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AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DUTY



# PUS DEI

Giorgio Agamben

TRANSLATED BY ADAM KOYSKO

OPUS DEI

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OPUS DEI

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*An Archaeology of Duty*

Giorgio Agamben

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## Translator's Note

One difficulty facing the translator of this work was the multiplicity of Italian terms connoting the concept of “duty.” The first is *ufficio*, which primarily connotes “duty” but can also mean “office” in the sense, for example, of holding a political office. (Though the English term *office* can carry connotations of “duty,” this meaning is somewhat antiquated.) Like the Latin term *officium*, which plays a decisive role in Agamben’s archaeological investigation, this term can also refer to the “Divine Office” or liturgy. I have rendered this term as “office,” “duty,” or “office or duty,” depending on the context, and have frequently left the Italian word in brackets. Most notably, the term *ufficio* is rendered as “duty” in the subtitle of the work as a whole but as “office” in the title of the third chapter.

A related word is *dovere*, a noun meaning “duty” and also the infinitive of the Italian auxiliary verb meaning “must, should, ought to, to have to.” One challenge in translating this term comes in Agamben’s references to two ontologies, one of *essere* and one of *dovere-essere*. This distinction is often captured in English by juxtaposing the terms *is* and *ought*, but that conventional translation lacks the connotations of the imperative or command that Agamben associates with the ontology of *dovere-essere*. Thus I translate this contrast as one between “being” and “having-to-be.”

Finally, a much less frequent term is *vece*, which carries connotations of duty, as well as alteration and vicarious action (as in the

phrase *fare le veci*, to act in someone's place or stead). When this term occurs, I have translated it according to the context but left the Italian word in brackets.

Another difficulty stems from words related to the Latin term *effectus*: the Italian *effettuale*, *effettualità*, etc. In Italian these terms are generally translated with words like *real*, *actual*, or *true*, but to emphasize the etymological connections Agamben is making, I have chosen to translate them more literally with the English terms *effective* or *effectiveness*.

Works are cited according to the page number of the original text, followed by the page number of the English translation (where applicable), or else by a standard textual division that is consistent across translations and editions. All translations from the Bible are based on the New Revised Standard Version. Translations have been frequently altered throughout for greater conformity with Agamben's usage. Where no English translation is listed in the bibliography, the translations are my own. Where the main text is a close paraphrase of a Latin quotation or where Agamben's purpose in quoting a Latin text is simply to demonstrate the presence of a particular term or phrase in that text, I have often opted not to provide an English translation in order to avoid redundancy.

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## Preface

*Opus Dei* is a technical term that, in the tradition of the Latin Catholic Church that starts from the *Rule of St. Benedict*, designates the liturgy, that is, “the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. . . . In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members” (Vatican Council II, Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963).

The word *liturgy* (from the Greek *leitourgia*, “public services”) is, however, relatively modern. Before its use was extended progressively, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, we find in its place the Latin *officium*, whose semantic sphere is not easy to define and in which nothing, at least at first glance, would seem to have destined it for its unusual theological success.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory* we investigated the liturgical mystery above all in the face it turns toward God, in its objective or glorious aspect. In this volume our archaeological study is oriented toward the aspect that above all concerns the priests, that is, the subjects to whom belongs, so to speak, the “ministry of the mystery.” And just as in *The Kingdom and the Glory* we sought to clarify the “mystery of the economy,” which theologians had constructed by reversing a Pauline expression that was clear in itself, here it is a matter of tearing the liturgical mystery out of the obscurity and vagueness of the modern literature on the subject, returning it to the rigor and splendor of the great medieval

treatises of Amalarius of Metz and William Durand. The liturgy is, in truth, not very mysterious at all, to the point that one can say that, on the contrary, it coincides with perhaps the most radical attempt to think a praxis that would be absolutely and wholly effective. The mystery of the liturgy is, in this sense, the mystery of effectiveness, and only if one understands this arcane secret is it possible to understand the enormous influence that this praxis, which is only apparently separate, has exercised on the way in which modernity has thought both its ontology and its ethics, its politics and its economy.

As happens in every archaeological study, this one leads us well beyond the sphere from which we started. As the diffusion of the term *office* in the most diverse sectors of social life attests, the paradigm that the *Opus Dei* has offered to human action has been shown to constitute for the secular culture of the West a pervasive and constant pole of attraction. It is more efficacious than the law because it cannot be transgressed, only counterfeited. It is more real than being because it consists only in the operation by means of which it is realized. It is more effective than any ordinary human action because it acts *ex opere operato*, independently of the qualities of the subject who officiates it. For all these reasons, office has exercised on modern culture an influence so profound—that is, subterranean—that we do not even realize that not only does the conceptuality of Kantian ethics and of Kelsen's pure theory of law (to name only two moments, though certainly decisive ones, in its history) depend entirely upon it, but that the political militant and the ministerial functionary are also inspired in the same way by the model of the "acts of office," that is, duties.

The paradigm of the office signified, in this sense, a decisive transformation of the categories of ontology and of praxis, whose importance still remains to be measured. In office or duty, being and praxis, what a human does and what a human is, enter into a zone of indistinction, in which being dissolves into its practical effects and, with a perfect circularity, it is what it has to be and has to be what it is. Operativity and effectiveness define, in this sense, the ontological paradigm that in the course of a

centuries-long process has replaced that of classical philosophy: in the last analysis—this is the thesis that our study will wish to put forward for reflection—being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real: this is the extent to which office, under the guise of the humble functionary or the glorious priest, has changed from top to bottom the rules of first philosophy as much as those of ethics.

It is possible that today this paradigm is going through a decisive crisis, the results of which cannot be foreseen. Despite the renewed attention toward liturgy in the twentieth century, of which the so-called “liturgical movement” in the Catholic Church on the one hand and the imposing political liturgies of the totalitarian regimes on the other are an eloquent testimony, many signs allow one to think that the paradigm that office or duty has offered to human action is losing its attractive power precisely when it has reached its maximum expansion. Thus, it was all the more necessary to try to establish its characteristics and define its strategies.



# OPUS DEI

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To act is said in two ways:

1. the true and primary act, that is, to produce things from non-being to being
2. to produce an effect in that in which an effect is produced.

—Al-Kindi

The work of art is the setting-to-work of the truth of Being.

—Martin Heidegger



## § 1 Liturgy and Politics

1. The etymology and meaning of the Greek term *leitourgia* (from which our word *liturgy* derives) are clear. *Leitourgia* (from *laos*, people, and *ergon*, work) means “public work” and in classical Greece designates the obligation that the city imposes on the citizens who have a certain income to provide a series of services for the common interest. These services ranged from the organization of gymnasia and gymnastic games (*gymnasiarchia*) to the preparation of a chorus for the city festival (*chorēgia*, for example the tragic choruses for the Dionysian festival), from the acquisition of grain and oil (*sitēgia*) to arming and commanding a trireme (*triērarchia*) in case of war, from directing the city’s delegation to the Olympic or Delphic games (*architheōria*) to the expectation that the fifteen richest citizens would pay the city for all the citizens’ property taxes (*proeisphora*). It was a matter of services that were of a personal and real character (“each one,” writes Demosthenes, “liturgizes both with person and with property” [*tois sōmasi kai tais ousiais leitourgēsai*]; Fourth Philippic Oration 28) that, even if they were not numbered among the magistracies (*archai*), had a part in the “care of common things” (*tōn koinōn epimeleian*; Isocrates 25). Although the services of the liturgy could be extremely onerous (the verb *kataleitourgeō* meant “to be ruined by liturgies”) and there were citizens (called for this reason *diadrasipolitai*, “citizens in hiding”) who sought by every means to exempt themselves from them, the fulfillment of the liturgies

was seen as a way of obtaining honor and reputation, to the point that many (the prime example, referred to by Lysis, is that of a citizen who had spent in nine years more than twenty thousand drachmae for the liturgies) did not hesitate to renounce their right not to serve the liturgies for the two following years. Aristotle, in the *Politics* (1309a18–21), cautions against the custom, typical of democracies, of “costly but useless liturgies like equipping choruses and torch-races and all other similar services.”

Since the expenses for the cult also concern the community (*ta pros tous theous dapanēmata koina pasēs tēs poleōs estin*), Aristotle can write that a part of the common land must be assigned to the liturgies for the gods (*pros tous theous leitourgias*; *ibid.*, 1330a13). The lexicons register numerous witnesses, both epigraphic and literary, of this cultic use of the term, which we will see taken up again with a singular continuity both in Judaism and among Christian authors. Moreover, as often happens in these cases, the technico-political meaning of the term, in which the reference to the “public” is always primary, is extended, at times jokingly, to services that have nothing to do with politics. A few pages after the passage cited, Aristotle can thus speak, in reference to the season best suited to sexual reproduction, of a “public service for the procreation of children” (*leitourgein . . . pros teknopoiian*; *ibid.*, 1335b29); in the same sense, with even more accentuated irony, an epigram will evoke “the liturgies” of a prostitute (*Anthologia Palatina* 5.49.1; qtd. in Strathmann, 217). It is inexact to claim that in these cases “the significance of the *lēitos* [public element] is lost” (Strathmann, 217). On the contrary, the expression always acquires its antiphrastic sense only in relation to the ordinary political meaning. When the same Aristotle presents as a “liturgy” the nursing of puppies on the part of the mother (*De animalia incessu* 711b30; qtd. in Strathmann, 217) or when we read in a papyrus the expression “to oblige to private liturgies” (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 3.475.18; qtd. in Strathmann, 218), in both cases the ear must perceive the forcing implicit in the metaphorical shift of the term from the public and social sphere to the private and natural sphere.

8. The system of liturgies (*munera* in Latin) reached its greatest diffusion in imperial Rome starting in the third century AD. Once Christianity becomes so to speak the religion of the State, the problem of the exemption of the clergy from the obligation of public services acquires a special interest. Already Constantine had established that “those who see to the ministry of the divine cult [*divini cultui ministeria impendunt*], that is, those who are called clergy, must be completely exempted from any public service [*ab omnibus omnino muneribus excusentur*]” (qtd. in Drecoll, 56). Although this exemption implied the risk that affluent people would become clergy to escape onerous *munera*, as a subsequent decree of Constantine that prohibited *decuriones* from taking part in the clergy proves, the privilege was maintained, albeit with various limitations.

This proves that the priesthood was seen in some way as a public service and this may be among the reasons that will lead to the specialization of the term *leitourgia* in a cultic sense in the sphere of Greek-speaking Christianity.

2. The history of a term often coincides with the history of its translations or of its use in translations. An important moment in the history of the term *leitourgia* thus comes when the Alexandrian rabbis who carried out the translation of the Bible into Greek choose the verb *leitourgeō* (often combined with *leitourgia*) to translate the Hebrew *šeret* whenever this term, which means generically “to serve,” is used in a cultic sense. Starting from its first appearance in reference to Aaron’s priestly functions, in which *leitourgeō* is used absolutely (*en tōi leitourgein*: Exodus 28:35), the term is often used in a technical combination with *leitourgia* to indicate the cult in the “tent of the Lord” (*leitourgein tēn leitourgian . . . en tēi skēnēi*; Numbers 8:22, referring to the Levites; *leitourgein tas leitourgas tēs skēnēs kyriou*, in 16:9). Scholars have wondered about this choice with respect to other available Greek terms, like *latreuō* or *douleō*, which are generally reserved for less technical meanings in the Septuagint. It is more than probable that the translators were well aware of the “political” meaning of the Greek term, if one remembers that the Lord’s instructions for the organization of the cult in Exodus 25–30 (in

which the term *leitourgein* appears for the first time) are only an explication of the pact that a few pages earlier constituted Israel as a chosen people and as a “kingdom of priests” (*mamleket kohanim*) and a “holy nation” (*goj qados*) (Exodus 19:6). It is significant that the Septuagint here has recourse to the Greek term *laos* (*esesthe moi laos periousios apo pantōn tōn ethnōn*, “you shall be my treasured people out of all the nations”; Exodus 19:5) in order then to subsequently reinforce its “political” meaning by translating the text’s “kingdom of priests” as “royal priesthood” (*basileion hierateuma*, an image significantly taken up again in the First Epistle of Peter 2:9—“you are a chosen race, a *basileion hierateuma*”—and in Revelation 1:6) and *goj qados* as *ethnos hagion*.

The election of Israel as “people of God” immediately institutes its liturgical function (the priesthood is immediately royal, that is, political) and thus sanctifies it insofar as it is a nation (the normal term for Israel is not *goj*, but *am qados*, *laos hagios*, “holy people”; Deuteronomy 7:6).

8. The technical meaning of *leitourgia* and *leitourgeō* to indicate the priestly cult is standard in Alexandrian Judaism. Thus, in the *Letter of Aristeas* (second century BCE), *tōn hierēōn hē leitourgia* refers to the cultic functions of the priest, meticulously laid out, from the choice of victim to the care of the oil and the spice (Aristeas 92). A little after *Eleazar en tēi leitourgiai* designates the high priest in the act of officiating, whose holy vestments and paraments are described with care (96ff.). The same can be said for Flavius Josephus and Philo (who also use the term in a metaphorical sense, for example with respect to the intellect: “when the mind is ministering to God [*leitourgei theoi*] in purity, it is not human, but divine”; Philo 84).

3. All the more significant is the lack of importance of this lexical group in the New Testament (with the notable exception of the Letter to the Hebrews). Beyond the Pauline corpus (where one also reads the term *leitourgos* five times), *leitourgein* and *leitourgia* figure only twice, the first time quite generically in reference to Zechariah’s priestly functions in the Temple (Luke 1:23) and the second in reference to five “prophets and teachers” of the *ecclesia*

of Antioch (Acts 13:1–2). The passage from Acts (*leitourgountōn de autōn tōi kyriōi*; 13:2) does not mean, as some have wanted to suggest with an obvious anachronism, “while they were celebrating the divine service in honor of the Lord.” As the Vulgate had already understood in translating it simply as *ministrantibus autem illis Domino*, *leitourgein* is here the equivalent of “while they were carrying out their function in the community for the Lord” (which was precisely, as the text had just specified, that of prophets and teachers—*prophētai kai didaskaloi*; Acts 13:1—and not of priests, nor is it clear what other *leitourgia* could be in question at this point; as to prayer, Luke generally refers to it with the term *orare*).

Even in the Pauline letters the term often has the secular meaning of “service for the community,” as in the passage in which the collection made for the community is presented as a *leitourgēsai* (Romans 15:27) or as *diakonia tēs leitourgias* (2 Corinthians 9:12). It is also said of the action of Epaphroditus, who has put his life at risk, that he has carried it out in order to make up for the “liturgy” that the Philippians have not been able to perform (Philippians 2:30). But even in the passages where *leitourgia* is deliberately connected to a properly priestly terminology, it is necessary to take care not to incautiously mix up the respective meanings, thus allowing the specificity and audacity of Paul’s linguistic choice, which intentionally juxtaposes heterogeneous terms, to pass unnoticed. The exemplary case is Romans 15:16: “to be a *leitourgos* of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, carrying out the holy action of the good news of God [*hierourgounta to euangelion tou theou*].” Here commentators project onto *leitourgos* the cultic meaning of *hierourgeo*, writing: “What follows shows that [Paul] is using *leitourgos* cultically almost in the sense of priest. For he construes it in terms of *hierourgein to euanglion*. He discharges a priestly ministry in relation to the Gospel” (Strathmann, 230). The hapax *hierourgein to euanglion*, in which the good news becomes, with an extraordinary forcing, the impossible object of a *sacrum facere* (just as, with an analogous *tour de force*, *latreia*, the sacrificial cult, is linked

in Romans 12:1 to the adjective *logikē*, “linguistic”), is all the more effective if *leitourgos* conserves its proper meaning as “one entrusted with a community function” (*minister*, as the Vulgate correctly translates it). The connection of the cultic terminology of the Temple to something—the announcement made to the pagans and, as is said immediately after, the “offering of the Gentiles,” *prosphora tōn ethnōn*—which can in no way take place in the Temple, has an obvious polemical meaning and does not intend to confer a sacrificial aura to Paul’s preaching.

Analogous considerations can be made for Philippians 2:17: “But even if I am being poured out as a libation [*spendomai*] over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith [*epi tēi thysiai kai leitourgiai tēs pisteōs*], I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” Whatever the connection between *spendomai* and the words that follow, the affirmation gains its pregnancy only if, leaving aside the anachronism that sees in *leitourgia* a priestly service (the Pauline community obviously could not have been familiar with priests), one perceives the contrast and almost the tension that Paul skillfully introduces between cultic terminology and “liturgical” terminology in the proper sense.

