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Paradigms shifts for metaphysics

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How might we think personhood and relationality *together*? The foundation of modern metaphysics in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am') constitutes a deliberate narrowing of attention. If I think and doubt, like Descartes, these are merely *signs* that I am or *effects* of my being; I continue to exist while asleep, when neither thinking nor doubting. Neither thought, which I cannot doubt, nor extension, which I can, fully express what it means for me to be as a person and in relation. I might equally say that I am because God exists; I am because of my parents' choices; I am because I cook and eat; I am because of the international economy, my physiology, medical institutions, the outcomes of past wars, much of human history, the laws of nature, and the temporary stability of the climate. For once the climate no longer supports a modern economy, I will be no more: the climate grounds me in the sense that it is the actual condition of my possibility, inherent to my very mode of existence – my habitat expresses a dimension of what it means for

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me to be. The danger of narrowing attention to signs and effects, here, is that a habitual mode of *representing*—by making sharp distinctions—is projected onto reality as its inherent structure. Specifically, a modern person might conceive themselves as:

- A discrete individual;
- Engaging in extrinsic relations with other beings;
- Known through their own agency—their effects on the world prove that they are more than a mechanical reflex.

This offers a model for conceiving existence, presence, and power. Excluded from consideration, under such a model, are vital dimensions of being:

- The temporality of being: I am a process of individuation as much as a finished individual—the world conspires to form me as increasingly distinct, even idiosyncratic, as well as conspiring to set limits to the duration of my life.
- The relationality of being: I am intrinsically constituted as who I am through the people I have shared my life with, the activities I have undertaken, the books that I have taken to heart—as well as by the relative health, dysfunctions, and instabilities of my body, the institution where I work, the economy in which I participate, the ecology in which I dwell, and the ways attention, reasoning, and thinking are directed, communicated, and oriented in collective life.
- The investment in being: I am a distinct node in being by virtue of recollecting the past, attention in the present, and investment in the future. Where agency involves action in an instantaneous present, awareness links past, present, and future. Specifically, I do not give myself life through agency or thinking; I receive my life. But I only receive my life by spending it; the only life I have is the life I have spent, the life I have no more. The structure of existence is credit or grace: I exist only by investing time, attention, care, cooperation, and trust, just as I exist only through the time, attention, care, cooperation, and trust invested in me.

What is required, therefore, is a fundamental paradigm shift for metaphysics: a way of thinking existence, presence, and power in all their *fullness*, rather than as empty concepts devoid of the actual character of life.

The ecological crisis brings to an end the modern world with its assumptions about discrete individuals, extrinsic relations, and agents. One metaphysical problem posed by the climate crisis is this: what should be preserved *for its own sake*? Of course, we cannot preserve all persons and relations,

for that is never the natural order in life: persons and relations come and go – especially at conferences. A conference seeks some truth to be preserved for its own sake, and it is through working cooperatively on this problem that our temporary mutual relations take on sense. Let me formulate the problem like this: as persons we appear to one another, yet intrinsic to such temporary appearances, there is some substance, personhood, which constitutes your existence, presence, and power. Clearly, just as a character cannot be fully expressed in an image posted on social media, personhood cannot be expressed in a few concepts or propositions – each of us has a fullness and sacredness of meaning which far exceeds the focus of a moment's thought. This returns us to the problem posed by the climate crisis: how can we engage with a continuous creation of full and sacred meanings without reducing this to representations, instruments, symbols, or monetary values to be manipulated for our own purposes? Rather than the problem of *what* to think about intrinsic existence, presence, and power, it is a problem of *how* to think of them.

Since this is a problem which has exercised me for decades, let me share how I think about it through three problems and three tendencies². What should be preserved for its own sake?

