by pure passivity, nor by pure activity, but rather by an “active receptivity” (Perl 2007:40). In short, being is disclosed when it is actively received from the Good. Traditional thought thereby prevents the dualist position taken by those modernists who emphasise either our complete passivity in the face of an overwhelming necessity, or the idea that we as human beings are the sole agents in the creation of being. Traditional metaphysics rather “positioned” itself in the strange space between the passive and the active, for the latter, according to the metaphysicians, is the proper place for the exchange between receiving and giving, between gift and counter-gift, to happen at all.

This brings me at last to modernism, of which the essence is encapsulated in the fact that it caused a shattering of the intrinsic cohesion between the active and the passive. Henceforth, they are dualistically opposed, as either contemplative passivity or as rational activity – either *theoria* or *praxis*. Thus, the circular event of being was thrown into a crisis.

### 3. MODERNISM

Although the following remarks do not by far suffice to do justice to a rich and textured historical phenomenon such as modernism, they address a central aspect thereof, namely its underlying ontological assumptions and, more specifically, its commitment to a univocal and spatialised ontology.

Modernist ontology represents a fundamental shift away from traditional metaphysics. Henceforth, the first principle is no longer perceived to be radically other than being, but is now rather a being among other beings, albeit the most high and powerful being. Underlying this fundamental shift in modern ontology is the assumption that all of reality can, in principle, be “mapped” onto a third and neutral ontological continuum, ranging in a linear series from the highest being to the lowest entity. The idea of univocity was put forward to explain why this was at all necessary.<sup>6</sup> According to modernism, true statements about being are only possible

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6 As with traditional metaphysics, I rely in my short analysis of modern thinking on a variety of sources. The idea that the origins of modern thinking can be traced back to the univocal ontologies of early modernity has a rather long-standing place in recent idea-historical research. In this regard, I made good use of, among others, Dupré, *The passage to modernity* (1993); Schmitz, *The texture of being* (2007); Gillespie, *The theological origins of modernity* (2008), and Gregory, *The unintended reformation. How a religious revolution*

once it is mapped onto a third and neutral continuum. Why? Since, goes the argument, it enables one to determine whether any being shares at least one fact, namely its existence, in a univocal manner with other beings. If this cannot be determined, one's statements will, of necessity, fail the test of rationality. It is, for example, only possible to represent God in a rational manner, according to modern univocal thinking, once it is determined that he at least shares being in a univocal manner with beings such as rocks, plants and human beings. If God does not share existence in a univocal manner with these entities, he might as well be a fiction or a projection of our imagination, but not the true God. Absent from this is the paradoxical traditional idea that God is both identical to, and radically different from being, for such a God does not share existence univocally with other beings.

Indicative of the ontological shift in modern thinking is the significant role played by the image of the straight line. The neutral space, onto which everything could be mapped, can be visualised as a straight line that extends from a most powerful being – among other things, a deistic God, a rational subject or sovereign state – towards a multitude of lower beings, all of them spatialised (occupying a certain space) on the same ontological continuum. Absent from this linear image is the circular return of beings to their origin. Although I shall now focus on the modern territorial state as a typical expression of the modern turn to the image of linearity (the state imposing its will in a linear fashion from the top), it can already be helpful to illustrate this with regard to modern ethical thinking. While traditional virtue-ethics emphasised the circular return to the Good in, and through the cultivation of the cardinal virtues, modern ethics is often characterised by the image of linearity. Pinckaers (1995) illustrates this superbly by means of the significant role played by the ethics of obligation in modern thought. For the nature of the obligation is to impose in a linear fashion (from the transcendental sources of the modern subject) a set of abstract moral imperatives onto what is perceived to be empty, formless, and even maleficent being. So dominant has the image of linearity become, that it is even visibly present among some of the strongest critics of modernism. Heidegger, for example, views the event of being (*Ereignis*) as something that overtakes one from high above, as it were. The active and virtuous response, which formed an intrinsic part of the event of being, is absent in this instance. It is no wonder that a political philosophy embedded in virtue ethics is foreign to Heidegger's philosophy. The passive waiting