8. It has been known for some time (see Dunin-Borkowski) that in the earliest Christian literature the terms *hiereus* and *archiereus* (priest and high priest) are reserved solely for Christ, while for the members or heads of the communities, a properly priestly vocabulary is never used (leaders are defined simply as *episkopoi* [superintendents], *presbyteroi* [elders], or *diakonoι* [servants]). A priestly vocabulary appears only with Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17.1; *Against the Jews* 6.1.14), Cyprian (*Epistle* 59.14, 66.8), and Origen (*Homiliae in Numeros* 10.1). In the Pauline letters, which mention *episkopoi* and *diakonoι* (in Colossians 1:25, Paul calls himself a *diakonos*), particular attention is dedicated to the various functions carried out in the community, none of which is defined in priestly terms. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28–31: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles [*apostolous*], second prophets [*profētas*], third teachers [*didaskalous*]; then deeds of power [*dynameis*], then gifts of healing [*charismata iamatōn*], forms of assistance [*antilēpseis*], of leadership [*kybernēseis*], various kinds of tongues [*genē*

*glōssōn*”]; Romans 12:6–8: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering [*diakonian en tēi diakonīai*], the teacher, in teaching [*didaskōn en tēi didaskaliāi*], the comforter, in comforting [*parakalōn en tēi paraklēsei*].”)

4. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews elaborates a theology of the messianic priesthood of Christ, in the context of which the lexical group that interests us occurs four times. Developing the Pauline argumentation about the two covenants (2 Corinthians 3:1–14), the theological nucleus of the letter plays on the opposition between the Levitical priesthood (*levitikē hierōsynē*, 7:11), corresponding to the old Mosaic covenant and encompassing the descendants of Aaron, and the new covenant, in which the one who assumes the “liturgy” of the high priest (*archiereus*, this time encompassing the descendants of Melchizedek) is Christ himself. Of the four appearances from the lexical family, two refer to the Levitical cult: in 9:21 Moses sprinkles with blood “the tent and all the vessels used in the liturgy” (*panta ta skeuē tēs leitourgias*); in 10:11 the author evokes the priest of the old covenant, who “stands day after day for his liturgical functions [*leitourgōn*], offering again and again the same sacrifices.” The remaining two occurrences refer in turn to Christ, the high priest of the new covenant. In the first (8:2) he is defined as “liturgue of the holy things and of the true tent” (*tōn hagiōn leitourgos kai tēs skēnēs tēs alēthinēs*; cf. Numbers 16:9); in the second (8:6) it is said that he “has obtained a different and better liturgy (*diaphorōteras tetychen leitourgias*), to the degree to which the covenant of which he is mediator is better.” While in fact the sacrifices of the Levites are only an example and shadow (*hypodeigma kai skia*, 8:5) of heavenly things and cannot therefore complete or render perfect (*teleiōsai*, 9:9, 10:1) those who offer them, the sacrifice of the new covenant, in which Christ sacrifices himself, annuls sin (*athetēsīn hamartias*, 9:26) and purifies (*katharīei*, 9:14) and sanctifies the faithful once and for all (*teteleiōken eis to diēnekes tous hagiāzomenous*, 10:14).

Let us reflect on the identity that the text presupposes between the action of Christ and liturgy. His salvific action is not only presented as a "liturgy," but as the high priest of a sacrifice in which the officiator sacrifices himself (*heauton prosēnenken*, 9:14), Christ accomplishes a liturgical action that is, so to speak, absolute and perfect and that for this reason can be carried out only once (*hapax prosenechtheis*, 9:28; *mian . . . prosenenkas thysian*, 10:12). In this sense Christ coincides without remainder with his liturgy—he is essentially liturgy—and precisely this coincidence confers on his liturgy its incomparable efficacy.

The intention of the author in decisively opposing the two figures of the priest is doubtless to present the messiah in the hieratic vestments of a celebrant, and so one must not forget that the messianic priesthood that is here in question presents some entirely peculiar characteristics that distinguish it point by point from the Levitical priesthood and that the sense of the letter lies precisely in this counterposition. It is decisive that while the Levitical sacrifices must be ceaselessly repeated and each year renew the memory of sins (*anamnēsis hamartiōn*, 10:3), the sacrifice of the new covenant happens, as the author never stops repeating, only once and cannot be repeated in any way. In the affirmation of this unrepeatability of the sacrifice, whose unique priest, "having obtained an eternal redemption, enters once for all [*ephapax*] into the sanctuary" (9:12), the author of Hebrews remains faithful to a genuine messianic inspiration, on the basis of which (with all due respect to subsequent ecclesiastical practice) it is not possible to found any cultic liturgy. In the same instant in which he defines him as *leitourgos* and evokes for him a "different and better liturgy," the author of Hebrews knows that the high priest of the new covenant has irrevocably closed the door of the temple behind him. The *diaphorōtera leitourgia* is not, in this sense, a celebration, that is, something essentially repeatable (this is the etymological meaning of *celeber*). The paradox of the Christian liturgy is that by taking as the model of its priesthood the liturgical action of the *archiereus* Christ and founding its celebrations on the Letter to the Hebrews, it

devotes itself to repeating an unrepeatable act, to celebrating what cannot be celebrated.

5. Rudolf Sohm defined the primitive church as a charismatic community, within which no properly juridical organization was possible. “As soon as it is certain that no human Word but only God’s Word shall rule in the Church, so is it also certain that there can be no power or official appointment in Christendom which should have *legal* authority over the congregation. One apprehends the Word of God not in some form or other but in its inner power. Christianity has only to follow that Word which by the power of an inner, free assent it *recognizes* as the Word of God. . . . *There can be no legal power to rule* [rechtliche Regierungsgewalt] *in the Church*” (Sohm, 22–23/13–14). The organization of the primitive community can consequently have only a charismatic character: “Christendom is organized through the distribution of the *gifts of grace* (*Charismen*), which both qualify and call the individual Christian to different activities in Christendom. The charisma is from God. Thus the service (*diakonia*) to which the charisma calls is a service imposed by God” (Sohm, 26/15). Hence the radical thesis, according to which “canon law stands in contradiction with the nature of the church. The true church, the church of Christ knows no canon law” (Sohm, 459).

According to Sohm the situation changes when—in a moment to which the Letter of Clement to the Corinthians testifies—the way was paved for the idea that the presbyters and bishops have a right to exercise their “liturgy” and that the community cannot remove them from their position, which thus comes to acquire a “legal meaning” (Sohm, 159). “The immediate consequence of the letter of Clement,” writes Sohm, “was a change in the constitution of the Roman community” (165), whose ultimate demand is the transformation of the primitive church into the Catholic Church, of the original charismatic community into the juridical organization that is familiar to us.

Here is not the place to enter into the merits of the discussion provoked by Sohm’s thesis among church historians and students

of canon law. What interests us rather, in the economy of our archaeological inquiry, are the meaning and special relevance that the term *leitourgia* and its derivatives have in Clement's letter.

6. The Letter of Clement to the Corinthians is the first text in which a pastoral preoccupation assumes the form of a theorization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy understood as a "liturgy." The context of the problem is well known: Clement, who represents "the church of God, which sojourns in exile [*paroikousa*] at Rome" (preamble; translation altered), writes to the church in exile at Corinth, in which a conflict (indeed, a true and proper *stasis*, a civil war, 1.1) is dividing the faithful from the heads of the community, who have been dismissed from their function. In the struggle that opposes "those of no repute against the highly reputed, the foolish against the wise, the young against the elders" (3.3), Clement resolutely takes the side of the latter. What is decisive in his strategy is not the recourse to military metaphors, which will have considerable success in the history of the church (as in an army, "each in his own rank executes the orders given by the emperor and the commanders," 37.3), so much as the idea of founding the function of the presbyters and bishops in the Levitical priesthood. Clement knows the priestly Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews and once defines Christ as "the High Priest of our offerings" (*archiereia tōn prosphorōn hēmōn*, 36.1). But what interests him are not the special characteristics and effectiveness of this priesthood but rather the fact that Christ constitutes the foundation of the apostolic succession: "So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ" (42.2). Contradicting what is said in the Letter to the Hebrews (which had substituted the priesthood of Christ for the Levitical priesthood) and with a curious anachronism (the priestly functions in the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, had been halted for some time), Clement institutes a paradigmatic relation between the hereditary order of the Levites and that of the apostolic succession in the Church. In the construction of this analogy the concept of *leitourgia* takes on a central role. Just as in

the Temple of Jerusalem “the offerings and liturgical functions [*prosphoras kai leitourgias*]” are “not to be done carelessly or in disorder, but at designated times and seasons . . . for to the high priest the proper liturgies [*idiai leitourgiai*] have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries [*diakoniai*] have been imposed,” so also in the Church each must act and please God in the rank that is proper to him, “not overstepping the designated rule of his liturgy [*ton hōrismenon tēs leitourgias autou kanona*]” (40.2–41.1). The apostles, in fact, foreseeing that there would be a sort of dispute over the episcopal function (*peri tou onomatos tēs episkopēs*), “have established as a rule that, after the death of those they had appointed, other approved men should succeed to their liturgy [*diadexontai tēn leitourgian autōn*]” (44.2). For this reason Clement can now forcefully claim that “these men we consider to be unjustly removed from their liturgy [*apoballesthai tēs leitourgias*] . . . who have carried out their liturgical function blamelessly [*leitourgēsantas amemptōs*] before the flock of Christ” (44.3). And he can conclude with an encomium to those “presbyters [*presbyteroi*] who have gone on ahead, who took their departure at a mature and fruitful age” (44.5) and with a reproach of the faithful in Corinth who have deprived them “of the liturgy that they had exercised honorably and blamelessly” (44.6).

It is obvious that in the letter the term *leitourgia*, while also maintaining the originary meaning of a service for the community, acquires the characteristics of a stable and lifelong office, an object of a canon (*kanōn*) and rule (*epinomē*, which the old Latin version of the letter renders as *lex*). All of Clement’s vocabulary tends in this direction: *kathistēmi* (establish, nominate), *diadexomai* (a technical term for succession in an office), *hypotassō* (to submit oneself to an authority; conversely, those who are disobeying are responsible for a *stasis* [civil war, insurrection]). The paradigmatic reference to the Levitical cult, moreover, confers on the term a priestly character and aura (as it had already had in the Septuagint) that was anything but taken for granted at that point (as we have seen, none of the original documents use the

term *priest*—*hierus, sacerdos*—to indicate a member of the community). From an occasional public service, which does not have a specific title within the community, liturgy begins to transform into a special activity, into a “ministry” that tends to define a particular subject as entitled to it: the bishop and the presbyters in the letter and, later, the priest. What defines this activity? What constitutes a determined sphere of action as a liturgy?

8. In the section of the *Apostolic Constitutions* known as the *Canones apostolici* one can see how the passage from a charismatic community to an organization of a juridical type was not only a fact already in some sense achieved, but had constituted the object of a precise strategy. The text—which, although composed around the end of the fourth century, pretends to be a work of the apostles themselves—actually opens with a lengthy treatment of the traditional charismas (glossolalia, etc.), but the goal of the author is obviously to minimize their relevance with respect to what he defines immediately after as “ecclesiastical organization” (*ekklēsiastikē diatypōsis*). In question are precisely the “constitutions” (*diatexeis*, a technical term for testamentary provisions) that the apostles had established as a configuration or general model (*typos*) of the church, from the ordination of the bishop to the articulation of the hierarchy to the rituals of the sacraments. What is evident in the *Constitutions* is the construction of a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy which culminates in the bishop: “Those which were then the sacrifices now are prayers, and intercessions, and thanksgivings [*eucharistiai*]. Those which were then first-fruits, and tithes, and offerings, and gifts, now are oblations, which are presented by holy bishops to the Lord God, through Jesus Christ, who has died for them. For these are your high priests [*archiereis*] and presbyters are your priests, and your present deacons instead of your Levites” (*Apostolic Constitutions* 2.4.25). “If anyone does anything without the bishop,” one reads a little further down, “he does it to no purpose [*matēn*]” (2.4.27). “For neither may we address ourselves to Almighty God, but only by Christ. In the same manner, therefore, let the laity make known all their desires to the bishop by the deacon” (2.4.28).

In Irenaeus, by contrast, the charismas are still not subordinated to the succession according to apostolic ordination. The passage in which he recommends obedience to the presbyters, “who, together with the

succession of the episcopate, have received a *charisma veritatis certum*" (Irenaeus 4.26.2), does not mean, as has been suggested, that he claims a sort of infallibility for the bishop. Rather, the fact that immediately afterward he distinguishes between good and evil presbyters and confirms the importance of the *charismata Dei* shows that Irenaeus conceives the latter as an equally important element of ecclesiastical ordination: "Where, therefore, the gifts of the Lord have been placed [*ubi igitur charismata dei posita sunt*], there it behooves us to learn the truth, namely, from those who possess the succession of the Church which is from the apostles, and among whom exists what is sound and blameless in conduct, as well as that which is unadulterated and incorrupt in speech" (Irenaeus 4.26.5). At the end of the second century, a charismatic community and a hierarchical organization still cohabitated in a functional unity in the church.

7. Guy Stroumsa has recently called attention to the persistence of sacrificial ideology in Christianity. It is well known that after the second destruction of the Temple, rabbinic Judaism oriented itself in the direction of a spiritualization of the liturgy, transforming it from a sequence of rites that accompanied the sacrificial action into a collection of prayers that were actually substituted for the sacrifices. From this perspective the *talmud Torah*, the study of the Torah, supplanted sacrificial practices, and "the rabbis gathered in Yavneh in 70 succeeded in transforming Judaism—without admitting doing so, and perhaps also without admitting it completely even to themselves—into a non-sacrificial religion" (Stroumsa, 129/72). Christianity, by contrast, defined itself early on "as a religion centered on sacrifice, even if it was a reinterpreted sacrifice. The Christian *anamnēsis* of the sacrifice of Jesus has a power very different from that of the Hebrew memory of Temple sacrifices, because the *anamnēsis* is the reactivation of the sacrifice of the Son of God, performed by the priests" (Stroumsa, 129/72).

Stroumsa could have added that the construction of the sacramental liturgy is founded, starting already with the Church Fathers, on explicit and unreserved opposition of the sacraments of the Old Law—which signify and announce but do not achieve

what they signify—to the sacraments of the New Law, which accomplish what they signify.

In reality the author of the Letter to the Hebrews does not establish any connection between the doctrine of Christ's priesthood and the eucharistic celebration. This is not the place to reconstruct the genealogy of this connection, whose strategic importance for the Church is obvious. Already implicit in Origen (*Homiliae in Numeros* 9.5.2, 10.21), it often appears surreptitiously, through the simple juxtaposition of the two motifs. Thus in two passages of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, in which the ecclesiological preoccupation is evident: "Lord, grant that this your servant, whom you have chosen to be a bishop, may feed your holy flock and discharge the office of a high priest [*archierateuein*] before you blamelessly night and day . . . offering to you a pure and unbloody sacrifice, which you have appointed through Christ as the mystery of the new covenant" (*Apostolic Constitutions* 8.2.5; translation altered); "The first High Priest therefore, who is so by nature [*prōtos . . . tēi physēi archiereus*], is Christ the only begotten; not having snatched that honor to himself but having been appointed such by the Father. He was made man for our sake, and offering the spiritual sacrifice to his God and Father, before his suffering charged us alone to do this" (8.5.46); and in Epiphanius ("so as to be made a priest for us after the order of Melchizedek . . . for he abides forever to offer gifts for us—after first offering himself by the cross, to abolish every sacrifice of the old covenant"; Epiphanius 55.4.5–7, 2:80–81). Later, we find the two terms connected in Ambrose ("Who then is the author of the sacraments but the Lord Jesus? . . . We learn that those sacraments were prefigured in the times of Abraham, when holy Melchizedek offered sacrifice, having neither beginning nor end of days. Hear, O man, what the Apostle Paul says to the Hebrews"; *On the Sacraments* 4.13, 5.1) and in Augustine ("Also, our priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, he offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and recommended the reenactment of that sacrifice to be celebrated in memory of his suffering and death, so that what Melchizedek offered to God now we see offered in the Church of Christ

throughout the whole world"; *De diversis questionibus*, question 61 [117]).

In each case, in bringing together two distinct texts, it is a matter of conceiving the institution of the Eucharist as a priestly service of Jesus, who according to the doctrine of the letter acts as high priest of the order of Melchizedek and in this way transmits the priestly ministry to the apostles and to their successors in the Church. In this sense one can say that the definition of the priestly character of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is constructed precisely through founding the sacramental liturgy in the doctrine of Christ as high priest. In the *summa* of the Catholic liturgy that is William Durand's *Rationale divinatorum officiorum*, the connection already has the obviousness of a formula: *Missa instituit Dominus Iesus, sacerdos secundum ordinem Melchisedech, quando panem et vinum in corpus et sanguinem suum transmutavit, dicens: "Hoc est corpus meum, hic est sanguis meus," subiungens: "Hoc facite in meam commemorationem"* (The Lord Jesus instituted the mass as priest according to the order of Melchizedek, when he transmuted bread and wine into his body and blood, saying, 'This is my body, this is my blood,' and enjoining, 'Do this in memory of me'); Durand, bk. 1, 240).