- To exist, thought according to personhood and relationality, is to *matter* – to present, convey, and preserve some purport, something of sense, value, and compelling force. The problem of what exists intrinsically may be reframed as the problem of what truly matters.
- To be present, thought according to personhood and relationality, is to be *sincere* – to faithfully present, convey, and preserve some purport, something of sense, value, and compelling force. Reflexive awareness is not self-consciousness, as a discrete individual, but self-awareness – fidelity to some purport that matters.
- To express power, thought according to personhood and relationality, is to be *trustworthy* – for true power involves combining power with others, and such combinations only endure so long as there are appropriate grounds for trust.

² These are fully developed in Philip Goodchild, *Rethinking the Existence of God: Renewing Metaphysics after the Critical Turn*, Oxford 2026.

Consider, for a moment, the potency of this paradigm shift:

- Imagine if all our endeavours were framed by the problem of what really matters, rather than what is efficient, profitable, acceptable, or makes an impression. Then the climate, and all other things that ground our being, would matter as something to be preserved.
- Imagine if all our conversations were shaped by the problem of what is truly sincere, rather than what is stimulating, viable, comforting, or conformable to self-interest. Then concern for what matters, expressed through care, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and trust, would orient all our thoughts towards justice.
- Imagine if all our political, economic, and social choices were framed by the problem of what is truly trustworthy, rather than what is expedient, enriching, empowering, or manipulative. Then the thoughtful investment of trust would ground far more cooperation, far more collective wealth creation, than mechanisms of accountability motivated by distrust.

If justice were conceived as preserving what matters, is sincere, and trustworthy for its own sake, the vast majority of current human behaviour would be judged as unjust.

This paradigm shift matters because an implicit metaphysics determines and reproduces what is noticed, paid attention, recorded, counted as real, invested in and trusted. If such implicit metaphysics does not arise out of thoughtfulness and love of justice, then it will be shaped unconsciously and automatically by the institutions and customs which determine lived experience: systems of trade, finance, bureaucracy, auditing, public representation, social media, and algorithms – in contemporary life, it is our systems, our machines, our money which express a tendency to self-preservation at the expense of our character. But noticing, paying attention, recording, counting as real, investing, and trusting are the daily practices which constitute love. Metaphysics should not only make the world comprehensible; it should also, by exposing its intrinsic sense, value, and compelling force, make it lovable.

The prospect of ecological collapse has drawn much closer in 2023 with marked divergences from all recent years in ocean and land surface temperature, Antarctic sea ice reduction, and carbon release from forest fires. This poses for us a second metaphysical question: how might continuous creation be thought before, intrinsic to, and beyond the human? What does God do in the world in our absence? What holds intrinsic existence, presence, and power

apart from human personhood? Such a question might also illuminate what God does in the world in our presence.

Let me share how I reframe such a problem. Our minds may grasp the infinite singularity who is God as that than which nothing that matters more, is more sincere, and is more trustworthy can be conceived.

- The existence of God may be reconceived as the intrinsic unity of what matters, what is sincere, and what is trustworthy.
- The presence of God may be reconceived as the problem of justice, present to all creatures, as what should be preserved for its own sake.
- The power of God may be reconceived as the actual outworking of time, actualising, liberating, and limiting creatures – creating, redeeming, and judging them.

Despite the progress of entropy and climate instability, time is not what is recorded on clocks – it has definite, irreversible, asymmetrical orientations:

- From the past to the future.
- From nothing to the presence of information.
- From constraint to causes and debts to release.
- From lack of purport to the expression of purport – of what matters, is sincere, and is trustworthy for its own sake.

This means that there are intrinsic tendencies expressed by all temporal creatures, albeit in very limited and finite modes, which are as inevitable as the passage of time since intrinsic to time itself:

- A tendency towards individuation, replacing the paradigm of discrete individuals.
- A tendency towards engagement with others, replacing the paradigm of extrinsic relations.
- A tendency towards expression of justice or God, replacing the paradigm of seeking being through power over others.

If the creatures which are incapable of expressing the justice of God in these ways do not long endure, their ending is another expression of this justice. For not even ecological collapse on this earth may prevent the arrival of the kingdom of God.