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*secularized society* (2012). Perl's response to modernism relies largely on a similar interpretation of the origins of early modernity.

upon *Ereignis* eventually takes front seat, while the active response in, and through virtuous practices disappears from the scene.<sup>7</sup>

The dominance of linearity resulted in the replacement of the intrinsic coherence between passive contemplation (*theoria*) and active realisation (*praxis*) – i.e., Perl’s “active receptivity” *vis-à-vis* the first principle – with the idea that human beings are either the passive victims of impersonal, mechanical, and lifeless forces beyond their control, or active producers that “make” and “construct” reality according to their own wishes and commands. Henceforth, freedom and necessity, subject and object, active will and passive indifference, ethics and science, value and fact, and so on, exclude each other in an extrinsic manner. In the background of these dualistically opposed concepts stands the image of linearity, and, as its enabling condition, the univocal ontology of modernism. Because all of reality (including the first principle, now a being among other beings) is mapped onto a neutral and horizontal grid, an almost never-ending series of dualist oppositions battling it out for supremacy is made possible.

In passing, I must mention that the spatial mapping of beings on the very same ontological plane unleashed endless mimetic struggles. (It is not ontological differences that cause violence, but rather ontological sameness.) Once the ontological difference between the Good and being (and eventually the differences between beings) are done away with and reduced to the same ontological plane, the way is paved for the modern understanding of reality as nothing but a war of all against all, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Despite differences among them, Hobbes, Hegel and Girard are the most important modern seismologists of these events.

The Canadian philosopher George Grant captures well the oscillation between freedom and necessity in modern thought:

Where the (modern) political liturgy is full of appeals to the individual in his freedom to make society, the scientific analysis of society and individuals is centered around the principle of a complete determinism ... We assert ‘scientifically’ that human conduct can be absolutely predicted and therefore controlled; as individuals we belie[ve] ourselves to be free in the most absolute sense, as the makers of our own selves and our own values (quoted from Crawford 2016:258).

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7 Berger (2003) showed quite convincingly that Heidegger’s thought oscillates between the extremes of radical activity (the early Heidegger) and a passive waiting upon the gods to save us in a time of *Seinsvergessenheit* (the later Heidegger).

Modern philosophy is committed to the idea that human beings are the sole agents in the “making” of the world. Strauss (1953:12) mentions that

[w]e (as modern subjects) understand only what we make ... Man can guarantee the actualization of wisdom, since wisdom is identical with free construction.

In other words, being is henceforth not experienced as a gift given by a source beyond the order of being, but rather as something made, constructed, designed and produced by man, the supreme being in modern thought.

The underlying assumption in the constructivist view is that being itself is without form and intelligibility. In fact, being is experienced as a mechanical process, marked by its unpredictable and random nature. If form and intelligibility are at all present, it is because they have been imposed externally by the constructing subject: “Since we do not make the natural beings, they are, strictly speaking, unintelligible.” (Strauss 1953:12). From this, Strauss draws the all-important conclusion: since human beings experience themselves to be the sole source of form and intelligibility, they also view themselves as the sovereign centre of being.

Man can be sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is absolutely a stranger in the universe. He can be sovereign only because he is forced to be sovereign. Since the universe is unintelligible and since control of nature does not require understanding of nature, there are no knowable limits to his conquest of nature (Strauss 1953:174-75).

In his commentary on these striking Straussian sentences, Crawford argues that they capture an important ambiguity at the heart of the modern project. It may be helpful to quote Crawford in more detail, because it not only captures the essence of modernity, but it also lays the precondition for an understanding of the modern state and its territorial ambitions to be discussed in the penultimate section on apartheid:

The new form of knowing and reasoning Strauss describes tends by its very logic toward a constructive and technical approach to the world. The knowable is the makeable, according to the formula *verum quia faciendum*. To know the world, in other words, is freely to construct it. But to be entirely free in this regard, the world must be drained of its inherent meaningfulness. Hence the “unintelligibility” of things in themselves. Here we find the fundamental nihilating character of modernity’s main currents of thought at their sources. Knowledge and reason concern not things in themselves but their mechanical properties, their external relations, extension, mass,

force, etc. At the same time, this concept of knowing and reasoning gives birth to the modern narrative of inevitable and perpetual technical progress and development, the ever-greater conquest of nature (“no knowable limits”) (Crawford 2016: 257-8).