The Council of Trent (session XXII, chap. 1) confirms beyond any doubt the foundational and eternal character of Christ's priesthood, which is renewed and perpetuated in the eucharistic liturgy, in the celebration of which the Church is linked to Christ as the liturgue of the Letter to the Hebrews:

He, therefore, our God and Lord, though He was by His death about to offer Himself once upon the altar of the cross to God the Father that He might there accomplish an eternal redemption, nevertheless, that His priesthood might not come to an end with His death, at the last supper, on the night He was betrayed, that He might leave to His beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice, such as the nature of man requires, whereby that bloody sacrifice once to be accomplished on the cross might be represented . . . , declaring Himself constituted a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, offered up to God the Father His own body and blood under the form of bread

and wine, and under the forms of those same things gave to the Apostles, whom He then made priests of the New Testament, that they might partake, commanding them and their successors in the priesthood by these words to do likewise: Do this in memory of me.

In the idea of Christ as a “priest forever,” the “once for all” (*hapax*) of the Letter to the Hebrews is joined with the “forever and ever” of the eucharistic celebration ceaselessly repeated by the Church, and the continuity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Clement’s letter receives its priestly seal.

The definition of the liturgy in twentieth-century encyclicals has only confirmed this connection: “The sacred liturgy is, consequently, the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father” (*Mediator Dei* §20; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 571).

The fact that the Church has founded its liturgical praxis on the Letter to the Hebrews, namely by putting at its center an unceasing reactualization of the sacrifice achieved by Christ the *leitourgos* and high priest, constitutes both the truth and the aporia of Christian liturgy (which Augustine summarizes in the antithesis *semel immolatus . . . et tamen quotidie immolatur* [offered once . . . and yet he is offered daily]). The problem, which will never cease to appear again and again in the history of the Church as its central “mystery,” is precisely that of how one is to understand the reality and effectiveness of the sacramental liturgy and, at the same time, of how this “mystery” can take the form of a “ministry,” which defines the specific praxis of the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

8. The doctrine of the liturgical character of Christ’s sacrifice has its root in the doctrine of the Trinity itself. We have shown how the Fathers, in order to reconcile the unity of substance with the plurality of persons in God and in close hand-to-hand combat with Gnosis, initially formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of an *oikonomia*, of an activity of “administration”

and “management” of the divine life and of creation (Agamben, 17–50). In the words of Tertullian, who (in opposition to the monarchians) was among the first to elaborate the doctrine of the Trinity as a divine “economy”: “they must believe in one only [God], yet they must believe in him along with his *oikonomia*. . . . A unity which derives from itself a trinity is not destroyed but administered by it [*non destruat ab illa sed administratur*]” (*Against Praxeas* 3.1; qtd. in Agamben, 42). Reversing an expression of Paul, who in his letters had spoken, in reference to the divine plan of redemption, of an “economy of the mystery” (*oikonomia tou mystēriou*, Ephesians 3:9), Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian thus presented the very articulation of the Trinity and its salvific action as a “mystery of the economy” (*mystērion tēs oikonomias, oikonomias sacramentum*). The insistence on the “mysterious” character of the divine work of salvation shows, however, that the caesura they had wanted to avoid on the level of being reappears as a fracture between God and his action, between ontology and praxis. What is mysterious is now no longer, as in Paul, the divine plan of redemption, which demanded an *oikonomia* that was clear in itself. What is inscrutable or mysterious is now the “economy” itself, the very praxis through which God secures the salvation of his creation. Whatever meaning is to be assigned to the term *mystērion* and its Latin equivalent *sacramentum*, what is essential here is that the divine economy takes the form of a mystery.

Through the incarnation, Christ takes this mysterious economy on himself. But on the basis of the passage from John according to which “the Son of Man has been glorified by God and God has been glorified in him” (13:31), the “economy” is understood simultaneously as a glorification and as a reciprocal manifestation of the Father through the Son and of the Son in doing the Father’s work. In Origen’s commentary on the Gospel of John, the “economy of the passion” of the savior thus coincides perfectly with the economy of the glory by which the Son reveals and celebrates the Father. The mystery of the economy is a doxological, which is to say liturgical, mystery.

It is along with this aporetic conception of the trinitarian “economy,” in which Christ acts as “economy” of both redemption and the glory of the Father, that one must read the doctrine of the Letter to the Hebrews, in which Christ is presented in the guise of a *leitourgos*, of a high priest who takes upon himself the “liturgy,” the “public” and “sacrificial” service of the redemption of the human race. Trinitarian Christology is elaborated, that is to say, through a twofold metaphorical register: to the political and cultic metaphor of Christ as liturgue of redemption in the Letter to the Hebrews there corresponds point by point in the Fathers the “economic” metaphor of Christ as administrator and dispenser of the divine mystery of salvation. The relation and tension between these two metaphors define the *locus* in which Christian liturgy is situated. In liturgically celebrating his sacrifice (his “mystery”), Christ brings the trinitarian economy to completion. The mystery of the economy, insofar as it is an economy of salvation, is fulfilled in and transformed into a liturgical mystery, in which the economic metaphor and political metaphor are identified.

Modern theologians are accustomed to distinguishing the “economic Trinity” (or Trinity of revelation), which defines God in his salvific action with respect to humans, and the “immanent Trinity” (or Trinity of substance), which defines the internal articulation of the divine life in itself. Economic Trinity and immanent Trinity must correspond in the liturgy. But the tensions and contradictions that are implicit in the “economic-mysterious” paradigm of the Trinity will also continue to mark the public activity of the Church, in which mystery and economy, priestly action and economic-political praxis, *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* will continue to be endlessly distinguished and superimposed. The “kingdom of priests” of Exodus 19:6 and the “royal priesthood” of the Septuagint and the First Letter of Peter define the paradigm and, at the same time, the constitutive aporia of the Church’s liturgy.

9. The Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter of Clement constitute two polarities, and Christian liturgy will never cease to articulate itself and define itself through the tension between

the two. On the one hand, the *semel* [once] of the efficacious but unrepeated sacrament, whose sole subject is Christ; on the other, the *quotidie* [daily] of the “liturgy” of the bishop and the presbyter in the community. On the one hand, the *mystery* of a perfect sacrificial action, whose effects are accomplished once and for all (in the words of Cabasilas’s liturgical treatise, “sanctification”); on the other, the *ministry* of those who must celebrate its memory and renew its presence (which Cabasilas calls “signification,” *sēmasia*: Cabasilas, 130). On the one hand, in the words of the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, with which the modern Church, in a crucial moment of its history, sought to restore vitality to the liturgical tradition, the “objective” element of the liturgy, the “*mysterium* of the mystical body,” whose operator is grace, which is manifested in the charismas and acts in the sacraments *ex opere operato* (through the simple completion of a certain action); on the other, the “subjective” element of the cult provided by the participation of the faithful, *ex opere operantis Ecclesiae* (§27; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 574–75).

The insistence with which the encyclical *Mediator Dei* attempts to negate and almost to exorcise the contradiction between “the action of God” and “the collaboration of man,” between the efficacy of “the external administration of the sacraments, which comes from the rite itself (*ex opere operato*)” and “the meritorious action of their ministers of recipients, which we call the agent’s action (*opus operantis*),” between “the ascetical life and devotion to the liturgy” (§36; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 578), betrays a difficulty that the Church has never succeeded in fully unraveling.

What defines the Christian liturgy is precisely the aporetic but always reiterated attempt to identify and articulate at the same time in the liturgical act—understood as *opus Dei*—mystery and ministry, that is, of making the liturgy as effective soteriological act and liturgy as the clergy’s service to the community, *opus operatum* and *opus operantis Ecclesiae*, coincide.

8. It is customary, based on the authority of Du Cange, to attribute the creation of the syntagma *opus Dei* to the Benedictine rule, where

it appears multiple times to designate the liturgical office. In truth, the compiler of the rule depends in this case as well on his principal source, the *Regula magistri*. The concordance of Vogüé's edition registers around thirty occurrences for the expression *opus Dei* and shows, moreover, that already in the first quarter of the sixth century (when, according to Vogüé, the *Regula Dei* would have been composed) the syntagma had become a technical term for the monastic office. If it is a matter of an invention on the part of the author of the rule, it could derive from his definition of the monastery as *officina divinae artis* (*Officina vero monasterium est, in qua ferramenta cordis in corporis clausura reposita opus divinae artis diligenti custodia perseverando operari potest* [The workshop is the monastery, where the instruments of the heart are kept in the enclosure of the body, and the work of the divine art can be accomplished with assiduous care and perseverance]; Vogüé, 1:380/119). According to the correspondence between liturgy and trinitary economy that we have evoked, the origin of the expression is with all likelihood to be sought in the definition of Christ as *primum opus Dei*, which one finds, for example, in an Arian text, the letter of Candidus to Marius Victorinus on the divine generation (mid-fourth century): *Dei filius, qui est logos apud Deum, Jesus Christus, per quem effecta sunt omnia et sine quo nihil factum est, neque generatione a Deo, sed operatione a Deo, est primum opus et principale Dei* ("the Son of God, who is the 'Logos with God,' Jesus Christ, 'through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made,' is, not by God's begetting but by God's operation, the first and original effect of God"; in Victorinus, 122/55). In any case the syntagma *opus Dei*, which extended its effectiveness well beyond monasticism, acquires its proper sense in the context of the liturgy, conceived as the place in which mystery and ministry, priestly service and community obligation tend to coincide. When the syntagma is today associated with a powerful Catholic organization, founded in 1928 by Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, one must not forget that their choice of the name is perfectly coherent with this premise.

10. The distinction between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis* in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* comes from the scholastic tradition and found its sanction in the Council of Trent (session VII, canon 8, *Denzinger* 851): "If any one saith, that by the said sacraments of

the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed [*ex opere operato*], but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace; let him be anathema.”

In this formulation is expressed a principle that constitutively defines the liturgical praxis of the Church: the independence of the objective effectiveness and validity of the sacrament from the subject who concretely administers it. *Opus operatum* thus designates the sacramental act in its effective reality, *opus operantis* (the oldest formulation is actually *opus operans*) designates the action insofar as it is carried out by the agent and is qualified by his moral and physical dispositions.

The origin of the distinction goes back to the disputes over the validity of baptism that divided the Church between the third and fourth century. The salient moments here are the controversy between Cyprian and Pope Stephen in 256 and that between Augustine and the Donatists between 396 and 410. In both cases it is a matter of affirming, against Cyprian and the Donatists, the validity of baptism conferred by a heretic or by an unworthy minister, that is, of securing the objective validity of the sacrament and the priestly action beyond any subjective conditions that could render them null or ineffective. Just as those who were baptized by Judas, writes Augustine, did not have to be baptized again, since it is Christ who baptized them, “In like manner, then, they whom a drunkard baptized, those whom a murderer baptized, those whom an adulterer baptized, if it was the baptism of Christ, were baptized by Christ” (*In Evangelium Johannis Tractatus* 5.18). As happens in every institution, it is a matter of distinguishing the individual from the function he exercises, so as to secure the validity of the acts that he carries out in the name of the institution.

In Aquinas the doctrine of the efficacy of the sacraments *ex opere operato* is already fully elaborated. He first of all distinguishes the sacraments of the Hebrew law, which “did not have effectiveness *ex opere operato*, but only through faith,” from those of the new law, “which confer grace *ex opere operato*” (Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis* 92). In the treatise on the sacraments in the *Summa*

*theologica* (III, qq. 60–65), the neutralization of the *opus operantis* and the subjective condition is developed through the doctrine of the priest as instrumental cause of an act whose primary agent is Christ himself. And, as “the instrumental cause works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent” (q. 62, art. 1), so “the ministers of the Church work instrumentally in the sacraments, because, in a way, a minister is of the nature of an instrument” (q. 64, art. 5). For this reason, insofar as the minister is a sort of “animate instrument” (q. 64, art. 8) of an operation whose agent is Christ, not only is it not necessary that he have faith or love, but even a perverse intention (for example, baptizing a woman with the intention of taking advantage of her) does not take away the validity of the sacrament. In virtue of the effectiveness *ex opere operato* and not *ex opere operantis*, in fact “the perverse intention of the minister perverts the sacrament insofar as it is his action: not insofar as it is the action of Christ, whose minister he is” (q. 64, art. 10, sol. 3).

8. Grundmann has observed that the early and clear formulation of the doctrine of the *opus operatum* that is found already in Innocent III’s *De sacro altaris mysterio* can be considered as a response to the polemics of the spiritual movements, like the Waldensians, who called into question the validity of the sacrament imparted by unworthy priests (Grundmann, 519/413n50). “In the sacrament of the body of Christ nothing more is accomplished by a good priest, and nothing less by a bad priest . . . because it is confected not through the merit of the priest, but through the word of the Creator. Therefore the sin of the priest does not impede the effect of the sacrament, just as the sickness of the doctor does not corrupt the power of the medicine. Therefore, although the one doing the work is sometimes unclean, nevertheless the work done is always clean.” (*In sacramento corporis Christi nihil a bono maius, nihil a malo minus perficitur sacerdote . . . quia non inmerito sacerdotis, sed in verbo conficitur creatoris. Non ergo sacerdotis iniquitas effectum impedit sacramenti, sicut nec infirmitas medici virtutem medicinae corrumpit. Quamvis igitur opus operans aliquando sit immundum, semper tamen opus operatum est mundum*; Innocent III, *De sacro altaris mysterio*, bk. 3, chap. 5.)

II. Modern treatises on the sacraments attribute the first formulation of the doctrine of the *opus operatum* in a generic way to the *Sentences* of Peter of Poitiers, a twelfth-century theologian who, owing to his subtlety, was aligned with Peter Abelard, Gilbert of Poitiers, and Peter Lombard among the “labyrinths of France.” A survey of the two passages of the work in which the distinction appears will prove particularly instructive. The first articulation of the doctrine does not, in fact, have to do with the theory of the sacraments but that of the action of demons. “And the devil,” writes Peter in his labyrinthine style,

serves God and God approves the works that he has done, but not the way in which he has done them [*opera eius quae operatur, non quibus operatur*]: the works done, as one is accustomed to saying, not the doing of the works [*opera operata, ut dici solet, non opera operantia*], which are all evil, since they do not proceed from charity. So God approved of the passion of Christ carried out by the Jews, insofar as it was the Jews’ work done [*opus iudaeorum operatum*], but did not approve the Jews’ doing of the work [*opera iudaeorum operantia*] and the actions by which they worked that passion. God is offended by the devil’s action, but not by the act itself; God does not want the devil to do that which God commands him to do in the way he does it. If one reads in the Scriptures that God commands the devil to do something, as is said for example in the Book of Kings (chap. 22) of the deception of Ahab . . . this must not be understood to mean that he commands it as he wants it. Rather, if he wants him to do it, he does not, however, want him to do it as he does it. Even if the devil does what God wants, he does not do it as God wants and for that reason, he is always sinning. (Peter of Poitiers, *Sententiae* I.16)

One can understand why in the modern treatises the attribution of the doctrine of the *opus operatum* to Peter of Poitiers must necessarily remain generic. That the first formulation of the distinction that would furnish the paradigm of the sacramental paradigm of the priest was conceived to define the action of the devil within the providential economy cannot fail to appear embarrassing for historians of theology. It is only in book 5, in fact, in

connection with the effectiveness of baptism, that Peter moves the distinction into the sphere of the theory of the sacraments:

When someone is baptized, it is by the authority of someone: either Christ or the priest. If it is by the authority of the priest and not by the baptism of Christ, then it is the priest who remits the sins. . . . [The purification] is the work of someone, either the one baptizing or the one being baptized. If it is the work of the one baptizing and it is by virtue of charity, then the merit of the baptism belongs to the one baptizing. In the same way he has the merit of the baptismal action [*baptizatione*], in the sense in which *baptizatio* is called the action by which he baptizes, which is a different work from baptism [*baptismus*], since it is a doing of a work [*opus operans*], while baptism is a work done [*opus operatum*], if one can say so. (Peter of Poitiers, *Sententiae* 5.6)

8. It is important to note that both Peter of Poitiers and Innocent III speak of *opus operans* and not of *opus operantis*, as later theologians do. The distinction—in which, as we will see, its novelty consists—does not, that is to say, divide only the subject of the action but also the action itself, considered in one moment as the work of an agent and in another in itself, that is, in its effectiveness.

12. The stakes in the strategy that leads to distinguishing the *opus operatum* from the *opus operans* are clear at this point. It is a matter of separating, in an action, its effective reality from the subject who carries it out (though he cannot, for that reason, be exonerated from all responsibility for it) as much as from the process through which it is accomplished. Let us reflect on the singular status that thus comes to belong to the priestly action. It is split in two: on the one hand, the *opus operatum*, that is, the effects that derive from it and the function that it carries out in the divine economy; on the other, the *opus operans* (or *operantis*), that is, the subjective dispositions and modalities through which the agent calls the action into being. The liturgy as *opus Dei* is the effectiveness that results from the articulation of these two distinct and yet conspiring elements.

In this sense the ethical connection between the subject and his action is broken: what is determinative is no longer the right intention of the agent but only the function that his action carries out as *opus Dei*. Just as the demon's action as *opus operatum* is carried out in the service of God even if it remains evil as *opus operantis*, so the liturgical action of the priest is effective as *opus Dei* even if the unworthy priest is committing a sin. The liturgy thus defines a peculiar sphere of action, in which the mystery paradigm of the Letter to the Hebrews (Christ the high priest's *opus operatum*) and the ministerial paradigm of the letter of Clement (the *opus operantis Ecclesiae*) coincide and are at the same time distinguished. This can happen, however, only at the price of dividing and emptying of its personal content the action of the priest, who, as the "animate instrument" of a mystery that transcends him, exercises an action that is still in some sense his own. In this sense, if on the one hand (with respect to the mystery and the *opus operatum*) he is not a subject but an instrument who in Aquinas's words does not act "by the power of its form," on the other hand (with respect to his ministry) he maintains his specific action, just as the axe, in Aquinas's example, "does not accomplish the instrumental action save by exercising its proper action, that is, by cutting" (*Summa theologiae* III, q. 62, art. 1). *The priest as animate instrument is that paradoxical subject who fulfills the "ministry of the mystery."* Insofar as in him the *opus operantis* can coincide with the *opus operatum* only on condition of being distinguished from it and can be distinguished from it only on condition of disappearing into it, one can say that (in the terminology of speech acts) its felicity is its infelicity and its infelicity is its felicity.

✠ It is significant that the 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei* devotes special attention to the problem of the distinction between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis Ecclesiae* and seeks in every way to minimize the problem of the gap (*discrepantia*) that persists between them. "In the spiritual life," reads the text, "there can be no opposition or discrepancy [*discrepantia vel repugnantia*] between the action of God, who pours forth His grace into men's hearts so that the work of the redemption

may always abide, and the tireless work and collaboration of human beings [*sociam laboriosamque hominis operam*], who must not render vain the gift of God. No more can the efficacy of the external administration of the sacraments, which comes from the rite itself (*ex opere operato*), be opposed to the meritorious action of their ministers of recipients, which we call the agent's action (*opus operantis*). Similarly, no conflict exists between public prayer and prayers in private, between morality and contemplation, between the ascetical life and devotion to the liturgy. Finally, there is no opposition between the jurisdiction and teaching office of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the specifically priestly power exercised in the sacred ministry" (§36; translation altered; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 578).

Moreover, insofar as the text claims several times that, at least as concerns the sacraments, the effectiveness of the cult is produced "first of all and principally from the act itself (*ex opere operato*)" (§27; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 574), it is not clear how one should understand the necessity of the *opus operantis Ecclesiae* that the encyclical is anxious to affirm.

It is possible to recognize here the theological model of that division, and at the same time cooperation, between the necessary activity and initiative of the political militant on the one hand and the dialectical laws of history that guarantee their effectiveness on the other, which has made a lasting mark on praxis in the Marxist tradition.

# Threshold

In perfect consistency with the etymological meaning of the term *leitourgia*, the Church has always emphasized the “public” character of its own liturgy. The piety and private prayers of the faithful are certainly important, but as the encyclical *Mediator Dei* admonishes, they have their proper value insofar as they prepare for participation in the public cult, which has its center in the eucharistic celebration (§66; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 578), and, if separated from this, they are “sterile and deserve to be condemned” (§32; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 576). The definition of the liturgy contained in the encyclical expresses this public character through an image familiar to political historians: the “mystical body” of Christ, constituted by the inseparable union of the society of the faithful and its “Head”: “The sacred liturgy is . . . the public worship . . . rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members” (§20; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 571).

It is this political meaning of the Church as liturgical assembly that Erik Peterson puts at the center of his 1935 book on the angels. “The Christian *ecclesia*,” he writes, is “the assembly of the citizens with full rights [*Vollbürger*] of the heavenly city for the accomplishment of specific cultic acts” (Peterson, 198/108). “The worship of the heavenly Church,” we read a few pages later, “and therefore implicitly too of the earthly Church’s liturgy, which is joined with that of the heavenly, has an original relationship to the political world” (Peterson, 202/112).

The distinction and at the same time the conjunction between heavenly Church and earthly Church corresponds here to the twofold articulation between *opus operatum* and *opus operans*, immanent Trinity and economic Trinity, that we have seen to define the liturgy. The liturgy actualizes the political community between heavenly Church and earthly Church and at the same time the unity of immanent Trinity and economic Trinity in a sacramental praxis. Yet precisely for this reason it is constitutively marked by a duplicity. Insofar as it expresses the operation internal to the very divine life, the economic activity of Christ the “liturgue” and priest and of his mystical body can only be effective *ex opere operato*. And moreover, insofar as it defines the praxis of the Church as political community, there cannot be liturgy without the *opus operans* of its members. “The work of redemption,” claims the encyclical, “which in itself is independent of our will, requires a serious interior effort on our part if we are to achieve eternal salvation” (§31; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 576).

By defining the peculiar operativity of its public praxis in this way, the Church has invented the paradigm of a human activity whose effectiveness does not depend on the subject who sets it to work and nonetheless needs that subject as an “animate instrument” to be actualized and rendered effective. The liturgical mystery, insofar as in it the mystery of the trinitarian economy reaches its actualization, is the mystery of this praxis and this operativity.

## § 2 From Mystery to Effect

I. The term *mystery* is at the center of a reflection on liturgy that has profoundly marked the Church's conception of its activity today. Odo Casel (1886–1948), a Benedictine monk of the Rhineland monastery of Maria Laach, was one of the principal inspirations of what was later to be defined as the “Liturgical Movement” (*liturgische Bewegung*). Already Ildefons Herwegen, named abbot of Maria Laach in 1914, had immediately founded a rereading of the sources of the liturgical tradition, which starting from 1918 was advanced in the publication of two series with the significant titles *Liturgiegeschichtliche Quellen* (Sources for the History of Liturgy) and *Ecclesia orans* (The Praying Church). In 1921 Casel supplemented these two publications with the “Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft” (Yearbook for the Study of Liturgy), which proposed a systematic and at the same time historical study of the Church's worship. In the twenty years that that publication lasted, the “Jahrbuch” became, by its imposing bulk of philological-lexical and theological studies, the organ of what, in the title of a monograph dedicated to Maria Laach, has rightly been defined as a “renewal of the Church from the spirit of liturgy” (Jeggle-Merz). From the perspective of Casel and his followers the liturgy ceases to be the completion of a rite that received its meaning from elsewhere—in faith or in dogmatic theology—and becomes the *locus theologicus* par excellence, from which the Church can alone find its life and its reality. “Christianity,” writes

Casel, “is not a ‘religion’ or a confession in the way the last three centuries would have understood the word: a system of more or less dogmatically certain truths to be accepted and confessed, and of moral commands to be observed or at least accorded recognition. Both elements of course belong to Christianity, intellectual structure and moral law; but neither exhausts its essence” (Casel 1, 35/9). Christianity—such is the thesis that summarizes Casel’s thought—is essentially “mystery,” a liturgical action that each time renders present in ritual form the salvific praxis of Christ, and the worshiping community obtains salvation by entering into contact with this praxis. And it is to oppose the desacralization and rationalization that defines the modern world that Casel undertakes his vindication of mystery.

8. By forcefully affirming the centrality of the mystery-action in the reality of the Church, Casel (and with him the Liturgical Movement) seems to refer implicitly to the ancient axiom that confirms the primacy of liturgy over faith in the tradition of the Church: *legem credendi statuat lex supplicandi* (or, in abbreviated form, *lex orandi-lex credendi*, the law of prayer is the law of faith). As has been written, for Casel, “the authentic liturgical traditions are not simply one among many sources of knowledge of faith, but the *source and central witness* of the life of faith and so of all theology” (Kilmartin, 96–97). And it is certainly not an accident if in the imposing philological labor of his school, the analysis of liturgical texts and sacramentaries comes before that of Scripture or of theological texts in the strict sense. Liturgy predominates over doctrine exactly as the accent falls on praxis rather than theory in contemporary political movements. Given the success of the Liturgical Movement’s theses within the Church, it is not surprising that in his encyclical, Pius XII dedicates an important passage to the refutation of their extreme versions. While forcefully underlining the vital importance of liturgical praxis, the principle according to which the norm of liturgy decides that of faith is exactly reversed: “The sacred liturgy, consequently, does not decide or determine independently and of itself what is of Catholic faith. . . . If one desires to differentiate and describe the relationship between faith and the sacred liturgy in absolute and general terms, it is perfectly correct to say, *lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi*—let the rule of belief determine the rule of prayer” (§48; cf.

Braga and Bugnini, 581). And moreover, what the pope has in mind is, as the rubric of the chapter in question suggests, the “strictest connection between liturgy and dogma” (*arcta connexio liturgiae et dogmatis*; Braga and Bugnini, 580), in which the liturgy “can supply proofs and testimony, quite clearly, of no little value, towards the determination of a particular point of Christian doctrine” (§48; cf. Braga and Bugnini, 581).

2. The first twenty years of the twentieth century were rightly defined as “the age of movements.” Not only do the parties, on the right as much as on the left of the political spectrum, give way to movements (both the workers movements and Fascism and Nazism define themselves as “movements”), but also in the arts, in the sciences, and in every sphere of social life movements are substituted for schools and institutions to such a degree that it is practically impossible to provide a comprehensive list of them (it is significant that when, in 1914, Freud sought a name for his school, he decided in the end on “the psychoanalytic movement”).

A common characteristic of movements is a decided distancing with regard to the historical context in which they are produced and the vision of the world of the epoch and culture to which they are opposed. In this sense the liturgical movement also participates in the same reaction against humanist individualism and the rationalization of the world that defines many movements that followed the First World War. A reading of the first chapter of Casel’s book-manifesto, *Das christliche Kultmysterium* (*The Mystery of Christian Worship*, 1932), entitled “The Mystery and Modern Man,” is particularly instructive from this point of view. Our time, writes Casel, is witnessing the decline of individualism and humanism, which by stripping nature and the world of the divine had believed themselves to have forever dispelled the obfuscation of mystery. In this way, by means of the collapse of rationalist humanism, our time has opened up “a new turning to the mystery” (Casel I, 30/5). The world “becomes for him once more a stage on which God’s drama is being carried out. . . . God’s mystery once again inspires dread, attracts and calls us” (*ibid.*). With a barely veiled allusion to so much that was happening in those years in the secular sphere

and, in particular, to the rediscovery of ceremonials and liturgies in the political sphere, Casel can thus write: "Today the world outside Christianity and the church is looking for mystery; it is building a new kind of rite in which man worships himself. But through all this the world will never reach God" (ibid., 33/7).

3. Casel's strategy was already clearly articulated in the dissertation he defended in 1918 at the University of Bonn under August Brinkmann: *De philosophorum Graecorum silentio mystico* (*On the Mystical Silence of the Greek Philosophers*). Under the appearances of a purely historical-philological study, we find already enunciated here the two theses that will guide his subsequent labors.

The first, which constitutes the theme of the dissertation, is that the pagan mysteries (Eleusian, Orphic, and Hermetic) must not be seen as a secret doctrine, which one could pronounce in words but that one is prohibited to reveal. Such a meaning of the term *mystery*, according to Casel, is late and derives from the influence of the Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic schools. Originally, *mystery* designates a praxis, that of the *drōmena*, the gestures and acts by means of which a divine action is accomplished in time and in the world for human salvation: *silentium mysticum non quaecumque theologiam, sed actiones ritusque sacros texisse* (mystical silence does not conceal any kind of theology, but sacred actions and rites; Casel 2, 19).

The second thesis, which concludes the dissertation in the form of a question, is in reality a programmatic declaration: "Greek philosophy has ceased, but it is not dead. Thus it is possible to ask oneself if Christians took up the Greek mystery-doctrine again and put it back into use and what influence it exercised not only on their philosophy and theology, but also in sacred worship and in their moral precepts (in particular among monks). I propose to treat this argument elsewhere [*qua de re alio loco erit agendum*]" (ibid., 158).

One can say that all of Casel's subsequent work is the patient, methodical, and obstinate carrying out of this program. Through an imposing series of lexical and historical-philological studies, he

seeks to demonstrate the connection of the Christian sacramental liturgy with the pagan mysteries and to show that Christian worship is by nature essentially a “mystery.”

8. The attempt to put the pagan mysteries and Christian liturgy in relation in this way is in truth already implicitly present in the gesture with which Clement of Alexandria opposes the “mysteries of the *logos* (*tou logou ta mystēria*)” to the pagan mysteries (*Exhortation to the Greeks*, chap. 12). At any rate, between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, historians of religion—from Usener to Dieterich, from Reitzenstein to Wilhelm Bousset—had observed and documented beyond any doubt the obvious connection between the salvific experience that is in question in the pagan mysteries and the Christian message. The fact that the claim of this connection would now come from a Benedictine monastery and become widespread within the Church accounts for both the new meaning that it assumes in twentieth-century theology and the polemics that accompany its diffusion. Still in 1944, three years before the Curia would take a position on the theses of the Liturgical Movement with the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, a Jesuit theologian, Hugo Rahner, could write in a lecture on *Pagan Mysteries and Christian Mysteries* that “the matter still is very much under discussion” (Rahner, 152).

Casel’s doctrine can be seen as the attempt to construct a non-Judaic genealogy of Christian liturgy (which in fact, as Werner’s studies show, we know instead to derive in many aspects directly from the synagogue). “Judaism,” he never tires of repeating, “did not know mysteries. . . . The Hebraic religion of the law was not mystical; where mystic ideas appear, as in the prophets, these do not refer to worship. An authentic concept of mystery is found only in Hellenism” (Casel 3, 140). In this sense it is possible that this distancing from the Judaic genealogy may have contained, given its historical context, unconscious anti-Semitic implications (which their author, to be fair, does not seem to have ever expressed).

4. The thesis of the derivation of Christian liturgy from the pagan and late-classical mysteries has given rise to interminable discussions among theologians and historians of liturgy. The lexical studies of Casel and his students on the semantic history

(which they call “theological philology”) of the terms *mysterium*, *sacramentum*, and *leitourgia* show that in the Fathers already between the fourth and fifth centuries there is certainly a clear awareness of the meaning that these terms had in the pagan context. As to the derivation of the Latin term *sacramentum* from the classical oath—which in the figure of the vow implied a consecration and was in this sense present in the mystery-initiations—the polemics, already kindled in Casel’s lifetime, have continued after his death.

The debate over “theological philology” nevertheless risks obscuring a more essential problem, which concerns not the problem of the continuity between pagan mysteries and Christian mysteries so much as that of the very nature of the liturgical mystery. If we want to fully understand what Casel means by mystery, we must interrogate the function that it takes on in his argumentative strategy. What is at stake for Casel, then, in the definition of Christianity as a “mystery”? Why is the genealogical connection with pagan mysteries so decisive for him?

For Casel, *mystery* means essentially “cultic action.” Defining Christianity as a mystery is therefore equivalent for him first of all to affirming that the Church is not simply a community of believers, defined by sharing a doctrine crystallized in a set of dogmas. The Church is defined rather through participation in the mystery of the cultic action: “Yet just as the economy of salvation is not merely teaching, but first and foremost Christ’s saving deed, so, too, the church leads humanity to salvation not merely by word only, but by sacred actions” (Casel I, 32/7).

Christ’s salvation must be made real in us. This does not come about through a mere application, with our behavior purely passive, through a “justification” purely from “faith,” or by an application of the grace of Christ, where we have only to clear things out of the way in a negative fashion to receive it. Rather, what is necessary is a living, active sharing in the redeeming deed of Christ; passive because the Lord makes it act upon us, active because we share in it by a deed of our own. To the action of God upon us (*opus operatum*) responds our cooperation (*opus operantis*), carried out through grace from him. (Ibid., 41–42/14)

This means, if we look closely, that the Church is something like a political community (Casel uses the expression “cultic community”), which is fully accomplished only in the performance of a special action, which is the liturgy. Evoking the ordinary political meaning of the term *leitourgia*, Casel affirms that the two terms *mystery* and *liturgy* mean the same thing but from two different points of view: “*mystery* means the heart of the action, that is to say, the redeeming work of the risen Lord, through the sacred actions he has appointed; *liturgy*, corresponding to its original sense of ‘people’s work,’ ‘service,’ means rather the action of the church in conjunction with this saving action of Christ’s” (ibid., 75/40).

In another text he specifies that “mystery means the divine action [*göttliche Tat*] in the Church, namely objective facts [*objektive Tatsachen*], which happen in and for a community [*Gemeinschaft*] and thus find a supraindividual expression in community service [*Gemeinschaftsdienste*]” (Casel 4, 146). This divine action is effectively present in the liturgical action, which is defined therefore as “the ritual execution [*Vollzug*] of Christ’s redemptive work in and through the Church, that is, the presence of the divine action of salvation [*die Gegenwart göttlicher Heilstat*] under the veil of symbol” (ibid., 145).