This brings me to the modern territorial state. Since I discuss this in more detail in the section on apartheid, I only need to mention that the modern territorial state is heir to the modern univocal ontology and the accompanying idea that the subject is the sovereign source of form and intelligibility. The modern state is essentially characterised by the attempt to geometrise space and to impose an abstract rationality upon the rich and complex networks of places, communities and traditions, finding itself per chance within its artificially created borders. To give effect to its geometrising ambitions, the state – in short – seeks to appropriate the intermediary associations of communities “situated” between the individual and the state, thus exchanging a new and “simple space” between individual and state for the “complex space” of traditional medieval society.<sup>8</sup>

One of many examples is the role played by the absolute monarchies in early modernity (not to be confused with the monarchies in Medieval Europe). In many respects, the absolute monarchies do represent the very beginning of the modern territorial state. The Spanish monarchy, for example, accepted legislation in 1496 that made provision for the use of Castilian as the only official language across Spain. This process was repeated in the following decades, when England and France accepted similar legislation as far as English and French were concerned. The result of these deliberate attempts to standardise, geometrise and rationalise their respective territories using one official language only was the destruction of many languages, cultures and traditions within their abstractly geometrised “spaces” (see Pecknold 2010).

Since it is far too large a story to tell in any detail, I only need to add that the French Revolution hastened the modern process of geometrisation and standardisation by the modern sovereign territorial state. Instead of providing an answer to processes of standardisation already visible in the absolute monarchies, the Revolution deepened its hold on the modern imagination. The Revolution continued with greater pace what

8 See, in this regard, three of the most outstanding critics of the modern state’s ambition to spatialise and thus “colonise” the intermediary associations of communities: Nisbet, *The quest for community* (2010); Milbank, *The word made strange* (1997), and Milbank & Pabst, *The politics of virtue. Post-liberalism and the human future* (2016). Milbank (1997) uses the distinction between simple and complex space to explain the spatialising ambitions of modern states.

its arch-enemy, the absolute monarchy, started. Nothing but one official language will be permitted, was one of its directives.

De Tocqueville's *The old regime and the French Revolution* still serves as the best testimony to this. For De Tocqueville, the geometrising ambition of the French revolutionaries was visible not only in the imposition of one official language, but also in the creation of a centrally controlled network of symbols and institutions "thrown" across every centimetre of land. To conclude this section, I merely quote one of many passages from perhaps the best analysis ever on the destructive effects of the Revolution. Roads built according to the modern logic of linearity serve as De Tocqueville's example. Concerning the old monarchy, he states:

During the monarchies which followed Louis XIV ... the management of the Highways Department was besotted with the *geometrical beauty of straight lines which we have seen since*; it took great care to steer clear of existing roads if they appeared to curve ever so slightly; rather than making a short detour it carved a way through a thousand inheritances. Estates thus laid waste or destroyed were always compensated at an arbitrary rate, after an indefinite delay and frequently not at all (De Tocqueville 2008:186-7, my emphasis).

According to De Tocqueville, the Revolution did not tamper with the geometrising project. On the contrary, it caused the strengthening thereof to the detriment of the many places, communities, and traditions within its borders:

The Ancien Régime provided the Revolution with several of its procedures; the latter simply added the savagery of its own personality (De Tocqueville 2008:189).

#### 4. AFRIKANERS AND APARTHEID

From their earliest moments in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Afrikaners have been influenced by modernism, despite their relative isolation from its main centres. Following the quite extensive argument by a person such as W.A. de Klerk in *The Puritans in Africa* (1975), I argue that apartheid was an expression of the drive towards modernisation. In short, in and through the sovereign power of the state, space was geometrised according to the modern paradigm. As with the modern state in general, an abstract and artificial rationality was imposed upon a rich and complex network of places, communities and traditions.