8. The centrality of the liturgical mystery’s pragmatic character is affirmed forcefully in one of the first texts published by Casel in the *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft*, “*Actio* in liturgischer Verwendung” (*Actio* in liturgical use). This text is particularly important because it permits us to pose the problem of the relationship between liturgy and law. Through the analysis of a formula contained in the oldest sacramentaries and still in the Roman Missal, Casel shows that the name of the eucharistic celebration was originally *actio*, “action.” At this point Casel mentions the opinion of Baumstark, according to whom the liturgical use of the term derives from Roman law, in which *actio* designated that eminent form of acting that is the *legis actio*, the oath (Baumstark, 38–39). *Actio* here meant the particular performative efficacy of the pronunciation of a ritual formula (and of the gesture that accompanied it), which in the oldest form of the trial, the *legis actio*

*sacramenti*, also included the giving of an oath. Although Honorius of Autun had already noted the analogy between the trial and the mass, writing that “the canon is also called *actio*, because in it there takes place the case between the people and God [*quia causa populi in eo cum deo agitur*]” (c. 577), Casel drops Baumstark’s thesis to suggest that the liturgical use of the term *actio* is rather to be put in relation with Roman sacrificial terminology, where *agere* and *facere* designated the sacrificial praxis. “The designation of the canon as *actio* proves that, at the time of its origin, the ancient and strictly liturgical conception of the *eucharistia* as sacrificial offering was already vibrant. It also furnishes an important index for the evaluation of ancient Christian liturgy, whose content was not an engrossed silence and whose object was not an abstract theological doctrine, but an action, a deed [*Handlung, Tat*]” (Casel 5, 39).

Concerned as always to underline the practical character of the liturgy, Casel does not notice that the analogy with the *legis actio* would have allowed him to understand the peculiar nature of the liturgical action. The efficacy *ex opere operato* that defines it corresponds precisely with the performative efficacy of the pronouncement of the formula of the *actio*, which immediately actualized the juridical consequences contained in the declaration (*uti lingua nuncupassit, ita ius esto*). In both law and liturgy, what is in question is the peculiar performative regime of the efficacy of an *actio*, and our task is precisely to define it.

8. A similar denegation of the quite evident proximity between liturgical effectiveness and law is found in Walter Dürig’s essay on the concept of the pledge in Roman liturgy. The term *pignus*, which in Roman law designates the object that the debtor hands over to the creditor in full possession as a guarantee of payment, is transposed into the liturgical texts in reference to the cross, to relics of the saints, and in particular to the Eucharist, defined as “pledge of redemption.” Just as the pledge constitutes in the hands of the creditor a concrete anticipation of the future payment, so also the cross and the Eucharist anticipate the presence of the eschatological reality. The problem is not whether or not there is a juridical relation at the base of the eucharistic texts on the *pignus* (which Dürig intends precisely to deny: *ibid*, 398), so much as that of the obvious structural analogy between the juridical sphere and the liturgical sphere.

5. If the true reality of the Church is the liturgical mystery and if this is defined by means of the effective presence of the divine redemptive action, then understanding the nature of liturgy will mean understanding the nature and modes of this presence. To this decisive problem, which appears in filigree in all his writings, Casel has dedicated a specific essay, which is entitled precisely *Mysteriengegenwart*, "Mystery-Presence."

According to Casel, the term *mystery-presence* is a tautology because "presence belongs to the essence of mystery" (Casel 4, 145). This defines "the most proper nucleus of Christian liturgy," which is nothing other than the presentification (*repraesentatio* in the literal sense of "rendering newly present") of the *Heilstat*, of Christ's salvific action and therefore first of all of Christ himself. Casel cites in this connection the passage from Ambrose's *De mysteriis* in which this presence is affirmed as such: "Believe, therefore, that the presence of the Divinity is there [in the sacrament]. If you believe the working, do you not believe the presence? Where would the working come from, if the presence did not precede it?" (*On the Mysteries* 8.159–60/48).

The presence that is in question in the mystery is not, however, the historical presence of Jesus on Golgotha but a presence of a particular type, which solely applies to the redemptive action of Christ (and therefore Christ insofar as he is redeemer). Christ has in fact appeared to the Church in a twofold figure: "as the historical man Jesus, whose divinity was still veiled . . . and as *kyrios Christos*, who through his passion has been eternally transfigured at the right hand of the Father" (Casel 4, 155). In the liturgical mystery "only the actions that Christ achieved as redeemer" are present, "not the mere historical circumstances, which are devoid of value for the *oikonomia*" (*ibid.*, 174). This means that in the eucharistic sacrifice, "Christ does not die anew in a historical-real sense; rather his salvific action becomes sacramentally, *in mysterio*, *in sacramento*, present and in this way accessible to those who are seeking salvation" (*ibid.*).

It remains the case that, for Casel, this presence is, however, effective (*wirklich*) and not simply efficacious (*wirksam*) (*ibid.*,

159). Commenting on Augustine's saying *Semel immolatus est in semetipso Christus, et tamen quotidie immolatur in sacramento* (Christ was sacrificed once in himself, and yet he is sacrificed daily in the Sacrament [qtd. in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica* III, q. 83, art. 1]), he writes that if the *immolatio* that takes place on the altar is not real, but sacramental, nevertheless and precisely for that reason "it is not a mere representation [*Darstellung*]<sup>1</sup>—in that case it would not be a sacrament—but an effectiveness under the sign [*Wirklichkeit unter dem Zeichen*]. In a word: *sacramentum, mysterium*" (ibid., 182).

For this reason, according to Casel, Protestantism, which denies that Christ's sacrifice is effectively present in the Eucharist, destroys "the most proper force of the Catholic liturgy, which is that of being the objective mystery, full of effectiveness [*wirklichkeitserfülltes*], of Christ's salvific action" (ibid., 200).

6. To explain the singular modality of presence that he defines as *Mysteriengegenwart*, Casel refers in his essay to a tradition of the Greek Fathers, from Cyril of Jerusalem to John Chrysostom, who interpret this presence in a pneumatic sense. What is present in the mysteries is "the Pneuma of Christ, or more precisely, the pneumatic Lord," who constantly acts through them in the Church (ibid., 162). A similar spiritual terminology, which has its place and its proper sense in trinitarian theology, nevertheless does not say anything as to the mode of this mystical presence, to what we can define as an "ontology of the mystery." The Latin Fathers and the scholastics had given terminological expression to this problem by means of a peculiar vocabulary, which designated the mode of the presence and operativity of Christ in the sacraments. I have in mind the term *effectus*. It is with the semantic history of this term in Christian liturgy that we must therefore contend.

At the end of the essay on the *Mysteriengegenwart*, the term *effectus* makes its appearance at a crucial point, which has to do with the interpretation of Aquinas's eucharistic doctrine. With regard to the *immolatio* that takes place in the Eucharist, Aquinas in fact distinguishes two modes or senses in which this term is

said. In the first sense it is a matter of an image that represents the passion of Christ (*imago quaedam . . . repraesentativa passionis Christi, quae est vera eius immolatio*); in the second, by contrast, the term designates the *effectus* of Christ's passion, "because, to wit, by this sacrament, we are made partakers of the fruit of our Lord's Passion" (*Summa theologica* III, q. 83, art. 1; cf. Casel 4, 181). Casel cites other passages from the *Summa* in which the term *effectus* designates the effective reality of the sacrament, considered either with respect to representation (*id ex quo habet effectum, scilicet et ipse Christus contentus et passio eius repraesentata*) or else with respect to the use and goal of the sacrament (*id per quod habet effectum, scilicet usus sacramenti*) (*ibid.*, 184). According to Casel, the term *effectus* names this effective unity of image and presence in the liturgical mystery, in which the presence is real in its operativity, that is, as *Heilstat*, salvific action: "mystery-presence means a real presence, but a reality of a special type. A reality, to the extent to which it corresponds solely to the goal of the sacrament, which is that of permitting the faithful to participate, for their salvation, in the life of Christ as savior" (Casel 4, 191).

In a brief but dense essay on the *Roman Prayers* published in the "Jahrbuch" three years later, Casel returns to the concept of *effectus* to confirm that it does not mean efficacy (*Wirkung*) but effectiveness (*Wirklichkeit*). From this perspective he analyzes a series of texts, among which he singles out a passage from a sermon of Leo the Great that furnishes him with the essential documentation for his argument: "it was necessary that what had been promised in a figurative mystery [*figurato promissa mysterio*] be fulfilled in a manifest effectiveness [*manifesto impleantur effectu*], that the true lamb take away the signified lamb [*ovem significativam ovis vera removeret*], and that the variety of the victims be brought to completion through one sole sacrifice. . . . In order that the shadows may cede place to the body and the images pass away with the presence of truth, the ancient observance is abolished by the new sacrament, the sacrifice is sacrificed, and the legal holiday is fulfilled in the very instant in which it is transformed" (Casel 6, 38).

It seems difficult to deny that in this passage *effectus* does not designate simply the *Wirkung*, the effects of grace produced by the sacramental rite, but even and above all the *Wirklichkeit*, the reality in its effective fullness. “*Effectus*,” concludes Casel, “does not mean here the effect [*Wirkung*], but the full effectiveness [*die volle Wirklichkeit*], in opposition to the incomplete and exterior appearance” (ibid., 38). This is what corresponds invisibly to the exterior action, in which “all that was here represented symbolically becomes a reality, but a reality of an invisible and pneumatic type, which can thus also become productive of the effects of grace” (ibid., 45).

Let us reflect, however, on the peculiar character of this mystery “reality,” which coincides neither with the presence of the historical Christ in flesh and bone (*sicut corpus in loco*) nor with his simple symbolic representation, as in a theater. The liturgical mystery is not limited to representing the passion of Christ, but in representing it, it realizes its effects, so that one can say that the presence of Christ in the liturgy coincides totally with its effectiveness. But this implies, as we will see, a transformation of ontology, in which substantiality and effectiveness will seem to be identified.

8. By defining the effectiveness of the Christian sacrifice in this way, Casel takes up the scholastic doctrine of the difference between the sacraments of the *vetus lex* (old law), which had a purely ceremonial and prophetic character and did not produce a salvific effect, and those instituted by Christ, which by bringing to completion what the Judaic *sacra* were limited to announcing, performatively achieve what they figure (*efficiunt quod figurant*). In this connection Casel speaks of an “image full of effectiveness” (*wirklichkeitgefülltes Bild*). In this sense his labors on the liturgy can be set alongside the studies on the image as living reality or *Pathosformel* charged with effectiveness that Ludwig Klages and Aby Warburg were carrying out in different circles in those same years.

7. Walter Diezinger has dedicated a monograph to the term *effectus* in Catholic liturgy. While presenting itself as an

investigation of historical semantics, it announces in the preface “an *Auseinandersetzung* with Odo Casel’s doctrine of the mysteries” (Diezinger, 9), which has to do precisely with the article just cited. Diezinger goes back over the texts cited by Casel and reads, alongside these, a vast number of liturgical documents. His goal is to show that if in some, as in the passage cited from Leo the Great, the meaning of *Wirklichkeit* seems indubitable, in others what seems to be in question is instead something like a *Wirkung*.

Diezinger’s monograph shows in any case that the term *effectus*—whatever its exact meaning may be—develops an absolutely central function in liturgical texts, which is precisely what we must understand. The debate over the polysemy of the term *effectus* actually leaves in the shadows an otherwise decisive question, and that is whether a transformation might not by chance be hidden precisely in the semantic oscillation between “effect” and “effectiveness”—a transformation that, beyond the semantic history of the term, instead has to do with the history of ontology, the very modality of being that the term seeks to name. The opposition between *Wirkung* and *Wirklichkeit*, effect and effectiveness, is in fact not semantic (the two terms share the same root and the same etymology) so much as ontological. Rather, it is perhaps not an opposition that is at stake but an indetermination, which corresponds to a decisive mutation of the very conceptuality of ontology. While in the vocabulary of classical ontology being and substance are considered independently of the effects that they can produce, in effectiveness being is inseparable from its effects; it names being insofar as it is effective, produces certain effects, and at the same time is determined by them. Effectiveness is, that is to say, the new ontological dimension that is affirmed first in the liturgical sphere and is then to be extended progressively until in modernity it coincides with being as such.

Understanding the meaning of *effectus* in liturgical texts will thus mean being confronted with a transformation in the conception of being that intimately concerns us. It is perhaps the case that we do not have any representation of being today other than effectiveness, and it is this dimension that is in question in terms

like *Wirklichkeit*, *realitas*, “reality,” as much as in the definition of *Dasein* in §9 of *Being and Time* as that entity whose essence “lies [liegt] in its existence” (Heidegger 4, 42/67).

8. An examination of the occurrences of the term *effectus* in the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* proves particularly instructive from this perspective. In contrast with the verb *efficio*, from which it derives etymologically, the term *effectus* appears in Latin relatively late (around AD 45). But after the first occurrences (in Cicero and Varro), it is precisely the semantic oscillation between effect and effectiveness that proves to be an index of a mutation that has to do with the very ontological categories through which reality is conceived. Contrary to Diezinger, who seeks very carefully to keep *Wirkung* and *Wirklichkeit* distinct, the compilers of the entry in fact warn that it is impossible to separate with certainty the meaning of effectiveness (*actus efficiendi*) from that of effect of the act (*actus fructus*): *et est saepe in arbitrio interpretantis singulos locos, utram significationem potius accipiat*.

The initial two meanings registered in the *Thesaurus* may seem banal at first glance. The first is Cicero’s affirmation according to which *effectus eloquentiae audientium approbatio* (*Tusculan Disputations* 2.3). This does not mean “the effect of eloquence is the approval of the listeners,” which would be a truism, but as results unequivocally from the context, “the reality, the effectiveness of eloquence lies in the approval of the listeners” (that is, in the effect that it gives rise to). That is to say, Cicero has in mind something, a mode of being, in which reality and effect are indiscernible.

The second occurrence is in Varro (*On the Latin Language* 9.39). Varro here observes that, in comparing words, one must not be concerned only with what they have in common in form (*quid habeat in figura simile*), but also *in eo quem habeat effectum*, which does not mean “the effect that they have” so much as rather (as implied in the example that follows) “the effectiveness of their use.”

That *effectus* does not designate simply the effect, but a special modality of something’s being, is evident in the syntagma *esse in*

*effectu*, which one comes across frequently starting with Cicero. Particularly significant from this perspective is a passage (*De finibus* 3,32) in which unjust actions (*peccata*) are distinguished according to their being *in effectu* (as in mistreating one's parents or profaning temples) or their being *sine effectu* as in being sad or experiencing an erotic desire, *in libidine esse*). Here also the translation "to have or not have effects" would be manifestly insufficient: what is in question is the ontological status of the act, whether the effectiveness that belongs to it is full or somehow lacking, depending on whether one is dealing with an action or a state.

The properly ontological meaning of the term *effectus* becomes clear later in a series of passages in which it expresses a particular declension of the Aristotelian *energeia* in its relation to *dynamis*. In this sense the term appears in Calcidius's commentary on the *Timaeus*, in relation to the definition of material. Material (*silva*, as Calcidius calls it) is by its nature deprived of qualities and formal determinations (*sine qualitate ac sine figura et sine specie*) and is moreover never given if not accompanied by these latter. And just as we can remove from it in thought those qualities without which it does not exist, so also can we attribute to it the possession of them *non effectu sed possibilitate* (Calcidius 337). *Effectus* is here opposed to possibility but not exactly as *energeia* is opposed to *dynamis* in Aristotle. Calcidius takes care to specify that possibility or potential must be understood here not in the sense in which one says that the seed contains in itself the potential of the plant but in which one says bronze has a potential insofar as it can become a statue through the operation of an external (*extrinsecus*) agent. That is to say, *effectus* names not simply being-at-work (*energeia*) but the operation that actualizes a potential from the outside and in this sense renders it effective.

One can thus understand why Quintilian, in a text that was to exercise no small influence on Christian authors, can distinguish between arts *in actu* (or *in agendo*), like dance, which has its end in itself and does not leave behind any work once the act is ended (*nihilque post actum operis relinquit*), and arts *in effectu*,

like painting, which reaches its end in a work (*operis . . . consummatione finem accipit* [*Instituto Oratoria* 2:18.1–2]). More than the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis*, which has its *telos* in itself, and *poiēsis*, which has an external end (a distinction that would here be out of place, because for Aristotle a *technē-ars* can in no case be defined as a *praxis*: *anankē tēn technēn poiēseōs all'ou praxeōs einai* [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a17]), what is in question here is the different ontological status, the different mode of presence that belongs to due species of arts. While the *energeia* in dance is of the order of *actus* (*in actu posita*), that of painting is of the order of *effectus*, in the operation of which it is rendered effective, is given reality and consistency in an *opus*—considered, however, not in itself, but first of all as *effectus* of an *operatio*.

For this reason Ambrose, taking up the passage of Quintilian in the *Hexameron* (I, 5.17) in connection with the divine creation of the world (probably through the mediation of Basil), develops it, in his already fully liturgical vocabulary, by distinguishing between *artes actuosae*, which “relate to the movement of the body or to the sound of the voice” and in which nothing remains after the operation, and those arts, like architecture and weaving, which *cessante quoque operationis officio, operis munus adpareat . . . ut operatori operis sui testimonium suffragetur* (even when the craftsman’s office has ceased, still exhibit his skill, so that testimony is presented of the craftsman’s own work). Only in appearance does Ambrose here seem to be aiming at a primacy of the work. The syntagma *operis munus*—not the work, but the function of the work—put in correspondence with the *operationis officium*, the action conceived as an “office,” and the reference to the craftsman show that in truth he is moving in an ontological dimension that has nothing to do with that of Aristotle. What is in question is not the mode of being and the permanence of a form and a substance (that is, of a being that, in Aristotelian terms, “is what it was”) but a dislocation of being into the sphere of *praxis*, in which being is what it does, is its operativity itself.

It is significant that the divine creation itself can in this way be presented through the vocabulary of *officium* and *munus*. The

work, which was in Aristotle the paradigm of being, is here only the proof and the effect of a working (*est enim hic mundus divinae specimen operationis, quia dum opus videtur, praefertur operator* [this world is an example of the workings of God, because, while we observe the work, the Worker is brought before us]). The ontological status of the liturgical act, of the *opus Dei*, in which being and praxis, effectiveness and effect, operation and work, *opus operatum* and *opus operans* are inseparably intertwined, here has its obscure precursor.

8. In reality, the paradigm of action that is in question here is much closer than it seems to that of the *artes actuosae*, like dance and theater. In a passage from the *De finibus* (3.7.24), which contains perhaps the most precise definition of effectiveness, Cicero, comparing the *officium* of wisdom to the gestures and movements of the actor and the dancer, writes that in these latter, “its end, being the actual exercise of the art, is contained within the art itself, and is not something extraneous to it [*in ipsa insit, non foris petatur extremum, id est artis effectio*].” The end here is not an external work (as in *poiēsis*), but nor does it coincide, as it might seem at first glance, with the action itself (as in *praxis*). In fact, it only coincides with the act to the extent to which it is the execution (*effectio*) of an art. What is decisive here is that it is a specifically artistic operation (theatrical or choral) that furnishes a new ontological-practical paradigm, that is to say, that what is in question is not an ethical paradigm, but a particular technical paradigm. While Aristotle in fact considered the work (*ergon*) as the *telos* of the artisan or artist’s *poiēsis*, here, by means of the paradigm of performative arts like dance and theater, which are by definition without a work, the *telos* is no longer the work, but the *artis effectio* (execution of the art).

9. It is from this semantic constellation that an ontological paradigm is progressively elaborated among the Christian authors in which the decisive characteristics of being are no longer *energeia* and *entelecheia* but effectiveness and effect. It is from this perspective that one must consider the appearance in the Fathers, around the middle of the third century, of the terms *efficacia* and *efficientia*, closely linked to *effectus* and used in a technical sense

to translate (and betray) (*tradurre [e tradire]*) the Greek *energeia*. Thus Rufinus can write: *aliud est possibilitatem esse in aliquo, aliud efficaciam vel efficientiam, quos Graeci dynamin et energiean vocant* (it is one thing for there to be possibility in something, another for there to be *efficacia* or *efficientia*, which the Greeks call *dynamin* and *energiean* [in his translation of Origen's *Commentary on Romans* 8.2]). That Rufinus means by this term simply effectiveness is proved beyond any doubt by subsequent passages, in which *efficacia* and *efficientia* are glossed *hoc est re ipsa atque effectu* and an example is given in the work of the blacksmith or of the one who *effectu operis agit*, renders his work effective (literally, "acts with the effectiveness of the work, with its 'operativity'"). The thing and the work, considered inseparably in their effectiveness and in their function: this is the new ontological dimension that is substituted for the Aristotelian *energeia*. And it is interesting to note that before finding its canonical translation as *potentia-actualitas*, the couple *dynamis-energeia* had been rendered by the Latin Fathers as *possibilitas-efficacia* (*effectus*).

A gloss on the adjective *efficax* clearly expresses the semantic sphere that is in question here: *efficax dicitur quasi effectum capiens* (*Gramm.*, suppl. 74, 23). What is effective is not so much what produces an effect as what "takes effect," is given effectiveness—that is, exists in the mode of *effectus*. It is in this sense that in the Vulgate of Hebrews 4:12 Jerome renders the text's *energēs* with *efficax*: *vivus est enim sermo Dei et efficax et penetrabilior omni gladio* (the Word of God is living and active, able to penetrate more than any sword). And that this effectiveness implies, as *effectus* already did in Calcidius, a divine or human operation, and not simply an immanent natural process, is obvious in those passages in which the term *efficientia* is opposed to *natura*: *sit . . . in eo efficientia potius quam natura sapientiae* (in him there is effectiveness rather than a wise nature; Hilary of Poitiers, *In Evangelium Matthaei Commentarius* II.2).

It is in Augustine (*De gratia Christi et peccato originalis* I.4.5) that we find confirmed with perfect awareness the pertinence of *effectus* to the sphere of ontology: *posse in natura, velle in arbitrio*,

*esse in effectu* (the “ability” we place in our nature, the “volition” in our will, and the “actuality” in the effect). Let us linger over this triple affirmation, which seems to have almost the form of a theory but, restored to its context, permits us to understand and, so to speak, to follow at close range the transformation of ontology that was to be carried out in the Christian sphere. The phrase is not Augustine’s but is contained in a citation from Pelagius, whose opinion Augustine refers to in order to refute it. “We distinguish,” writes Pelagius in his impassioned defense of the human possibility not to sin, “three things, arranging them in a certain graduated order. We put in the first place ‘ability’ [*posse*]; in the second, ‘volition’ [*velle*]; and in the third, ‘actuality’ [*esse*]. The ‘ability’ we place in our nature, the ‘volition’ in our will, and the ‘actuality’ in the effect [*esse in effectu*].” It is obvious that in Pelagius the three elements still articulate an ontological gradation in the Aristotelian sense, which corresponds to the passage from the mode of being of potentiality (*posse*, which according to Pelagius belongs exclusively to God), through the will (*velle*), to the act (*esse*, which here significantly has its place in effectiveness, *in effectu*). But when Augustine summarizes his adversary’s theses, the ontological conceptuality gives way to a practical conceptuality, within which *esse* is already synonymous with “acting”: *Nam cum [Pelagius] tria distinguat . . . possibilitatem, voluntatem, actionem* ([Pelagius] posits and distinguishes three faculties . . . capacity, volition, and action; 1.3.4).

Here the transformation of the ontological paradigm that is already a *fait accompli* clearly shows its strength: being coincides without remainder with effectiveness, *in the sense that it does not simply exist but must be effectuated and actualized*. What is decisive is no longer the *work* as a stable dwelling in presence but *operativity*, understood as a threshold in which being and acting, potential and act, working and work, efficacy and effect, *Wirkung* and *Wirklichkeit* enter into a reciprocal tension and tend to become undecidable. This tension and this undecidability define the liturgical mystery that the Church recognizes as its most proper and highest task.

8. Nothing better illustrates the new meaning that *energeō* and *energeia* are acquiring and will acquire with ever greater clarity in Christian literature than the Pauline use of the terms. While *energeia* and *dynamis* in Aristotle designate a diverse and correlated mode of existing and being present (“*Energeia* is”; *Metaphysics* 1048a32), in Paul (and in his Latin translators) *energeia* indicates not a mode of being but rather the effectuation of a potency, the operation through which it receives reality and produces determinate effects. From this perspective God is defined twice as the principle that renders everything effective and real (*ho theos ho energōn ta panta en pasin*; 1 Corinthians 12:4) and that has rendered effective the “potency of his great power” (*kata tēn energeian tou kratous tēs ischyos, hēn enērgēsen en tōi Christōi*; Ephesians 1:19–20). Particularly significant in this sense is the frequent use of the syntagma *kata tēn energeian tēs dynameōs*, “according to the working of his potency” (Ephesians 1:20, 3:7, 4:16; Philippians 3:21). It is not surprising that in all these cases, Jerome made use of the terms *operare* (*qui operatur omnia in omnibus*) and *operatio* (*secundum operationem potentiae*) in his translation.

10. The place where the ontology of effectiveness finds its complete expression is the theory of the sacrament as sign, elaborated by the scholastics from Berengar of Tours and Hugh of St. Victor up to Aquinas. According to this theory, what defines the sacraments is their being at once a sign and the cause of that of which they are a sign. It is not surprising that in order to characterize this special performativity of the sacrament, the theologians have recourse to the vocabulary of effectiveness. “The sacrament,” one reads in an anonymous thirteenth-century *Summa sententiarum*, “is not only a sign of something sacred, but is also efficacy.” Or in the formula that Aquinas cites as canonical, the sacraments *efficiunt quod figurant*, effectuate what they signify.

The paradigm of this effectiveness of the sacrament is the performativity of Christ’s words that is at the center of the eucharistic liturgy. In this sense two passages from Ambrose are fundamental. In them the word of Christ is defined by means of its effective or operative character (for this purpose, Ambrose coins the adjective *operatorius*, which is not found before him; cf. Pépin, 333), and

this effectiveness of the word defines in its turn the performativity of the sacrament. In the first passage (*De fide* 4.7), citing Hebrews 4:12, Ambrose translates with the adjective *operatorius* the word *energēs*, with which the author of the letter defined the word of God: *Sed non sermo noster operatur, solum est verbum Dei, quod nec prolativum est, nec quod endiatheton dicunt: sed quod operatur et vivit et sanat. Vis scire quale verbum? Audi dicentem: "vivum est enim verbum Dei et validum atque operatorium et acutum."* (But the words we speak have no direct efficacy in themselves; it is the Word of God alone, which is neither an utterance, nor an *endiatheton*, as they call it, but works efficaciously, is living, and has healing power. Would you know what is the nature of the Word—hear the Scriptures. "For the Word of God is living and mighty.") In the second passage (*On the Sacraments* 4.15) the "operatorious" character of Christ's word is evocated to explain the efficacy of the formula of eucharistic consecration: *Quis est sermo Christi? Nempe is, quo facta sunt omnia. Iussit dominus, factum est caelum; iussit dominus, facta est terra; iussit dominus, facta sunt maria; iussit dominus, omnis creatura generata est. Vides ergo quam operatorius sermo sit Christi. Si ergo tanta vis est in sermone domini Iesu, ut inciperent esse quae non erant, tanto magis operatorius est, ut sint, quae erant et in aliud commutentur.* (What is the word of Christ? That, to be sure, whereby all things are made. The Lord commanded, and the earth was made; the Lord commanded, and the seas were made; the Lord commanded, and every creature was produced. You see, therefore, how effective is the word of Christ. If, therefore, there is such power in the word of the Lord Jesus, that the things which were not began to be, how much more is it effective, that things previously existing should, without ceasing to exist, be changed into something else?)

The effectiveness of the liturgical action coincides here with the performativity of Christ's word. And it is striking that what modern linguistics defines as the structural characteristic of performative verbs becomes fully intelligible on the level of the effective ontology that is in question in the sacramental liturgy (and probably derives from it). That words act, carrying out what they

signify, implies that the being that they bring about is purely effective.

II. The decisive characteristic of the new effective ontology in this sense is operativity, to which the coinage of the adjective *operatorius* on the part of Ambrose and, even earlier, the enormous diffusion of the term *operatio* (extremely rare in classical Latin, with seven total occurrences registered in the *Thesaurus*) both testify. Classical Latin knew the adjective *operativus* to designate the efficacy of a drug. That now the neologism *operatorius* in Ambrose instead acquires an ontological meaning is obvious, beyond the two passages already cited on the divine Word, in the introduction of his *Hexameron*, which pronounces an unheard-of thesis about the history of philosophy: "Still others . . . like Aristotle . . . postulate two principles, matter and form, and along with these a third principle which is called 'efficient,' to which effective operation belongs [*dua principia ponerent, materiem et speciem et tertium cum his, quod operatorium dicitur, cui suppeteret . . . efficere*]" (*Exameron* I.I.I).

It is not clear which Aristotelian concept Ambrose is referring to, but it is certain that *operatorium* here designates a third thing between material and form and therefore between potential and act. It is in this sense that both Ambrose and, after him, Augustine and Isidore most often use the expression *operatoria virtus* (or *operatoria potentia*), referring to the divine potency. Scholars have asked which Greek equivalent Ambrose could have had in mind for his neologism: *energētikon*, as Albert Blaise suggests, or, as Jean Pépin maintains, *poiētikon* (this sense is found in Philo, in the syntagma *poiētikē dynamis*; Pépin, 338–39). In any case the reference to Aristotle and the connection to potential show that Ambrose has in mind an ontological dimension that is not simply potential nor simply actual but is rather an *operatoria virtus*, that is, a potential that is given reality through its own operation.

It is from this perspective that it is necessary to consider the diffusion of the word *operatio* in patristic terminology. Particularly significant is its occurrence in trinitarian theology, in which it

designates the Logos as an operation internal to the divine being. “To be,” writes Marius Victorinus,

is the Father, [and] “to act” is the Son. . . . Certainly “to be” itself has innate action within [*habet quidem ipsum quod est esse intus insitam operationem*]; for without motion, that is, without action, what is life or what is understanding? . . . For with the appearance of action, it both is and is called action, and it both is and is regarded as self-begetting. Thus therefore, that itself which is “to act” has also “to be” itself [*sic igitur id ipsum quod est operari et ipsum esse habet*]; but, rather, it does not have it; for “to act” is itself “to be”—for they are simultaneous and simple [*ipsum enim operari esse est, simul et simplex*]. (Victorinus, 196/94–95)

In this extraordinary passage the new ontological paradigm finds perhaps its fullest formulation: being contains within itself an operation, is this operation, and at the same time is distinguished from it, as the Son is distinguished and at the same time is indiscernible from the Father. It is not being in action but *ipsum enim operari esse est*; operativity itself is being and being is in itself operative.

8. It is significant from this perspective that the term *operatio* is technicized to designate the operativity of the liturgical action, distinct from the simple *opus* in which it is materialized. As Ambrose can write with reference to baptism (*On the Sacraments* 1.15): “The work is one thing, the working another [*aliud opus, aliud operatio*]. The water is the work, the working is of the Holy Spirit.” While classical ontology put the accent on the work rather than on the operation that produces it, it is the superiority of the operation over the work that defines the new ontological paradigm. Contemporaneously, the same term, *operatio*, becomes specialized to mean the operativity of the trinitarian economy. In the letter from the Arian Candidus to Marius Victorinus already cited, Jesus Christ proceeds from God “not by begetting, but by operation” [*neque generatione a deo, sed operatione a deo*], and “he is in the Father and the Father is in him and both are one according to act [*secundum operationem et in patre est ipse et in ipso pater est*]” (Victorinus, 122/55–56). In the same sense the Son is defined by Candidus as *effectus* and *opus* of the Father’s will.

Certainly the anti-Arian orthodoxy will insist instead on the thesis according to which the Son coincides with the very will of the Father and, for that reason, cannot be said to be “effectuated” (*effectum*) by the latter. Nevertheless, beyond the difference that separates the two doctrines, it is significant that in both cases the presupposed ontology is an energetic-operative ontology, in which the divine being is hypostatized, is actualized in the Son.

12. Aquinas’s most original contribution to the doctrine of sacramental effectiveness has to do with the concept of cause. The Aristotelian tradition distinguished four types of cause: final, efficient, formal, and material. To explain the special efficacy of the sacraments, Aquinas adds to these a fifth, which in truth is presented as a specification of the efficient cause and which he defines as “instrumental cause” (*causa* or *agens instrumentale*).

What defines the instrumental cause is its twofold action, insofar as it acts according to its nature only insofar as it is moved by a principal agent, which uses it as instrument. “An instrument has a twofold action; one is instrumental, in respect of which it works not by its own power but by the power of the principal agent [*non in virtute propria, sed in virtute principalis agentis*]: the other is its proper action, which belongs to it in respect of its proper form: thus it belongs to an axe to cut asunder by reason of its sharpness, but to make a couch, insofar as it is the instrument of an art” (*Summa theologica* III, q. 62, art. 1). The two actions, while distinct, coincide perfectly: the axe “does not accomplish the instrumental action save by exercising its proper action: for it is by cutting that it makes a couch [*scindendo enim facit lectum*]” (*ibid.*).