However, for a start, it should be noted that this does not represent the full picture. Next to modernism, Afrikaners were also influenced by tradition, resulting in their inhabitation of both worlds, namely the premodern and the modern. The presence of both worlds can be illustrated by the influence of the concepts “space” and “place” in Afrikaner history. Both played a key role, with the preference for space a visible expression of modernist tendencies, while their sense of place gave expression to the ever-lingering presence of tradition in their collective memory.<sup>9</sup>

As argued earlier, the metaphor of space is a reference to the modern experience of being as a neutral grid on which beings can be mapped. In the bigger curve of Afrikaner history, this came to the fore towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as is apparent from the establishment of independent republics in the interior of the country. Especially after the discovery of gold in 1886 on the Witwatersrand, the Transvaal Republic initiated a significant project of spatialisation. The building of railways, roads, telecommunication networks, and so on, all testify to this. In the decades after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), which was by the way severely criticised by heroes of Radical Orthodoxy such as G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, the process of modernisation and nation-building was expedited.

This unfolded in two phases. First, since the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, Afrikaners attempted to deal with the White English-speaking population in and through the structures provided for by the unitary state (arguing that the unitary state – rather than a federal state – provides them with the means to govern the whole country in a sovereign fashion).

Since the victory of the National Party in 1948 and the subsequent implementation of apartheid, the unitary state was used to “deal” with the Black majority (by excluding the latter from the existing state through the attempt to create separate states for other cultural communities). The adoption of a comprehensive set of apartheid laws from the fifties onwards was essentially made possible by the apparatus of the modern state. Without exception, these laws rested on the modern assumption that being is in principle something that could be mapped onto a geometrised grid. Underlying this was the idea that being is, in principle, “empty”, and that the imposition of such a grid (artificial form) by the state was thus necessary. The homeland policy, in terms of which homelands for cultural communities were spatially demarcated, is the most obvious expression of this. Although the mapping of the landscape was often accompanied by attempts to take the natural contours of community and place into account,

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9 See Goosen (2015) for a reflection on the “conflict” between tradition and modernity, place and space, in Afrikaner history.

an equally important tendency was, however, to abstract communities from their historical places and, as often happened, to remove them to artificially created spaces, even forcefully, if need be. The best known example is the abstraction of the so-called coloured community from District 9 in Cape Town, and their resettlement in a non-place, such as the artificially created city of Atlantis in the Western Cape.

Due to the homeland policy, millions of commuters were transported daily between their places of residence and work by means of geometrising instruments such as railways and highways. The modern idea that speed would eliminate the disruption brought about by distances travelled was contradicted by the serious deterioration and even collapse of communities and traditional institutions, thus confirming the general tendency in modernism to put enormous pressure on the intermediary sphere of associations between the state and, ironically, the newly created mass of individuals.<sup>10</sup> In short, while spatial mapping was linearly imposed from the state centre, communities were abstracted from their many traditional places and institutions.<sup>11</sup> By so doing, the conditions for the circular movement between “procession from”, and “reversion to” were abolished, namely the many practices and institutions within which communities can cultivate a virtuous life and seek the common good.

In conclusion, I need to refer to the rather controversial fact that the modern attempt to standardise being by means of, among other things, the sovereign state was not necessarily absent from the anti-apartheid movement. In many respects, it (as the anti-colonial movement, in general) imitated the same spatialising structures it fought against so bravely. Post-apartheid South Africa is still bound to its legacy.

Following the example set by the anti-colonial movement, the anti-apartheid movement embraced the modern territorial state and the many spatialising instruments provided by the state apparatus. The postcolonial states in Africa, without exception, embraced the modern idea that being could, in principle, be mapped on an artificial grid by an all-controlling subject, namely the modern centralising state. In the process, it continued the colonial suppression of local communities, cultures and traditions,

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10 “Ironically”, because apartheid was driven by the need to create spaces *for* communities, and not a mass of individuals abstracted therefrom.