It is in this way that God makes use of the sacraments: “The principal agent of justification is God, who in himself has no need for instruments; but, in accordance with the human being who must be saved . . . he makes use of sacraments as instruments of justification” (*Scriptum super sententiis* IV, 32). And both the sacrament (thus the baptismal water, which “in respect of its proper power, cleanses the body, and thereby, inasmuch as it is the instrument of the Divine power, cleanses the soul”; *Summa theologica*

III, q. 62, art. 1) and the priest who administers the sacrament (*eadem ratio est ministri et sacramenti*, q. 64, art. 1).

It might be surprising that Aquinas was able to think the mystery of the liturgical action by means of a humble and quotidian category. But it is precisely the paradigm of instrumentality (that is, of something whose own action is always also the action of another) that allows Aquinas to define the effective nature of the sacraments, as “signs that effect what they signify.” “The principal cause cannot properly be called a sign of its effect [*signum effectus*], even though the latter be hidden and the cause itself sensible and manifest. But an instrumental cause, if manifest, can be called a sign of a hidden effect [*signum effectus occulti*], for this reason, that it is not merely a cause but also in a measure an effect insofar as it is moved by the principal agent. And in this sense the sacraments of the New Law are both cause and signs. Hence, too, is it that, to use the common expression, ‘they effect what they signify’ [*efficiunt quod figurant*]” (ibid., q. 62, art. 1, sol. 1).

Let us reflect on the paradoxical nature of this cause that is at the same time an effect and that solely and precisely as effect carries out its principal action (justification). The instrumental cause is not, therefore, a simple specification of the Aristotelian efficient cause but a new element, which subverts the very distinction of cause and effect on which the four Aristotelian causes are founded. In the horizon of a totally operative and effective ontology, the cause is cause insofar as it is effect, and the effect is effect insofar as it is cause.

13. It is this instrumental character of the priest as minister of the sacraments that allows us to understand in what sense theologians can define the priestly function as a “taking the place of Christ” (*sacerdotes vicem gerunt Christi*; Durand, bk. 1, 169) or “works in Christ’s person” (*sacerdos novae legis in persona ipsius [Christi] operatur*; *Summa theologica* III, q. 22, art. 4).

Here it is not a matter of a figure of juridical representation so much as, so to speak, a constitutive vicariousness, which concerns

the priest's ontological nature and renders indifferent the accidental qualities of the individual who exercises the ministry.

A minister is of the nature of an instrument. . . . An instrument acts not by reason of its own form, but by the power of the one who moves it. Consequently, whatever form or power an instrument has, in addition to that which it has as an instrument, is accidental to it: for instance, that a physician's body, which is the instrument of his soul, wherein is his medical art, be healthy or sickly; or that a pipe, through which water passes, be of silver or lead. Therefore the ministers of the Church can confer the sacraments, though they be wicked. (ibid., q. 64, art. 5)

The phrase "to act in his place" (*fare le veci*) is here to be taken literally: there is not an originary place of priestly praxis, but this is always constitutively an "alteration" (*vece*); it is something "done" or "acted out" and never a substance. The one in whose "stead" (*vece*) the function is carried out in his turn takes the place of another and precisely this constitutive vicariousness defines the "function." *Not only does "functioning" always imply an alterity in whose name the "function" is carried out, but the very being that is here in question is factual and functional—it refers each time to a praxis that defines and actualizes it.*

By means of the paradigm of vicariousness and instrumental cause, the principle—one which will find its broadest application in public law—is introduced into ethics according to which the moral or physical characteristics of the agent are indifferent to the validity and effectiveness of his or her action. "He who approaches a sacrament, receives it from a minister of the Church, not because he is such and such a man, but because he is a minister of the Church [*non in quantum est talis persona, sed in quantum est Ecclesiae minister*]" (ibid., art. 6). The distinction between the *opus operans*, which can at times be impure (*aliquando immundum*) and the *opus operatum*, which *semper est mundum* (is always pure; Durand, bk. 1, 245) here has its foundation. But in this way the action becomes indifferent to the subject who carries it out and the subject becomes indifferent to the ethical quality of his action.

14. If we turn now to the thesis of Casel from which we began, we can only note its exactness: *effectus* in liturgical language means *Wirklichkeit*, an eminent mode of reality and presence. This mode of presence is nevertheless indiscernible from its effects and its actualization—it is, in the sense we have seen, operativity and praxis. From this perspective it is the very essence of the liturgical mystery that is clarified: the mystery is the effect; what is mysterious is effectiveness, insofar as in it being is resolved into praxis and praxis is substantiated into being. *The mystery of the liturgy coincides totally with the mystery of operativity.* In conformity with the indetermination of potency and act, of being and praxis, which is here in question, this coincidence is operative, in the sense that in it a decisive transformation in the history of ontology is carried out: the passage from *energeia* to effectiveness.

In this ontological dimension the connection between *mysterium* and *oikonomia* that defines the Trinity also reaches a point of clarity: there is a liturgical mystery because there is an economy of the divine being. In the words of a modern theologian, the liturgy is not a third level of the mystery, after the mystery of the intradivine economy and that of the historical economy: the liturgical mystery is the indissoluble unity of the first two (Kilmartin, 196–97). The sacramental celebration only causes the divine economy to be commemorated and rendered each time newly *effective*. *There is an oikonomia—that is, an operativity—of the divine being: this and nothing else is the mystery.*

One can say then that what is at stake in both the conception of the Trinity as an economy and that of the liturgy as a mystery is the constitution of an ontology of the *effectus*, in which potency and act, being and acting are distinct and, at the same time, articulated through a threshold of indiscernibility. To what extent this effective ontology, which has progressively taken the place of classical ontology, is the root of our conception of being—to what extent, that is to say, we do not have at our disposal any experience of being other than operativity—this is the hypothesis that all genealogical research on modernity will have to confront.

15. Let us try to translate this new ontological paradigm into the conceptuality of classical ontology. Perhaps nowhere else is the transformation that this latter undergoes so evident as in the philosopher who made the Aristotelian *Organon* known to the Latins through his activity as a translator: Boethius. He is the one to whom we owe, among other things, the translation of *ousia* with *substantia*, which transmitted to the Middle Ages the substantialist conception of being as “what stands under” the accidents. But let us read the passage of the *Contra Eutychem* in which he seeks to define the meaning of the term *substantia* (which in this treatise corresponds instead to the term *hypostasis*). “That thing has substance [*substat*],” writes Boethius, “which furnishes from below [*subministrat*] to other accidental things a subject [*subiectum*] enabling them to be [*ut esse valeant*]; for it ‘subtends’ [*sub illis enim stat*] those things so long as it is subjected to accidents [*subiectum est accidentibus*]” (Boethius, 88–89).

Not only is substance here plainly an operation that renders the accidents capable of being (*minister* and *ministrare*—from which *subministrare* derives—are already part and parcel of the technical liturgical vocabulary in the age of Boethius), but being, too, which they attain by means of substance, is something operative that results from this operation. And it is in this sense that Boethius writes a little earlier that “the *subsistentiae* are present [*sint*] in universals but acquire substance [*capiant substantiam*] in particulars” (ibid., 86–87): substance is something that is “taken” and effective, and it does not have a being independent of its effectuation. Commenting on this singular expression, which has no parallels in the Greek texts from which Boethius draws his terminology, de Libera writes that “the term *substantia*, like the verb *substare*, signifies a property for Boethius. *Capere substantiam* signifies acquiring the property of working in hiding in such a way as to permit something to serve as subject to accidents” (de Libera, 185). In reality it is not a matter of a property but of an operativity within being, through which the latter, which in the universals simply is, is realized and rendered effective in individual beings.

The *Contra Eutychen* is a treatise on trinitarian theology, and the semantic transformation of the first Aristotelian category is to be read in connection with the doctrine of the three hypostases of the one divine substance that had prevailed in the Church starting with Athanasius. Dörrie has shown that in Athanasius “hypostasis” no longer means a reality (*Realität*), but a realization (*Realisierung*), in which one same essence is manifested and rendered effective in three aspects or, as will be said later, persons (Dörrie, 60). And it is this operative meaning of the term *substance*, in which the act of realizing and rendering effective remains in the foreground, that theologians will make use of to interpret the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews (11:1) in which faith is defined as “the substance of things hoped for” (*sperandarum substantia rerum, elpizomenōn hypostasis*). “Since things in hope are without substance [*anhypostata*],” writes John Chrysostom, “faith offers substance to them [*hypostasin autois charizetai*]” (qtd. in Dörrie, 63). And Haimo of Auxerre will write in the same sense: *Resurrectio generalis necdum facta est et cum necdum sit in substantia, spes facit subsistere in anima nostra* (The general resurrection has not yet been done, and while it is not yet in substance, hope causes it to subsist in our soul; qtd. in *ibid.*, 61). Being does not exist but is done and realized; it is, in any case, the result of a praxis, of which faith is the operator. According to the formulation cited from Marius Victorinus, in faith the working itself is being. Christian faith is a mobilization of ontology, in which what is in question is the transformation of being into operativity.

16. In the paradigm of operativity, a process that was present from the very beginning of Western ontology, even if in a latent form, reaches its culmination: the tendency to resolve, or at least to indeterminate, being into acting. In this sense the potential-act distinction in Aristotle is certainly ontological (*dynamis* and *energeia* are “two ways in which being is said”): nevertheless, precisely because it introduces a division into being and afterward affirms the primacy of *energeia* over *dynamis*, it implicitly contains an orientation of being toward operativity. This distinction

constitutes the originary nucleus of the ontology of effectiveness, whose very terminology takes form, as we have seen, by means of a translation of the term *energeia*. Being is something that must be realized or brought-into-work: this is the decisive characteristic that Neoplatonism and Christian theology develop, starting from Aristotle, but in what is certainly a non-Aristotelian perspective.

The place and moment when classical ontology begins that process of transformation that will lead to the Christian and modern ontology is the theory of the hypostases in Plotinus (which will exercise a decisive influence on Augustine's trinitarian doctrine through Marius Victorinus). An essential function is here developed by the very term *hypostasis*. Dörrie has shown, as we have seen, that this term—which in Hippocratic treatises still meant “sediment, deposit”—already in Neoplatonism, and afterward in Christian authors, acquires an active meaning and designates the realization of a transcendent principle; it means, that is to say, not *Realität* but *Realisierung*. To the extent that the One becomes more and more transcendent, it is all the more essential that it be given reality through three hypostases, which will constitute the logical model of the Christian Trinity (Picavet, *passim*). But this means that ontology is conceived fundamentally as a realization and a hypostatic process of putting-to-work, in which the categories of classical ontology (being and praxis, potential and act) tend to be indeterminated and the concept of will, as we will see, develops a central function.

The operator of this indetermination in Plotinus is the term *hoion* (as if, so to speak), whose strategic meaning clearly appears in the passage of the *Enneads* in which the will to overcome the duality of being and acting, potential and act, goes together with the impossibility of dropping it altogether. In *Enneads* 6.8.7 Plotinus writes with regard to the One:

His, so to speak [*hoion*], hypostasis and his, as it were, *energeia* are not two distinct things (they are not this even in the intellect); neither is the *energeia* according to [*kata*] its being, nor the being according to the *energeia*. It cannot possess being in action [*energein*] as something that follows from its nature, nor will its activity and

its life, as we may call it, be referred to its, in a manner of speaking, substance, but its (something like) substance is with and, so to put it, originates with its *energeia* and it itself makes itself from both, for itself and from nothing.

The technical use of *hoion* (Plotinus affirms it without reserve; *ibid.*, 6.8.13: “one should understand and always add *hoion* to every individual concept”) and the final idea of a *synousia* and of a conjoined generation of substance and *energeia*, shows how a tendency toward the indetermination of the categories of classical ontology is at work in Neoplatonism that will lead to the elaboration of the paradigm of effectiveness in the Christian sphere.

17. In his 1941 course “Metaphysics as History of Being,” reprinted in the second volume of *Nietzsche* in the *Gesamtausgabe* (1961), Heidegger dedicates an important section to the “change of *energeia* to *actualitas*” (*Die Wandel der energeia zur actualitas*). “Now *ergon*,” he writes,

becomes the *opus* of the *operari*, the *factum* of the *facere*, the *actus* of the *agere*. The *ergon* is no longer what is freed in the openness of presencing [*das ins Offene des Anwesens Freigelassene*], but what is effected in working [*das im Wirken Gewirkte*]. The essence of the “work” is no longer “workness” [*Werkheit*] in the sense of distinctive presencing in the open, but rather the “reality” [*dies Wirklichkeit*] of a real thing which rules in working and is fitted into the procedure of working. Having progressed from the beginning essence of *energeia*, Being has become *actualitas*. (Heidegger I, 412/12)

Heidegger identifies the Roman matrix of this transformation (from the point of view of historiography, it is a matter of a “transition from the Greek to the Roman conceptual language”) and signals the determinant influence that the “Roman church” exercised in it (*ibid.*). The ontological paradigm that oriented this transformation of ontology according to Heidegger is, however, “the biblical-Christian faith in creation”: “Being which has changed to *actualitas* gives to beings as a whole that fundamental characteristic which the representational thinking of the

biblical-Christian faith in creation can take over in order to secure metaphysical justification for itself" (ibid., 414/14).

The above analyses have shown that the decisive theological paradigm of the ontology of operativity is not the concept of creation but rather the sacramental liturgy, with its theses on the *effectus* of the *opus operatum*. In this sense the investigations undertaken here reconstruct a missing chapter in the history of the transformation of *energeia* into *actualitas* and must be understood—like those of Heidegger, of which they represent a completion—as a contribution, thought from the perspective of the history of being (*seinsgeschichtlich*; ibid., 415/15), to the “destruction” of the ontology of modernity.

Putting the creationist paradigm at the center of his reconstruction of the history of being leads Heidegger to define the central trait of modern metaphysics as a working in the sense of a causing and producing. The *ergon*, which named the persistence of being in presence in a form, now becomes the product of an effectuating and a producing:

When Being has changed to *actualitas* (reality), beings are what is real. They are determined by working, in the sense of causal making. The reality of human action and divine creation can be explained in terms of this. . . . *Esse*, in contradistinction to *essentia*, is *esse actu*. *Actualitas*, however, is *causalitas*. The causal character of Being as reality shows itself in all purity in that being which fulfills the essence of being in the highest sense, since it is that being which can never not be. Thought “theologically,” this being is called “God.” . . . The highest being is pure actuality [*Verwirklichung*] always fulfilled, *actus purus*. (Ibid., 414–15/14–15)

Standing before God is the human world understood as the effectiveness that is caused by creation: “The real is the existing. The existing includes everything which through some manner of causality *constituitur extra causas*. But because the whole of beings is the effected and effective product [*das Gewirkte-Wirkende*] of a first producer [*Wirker*], an appropriate structure enters the whole of beings which determines itself as the co-responding of

the actual produced being to the producer as the highest being” (419/18). And it is this conception of being as effectiveness that, according to Heidegger, renders possible the transformation of truth into certainty, in which the human being, whom faith in God renders certain of salvation, secures its unconditional dominion over the world by means of techniques.

One can ask to what extent this reconstruction of the determinate influence of Christian theology on the history of being is indebted to the privilege accorded to the creationist paradigm. It is by virtue of this model that Heidegger could think the essence of technology as production and disposition and the *Gestell* as the securing of the real in the mode of availability. But precisely for this reason he was not able to see what has today become perfectly obvious, and that is that one cannot understand the metaphysics of technology if one understands it only in the form of production. It is just as much and above all governance and *oikonomia*, which in the last analysis can even provisionally put causal production between parentheses in the name of a more refined and diffuse form of management of human beings and of things. And it is this peculiar praxis whose characteristics we have sought to define through our analysis of liturgy.

8. In his reconstruction of the passage from *energeia* to *actualitas*, Heidegger never mentions the terms that, as we have seen, furnish the first Latin translation of *energeia*, namely *effectus* and *operatio*, and prefers to concentrate on the word *actualitas*, which appears only in late scholasticism. It is possible that there are reasons for this internal to his thought, the ontology of which is more in solidarity with the paradigm of operativity that he intends to critique than is commonly believed. The being of *Dasein*, that is, of the being whose essence lies in existence and which, insofar as it must each time assume its being thrown into facticity, has to be its own ways of being—it is decisively effective, even if in a peculiar sense. Since “it has to do, in its being, with its own being,” *Dasein* is not, but has to be its own being, that is, must realize it and render it effective. For this reason, *Dasein* can be presented in Heidegger at the same time as a given and as an accomplishment, that is, as something that exists in the mode of its own incessant effectuation.

It is significant, from this perspective, that even at the foundation of the Heideggerian interpretation of the work of art (which is put forth consistently as ontological and not aesthetic), one finds an analogous operative paradigm. The celebrated definition of art as a “setting-to-work of truth” (*das Kunst ist das Ins-Werk-setzen der Wahrheit*; Heidegger 2, 64/55) in the last analysis presupposes an operative ontology. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) the work of art is what “effectuates [*erwirkt*] Being in a being” and “to effectuate [*erwirken*] means to bring-into-work” (Heidegger 3, 122/170). Being is something that must be “brought-into-work,” and art and philosophy are the agents of this operation.