11 It should be noted that traditional indigenous communities, of which the Khoi and the San are the oldest, were already disrupted by patterns of both European colonisation from the south of present-day South Africa, and African (“Bantu” to use the technical anthropological term) patterns from the north. Such disruptions moved to a new and much more focused level with modern state-building in South Africa, especially from 1910 onwards.

even if in the name of their deliverance from colonial rule. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan intellectual and world-renowned scholar illustrated this in his *Decolonising the Mind* regarding the fact that the postcolonial states, without exception, embraced the colonial languages (French, English, Portuguese), thereby giving renewed impetus to the attempt by the modern state to standardise their respective territories at the cost of local languages (Thiong'o 1986). Despite signs that it resented the logic of standardisation at the heart of the modern project, the anti-apartheid movement followed the example set by the anti-colonial movement. Rather than embracing the plurality of communities, languages and cultures, its inner tendency was to frown upon them as remnants of the apartheid past.

Even the liberal resistance against apartheid did not escape the influence of the spatialising dogma at the heart of the modern project. Liberal critics of apartheid, however, did not so much appeal to the instruments of the state as to the power of abstract moral principles. Ideals such as “reconciliation”, “justice” and “human rights” – all of which could be imposed from high above, i.e. *senkrecht von oben* – played a decisive role in their make-up. It came at the cost of indicating how these ideals could be embodied within concrete institutions and practices. In short, liberal critics strengthened the hold of the straight line on the imagination (instead of the image of the circular movement of traditional thought).

Although the post-apartheid order represents an enormous change for the better *vis-à-vis* the violent and discriminatory practices of the apartheid past, it nevertheless represents – viewed from the idea-historical perspective developed earlier – a continuation of the modern project. The above mentioned trust in the geometrising aims of the modern state also stands at the centre of the new order. Instrumental to this is, among other things, the majoritarian nature of governmental power and, as its ever-accompanying modern correction, unqualified trust in the liberal culture of human rights (instead of the culture of virtues). The result is a continuation of the modern tendency to flatten what Milbank refers to as the “complex space” between state and individual, i.e. the space where communities can pursue the good and flourish.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I conclude with a few speculative remarks on the Afrikaners and their future. As mentioned earlier, the Afrikaners were and are not only influenced by the modern notion of space, but also by the traditional notion of place. Nowadays the latter represents points of reference for what can be referred to as an alternative modernity.

Giliomee writes that Afrikaners have been characterised from early on by an attachment to specific places. Travellers to the interior of the Cape during the 18<sup>th</sup> century “reported that the (Afrikaner) burghers could not believe that there was a better land or a place more beautiful” (Giliomee 2003:35). Elaborating on this, I indicated elsewhere that Afrikaners’ republican past can, in a qualified sense, be indicative of this tendency. Afrikaners did establish “place-conscious republics” in the interior, i.e. republics with a minimal interest in spatialisation (Goosen 2015:351-92). In a remote shadowing of the classic *polis*, these republics were place-centred orders in which citizens could participate fairly directly in their communal affairs. In many respects, the common good was the *telos* of these small republics.

In late classical times, Proclus wrote that liturgical places enable, in our language, the mediation of the Good and being (Griffen 2012). In other words, it was in, and through the mediation of places that reality could be experienced as a “procession from”, and a “reversion to” the Good. Filtered through their own style of Calvinism, Afrikaners experienced their places in similar terms. In, and through the mediation of micro-republics, Afrikaners also experienced reality as a dramatic “procession from”, and a “reversion to” the Good. Can this again play an important role in the future? Perhaps within a symbolic context that may be described as an alternative modernity?

I conclude with a last remark. Seen against the background of the serious structural challenges faced by the South African state, the temptation is huge to respond with renewed efforts to strengthen the modern project of spatialisation. The question is whether a politics of place can be an alternative, i.e. a politics that opens the simple space between state and individual to a rich network of communities pursuing the common good. Such a politics will be a politics where – formulated in the language used above – the drama of being can be mediated.

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