In the *Zusatz* added to the *Ursprung des Kunstwerks* (*Origin of the Work of Art*) in 1956, Heidegger, who uses the term *Gestell* in the essay (“What we here call ‘figure’ [*Gestalt*] is always to be thought out of *that particular* placing [*stellen*] and placement [*Ge-stell*] as which the *work* comes to presence when it sets itself up and sets itself forth [*sich auf-und herstellt*]”; Heidegger 2, 50), can thus significantly evoke without reservation the mutual belonging between the *Gestell* that takes place in the work of art and the *Gestell* as the term that designates technological production (ibid., 67–68). A little before, he points out the ambiguity implicit in the expression *in-das-Werk-setzen*, which can mean both that being is brought into work by itself and that it has need of human intervention for this. In Heideggerian ontology, being-there and being, *Dasein* and *Sein* are implicated in a relationship of reciprocal effectuation, in which, as in the paradigm of liturgical operativity, one can say both that being-there brings being into work and renders it effective and that being actualizes being-there. In any case the relationship between *Dasein* and *Sein* is something like a liturgy, an at once ontological and political performance.

# Threshold

Let us attempt to summarize in thesis form the characteristics that define the ontology of the liturgical mystery.

1. In liturgy what is in question is a new ontological-practical paradigm, namely that of effectiveness, in which being and acting enter into a threshold of undecidability. If, in the words of Foucault, Plato taught the politician not what he must do but what he must be in order ultimately to act well (Foucault 1, 273), now it is a matter of showing how one must act in order to be able to be—or, rather, of reaching a point of indifference, in which the priest is what he has to do and he has to do what he is. The subordination of acting to being, which defines classical philosophy, thus loses its meaning.

2. While being and substance are independent of the effects that they can produce, in effectiveness being is thus indiscernible from its effects; it consists in them (*esse in effectu*) and it is “functional” to them.

3. An essential characteristic of effectiveness is operativity. We understand with this term the fact that being does not simply exist but is “brought into work,” is effectuated and actualized. Consequently, *energeia* no longer designates being-at-work as a full dwelling of presence but an “operativity” in which the very

distinctions between potential and act, operation and work are indeterminated and lose their sense. The *opus* is the *operatio* itself and the divine potency, which in its very virtuality is brought into work and actualized, is operative (*operatoria virtus Dei*). Operativity is, in this sense, a real virtuality or a virtual reality.

4. In this dimension cause and effect persist, but at the same time they are indeterminated: on the one hand, the agent acts only insofar as it is an effect in its turn (insofar as it is, as an instrument, acted upon by a principal agent); on the other, the effect is autonomized by its cause (which is only its instrumental, not efficient or final, cause).

5. Consequently, the sacramental action is divided in two: a manifest action (*opus operans* or *operantis*) that seems to act but in reality does nothing but offer the instrument and the “place” [*vece*] to a hidden agent, to whom all the operation’s efficacy belongs. But it is precisely owing to this separation of an action (reduced to instrumental cause) from its efficacy that the sacramental operation can unfailingly attain its effectiveness *ex opere operato*.

### § 3 A Genealogy of Office

1. In the history of the Church the term that names the effective praxis whose characteristics we are seeking to define is not *liturgy* (which in Latin appears only starting from the seventeenth century and prevails as a general technical term only in the twentieth century) but *officium*.

Certainly in the early centuries various terms compete in the translation of the Greek *leitourgia* and serve more generally to designate the function that it expressed. First of all, there is the term that indicated the political liturgy in the Roman Empire: *munus*. Since *munus* corresponded perfectly to *leitourgia* in Roman political-juridical vocabulary, secular sources speak indifferently of *munera decurionum*, *curialium*, *gladitorium*, *annonarium*, *militiae*, and so forth and distinguish, as the Greeks did for *leitourgia*, among *munera personalia*, *munera patrimonii*, and *munera mixta*. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the term pass in time into the vocabulary of the Church to designate either the divine service of the priest generically or else the very sacrifice of Christ. Still in Ambrose, who also provides a decisive impulse in the use of the term *officium*, both meanings are attested. Recounting in a letter that while he was beginning to celebrate mass in the new basilica, some of the faithful had departed at the news of the arrival of imperial officials in another basilica, he writes: *Ego tamen mansi in munere, missam facere coepi* (I then remained on duty and began to say mass; Epistle 20, *PL* 16, c. 995), where

*munus* can only designate the function that he was carrying out. In another letter, by contrast, it is the very death of Christ that is defined significantly as *publicum munus: quia cognoverat per filii mundi redemptionem aula regalis, etiam sua morte putaverat aliquid publico addituram muneri* (since the redemption of the world would prove to be royal power for the son, thus he held his death to be something added to his public duty; Epistle 63, *PL* 16, c. 1218). As in the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ's sacrifice appears here as a public performance, a liturgy done for the salvation of humanity.

The Latin term that seemed destined to designate par excellence the liturgical function at first, however, is *ministerium*. Not only is it with this term (together with *minister* and *ministrare*) that Jerome translates the term *leitourgia* in the Vulgate of the Letter to the Hebrews and the Pauline corpus, but he also uses it to translate *diakonia* (for example, in Ephesians 4:12, 2 Corinthians 6:3, and Romans 11:13). And that this must have reflected an ancient usage is proved by the Latin translation of Clement's letter to the Corinthians, which scholars believe goes back to the second century. Here we find, to translate the lexical group in question in the passages we have cited, *ministerium* (9.4, 41.1, 40.2–5, 44.2–3), *ministrationem* (20.10), *minister* (8.1, 41.2), *ministrare* (9.2; but in three cases—32.2, 34.5, and 34.6—*leitourgeō* is rendered with *servire* and *deservire*). Ambrose sometimes uses *ministerium* loosely alongside *officium* (*remittuntur peccata . . . per officium sacerdotis sacrumque ministerium* [Sins are forgiven . . . in the priest's sacred office and mystery]; *Cain et Abel*, 2.4.15; thus in Cyprian: *officii ac ministeri sui oblitus*; Epistle 3.1), and in the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, to indicate the episcopal function we find, in addition to *ministerium*, also *officium* (*episcopatus officium*: 3.66.4; thus in Clement's Epistle to James, 4.4; in Rufinus's prologue, *apostolatus officium*).

It is in this context that one must situate Ambrose's decision—apparently an arbitrary one—to entitle his book on the virtues and duties of the clergy *De officiis ministrorum*, thus inaugurating the sequence of treatises—from Isidore's *De ecclesiasticis officiis*

to the *Liber officialis* of Amalarius of Metz, from Jean Belet's *Summa de ecclesiasticis officiis* and Sicardus of Cremona's *Mitræ* up to the monumental *Rationale divinarum officiorum* of William Durand—that would lead to the affirmation of the term *officium* as a general designation of the liturgical praxis of the Church.

2. In an archaeology of the term *officium*, the inaugural moment is when Cicero, in the course of his repeated attempts to elaborate a Latin philosophical vocabulary, decides to translate the Stoic concept of *kathēkon* with the term *officium* and to inscribe under the rubric *De officiis* a book that, rightly or wrongly, was to exercise an enduring influence over Western ethics. The phrase expressing doubt, “rightly or wrongly,” is here justified by the fact that neither the Greek concept nor the Latin equivalent proposed by Cicero has anything to do with what we are accustomed to classify as morality, that is, with the doctrine of good and evil. “We count appropriate action neither a good nor an evil [*officium nec in bonis ponamus nec in mali*],” Cicero declares unreservedly in the work that he dedicates to the supreme good (*De finibus* 3.17.58). Nor is it a matter of a concept belonging to the sphere of law. The *De officiis* is not a treatise on the good or on absolute duty, nor on what one is juridically obligated to do or not to do. Rather it is, as has been suggested, a treatise on the *devoir de situation* (Goldschmidt, 155), on what is respectable and appropriate to do according to the circumstances, above all taking account of the agent's social condition.

Since the theoretical intent of the treatise is indissoluble from a strategy of translation from Greek into Latin (*semper cum graecis latina coniunxi . . . ut par sis in ultriusque orationis facultate* [I have always combined Greek and Latin studies . . . so I recommend that you should do the same, so that you may have equal command of both languages]; *De officiis* 1.1), only correctly situating this will allow us to fully understand its results and contents.

According to Diogenes Laertius, the first to introduce the term *kathēkon* (which in common language means “what is appropriate, opportune”) into philosophical vocabulary had been Zeno,

who defines it in this way: “an action for which a reasonable defense can be adduced [*eulogon . . . apologismon*], such as harmony in the tenor of life’s process, which indeed pervades the growth of plants and animals; for even in plants and animals, they hold, you may discern *kathēkonta*” (7.107; Arnim, 1:230). The Stoics distinguished from *kathēkon* what they called *katorthōma*, the action rightly done (that is, according to the good). With respect to this, which, being an act in conformity with virtue (*kat’aretēn energēmata*), is always good and always appropriate (*aei kathēkei*) independently of circumstances and is for this reason called *teleion kathēkon*, perfectly appropriate, simple *kathēkonta* acts, whose appropriateness depends on the circumstances, are defined as “intermediate” (*mesa*). “Another division is into duties which are always incumbent and those which are not. To live in accordance with virtue is always a duty, whereas dialectic by question and answer or walking-exercise and the like are not at all times incumbent” (7.109; Arnim, 2:496). Intermediate appropriate actions are situated, in this sense, between right actions and bad or mistaken actions: “Of actions, some are right (*katorthōma*), others are erroneous (*hamartēmata*), and others are neither one nor the other. The following are right actions: to have judgment, to be wise, to act justly, to rejoice, to help others, to live prudently. The following are erroneous actions: to act senselessly, to be intemperate, to act unjustly, to be sad, to steal, and in general to do things contrary to right reason. Things that are neither right nor bad are to speak, to ask questions, to respond, to walk, to emigrate, and the like” (Stobaeus 2.96.18, qtd. in Arnim, 2:501).

The difference between *kathēkon* and *katorthōma* is obvious in a passage from Cicero’s *Paradoxa stoicorum*. He takes up the case of a *gubernator* (pilot) who, by negligence, causes his ship to be shipwrecked. From the point of view of the good in itself (*katorthōma*), the fault of the pilot, who is committed to the art of navigation, is the same if the ship was loaded with gold as it would be if it was loaded with straw. From the point of view of *kathēkon*, by contrast, the circumstances prove determinative and the fault is greater if the ship was loaded with gold. *Ergo in gubernatione*,

Cicero will write when he takes up the example again in the *De finibus* (4.76), *nihil, in officio plurimo interest quo in genere peccatur. Et si in ipsa gubernatione negligentia est navis eversa, maius est peccatum in auro quam in palea.* (Hence the nature of the object upon which the offence is committed, which in navigation makes no difference, in conduct makes all the difference. Indeed in the case of navigation too, if the loss of the ship is due to negligence, the offence is greater with a cargo of gold than with one of straw.) Navigation in itself is not an *officium* but an action that, measured according to the rules of the art, can only be correct or incorrect, good or bad. From the perspective of *officium*, by contrast, the same action will be considered according to the subjective and objective circumstances that determine it. It is thus even more surprising that the book destined to introduce the notion of duty into Western ethics would not attend to the doctrine of good and evil but that of the eminently variable criteria that define the action of a subject “in a situation.”

3. It is in this context that one must situate Cicero’s decision to translate the Greek term *kathēkon* with the Latin *officium*. Despite the confidence with which Cicero seems to put forward his translation (*quod de inscriptione quaeris, non dubito quin kathēkon officium sit* [As to your query about the title, I have no doubt that *kathēkon* *officium* corresponds with *officium*]; *Letters to Atticus* 16.11.4), this must be far from settled, if a first-rate connoisseur of the Greek language like Atticus (*sic enim Graecae loquebatur, Cicero says of him, ut Athenis natus videretur* [he speaks Greek so well that he seems to have been born in Athens]) does not seem to be completely convinced of it (*id autem quid dubitas quin etiam in rempublicam caderet? Nonne dicimus consulum officium, senatus officium, imperatori officium? Praeclare convenit; aut da melius* [But why should you doubt whether the word fits appropriately in political affairs? Don’t we say the *officium* of consuls, of the Senate, of generals? It is quite appropriate; if not, suggest a better word]; *ibid.*, 16.14.3).

The scholars who have worked on *De officiis* have been focused above all on its Greek sources—in particular Panaetius’s treatise

*Peri tou kathēkontos*—and on the relation between the work and contemporary political events, which marked the definitive crisis of the Ciceronian idea of the *res publica*, faithful to the model of the Scipionian aristocracy. Here what interests us rather is the sense of the strategy inherent in the very choice of the term *officium* on Cicero's part.

While modern scholars derive the etymology of *officium* from a hypothetical \**opficium*, “the fact of actualizing a work” or “the work effectuated by an *opifex* (artisan) in his *officina*” (Hellegouarc’h, 152), it is significant that the Latins instead traced it back to the verb *efficere* (Donatus, *Ad Ter. Andr.*, 236.7, qtd. in *ibid.*: *officium dicitur ab efficiendo, ab eo quo quaeritur in eo, quid efficere unumquemque conveniat pro condicione personae*). Thus what was decisive for them was the sense of an “effective completed action or an action which it is appropriate to carry out in harmony with one's own social condition.”

The term's sphere of application was so broad, however, that Cicero can write at the beginning of his treatise that *nulla enim vitae pars neque publici neque privatis neque forensibus neque domesticis in rebus, neque si tecum agas quid, neque si cum alterum contrahas vacare officio potest* (no phase of life, whether public or private, whether in business or in the home, whether one is working on what concerns oneself alone or dealing with another, can be without *officio*; *De officiis* 1.4). In this sense Plautus, in addition to an *officium scribae* and a *puerile officium*, can mention an *officium* of the prostitute opposed to that of the matron (*non matronarum officium est sed meretricium* [it's not the duty of matrons, but of whores]; *Casina* 585) and, in a negative sense, an *improbi viri officium* (an “office of the rascal,” as elsewhere there is a question of a *calumniatoris officium* [the method of a pettifogger]; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 2.10.14). In all these cases the subjective genitive shows that it is a matter of the behavior that we expect from a certain subject in a situation, behavior that can, in turn (as in the case of the *patronus* with respect to the freedman or the client), be configured as a genuine obligation (as in Terence's *tu tuum officium facies* in relation to the obligation of the patron to protect and assist the client).

The peculiar nature of *officium* appears with greater clarity, however, precisely where there is not an obligation or duty in the strict sense. It is the case of *observantia* or *adsectatio*, which, in a heavily ritualized society like Rome, designates the behavior of the client who wants to render the proper honor to his patron, above all when, as was often the case, he was an influential public person. We know that *adsectatio* is expressed in three forms (Hellegouarc'h, 160–61):

- 1 *Salutatio*, which was not our salutation or greeting but the client's visit to pay respects in the patron's house. Not all *salutatores* were admitted into the intimacy of the master of the house: many were received only in the *atrium*, to receive the *sportula* there when the *nomenclator* called their name. With respect to the *salutatio*, a source informs us that, even though it was considered the lowest form of *officium* (*officium minimum*), it could be done (*effici*) in a way that could be much appreciated by the patron.
- 2 *Deductio*, which designated the act of accompanying (*deducere*) the patron from his house to the forum (and perhaps, if one wanted to be particularly obsequious, from the forum to his house on the way home). This was an important *officium*, because the patron's prestige also depended on the number of his companions (*ibid.*, 36: *deductorum officium maius est quam saluatorum*).
- 3 Finally, there is *adsectatio* in the broad sense, which included *salutatio* and *deductio*, but was not limited like they were to a specific occasion, but consisted in securing for the patron a kind of permanent court.

To assess what was *officiosior* (more in conformity with *officium*) in these situations was a question that obviously could not be decided once and for all but had to take account of all kinds of circumstances and nuances, which it was the duty of the *officiosus vir* to evaluate.

Particularly instructive in this sense is the obscene usage of the term, which we find, for example, in Ovid and in Propertius (*officium faciat nulla puella mihi* [no girl does her duty to me]; Ovid, *Ars* 2.687; *saepest experta puella officium tota nocte valere meum* [often a girl has felt my duty all night long]; Propertius

2.22.24, qtd. in Platter, 220) and, with customary wit, in Petronius (“instantly lowering his eyes to my middle, he officiously laid his hands on those parts, and greeted me by name” [*ad inguina mea luminibus deflexis movit officiosam manum et “salve” inquit*]; *Satyricon* 105.9). Even though it is certainly a matter of an intentional antiphrastic extension of a word that, as Cicero never stops repeating, belonged first of all to the sphere of *honestum*, *decorum*, and friendship, precisely this usage of the word in an obscene context can help us understand the proper meaning of the term. Seneca the Elder relates the unconscious *gaffe* of the orator Quintus Haterius, who in the course of defending a freedman accused of having had sexual relations with his patron candidly declared that *impudicitia in ingenuo crimen est, in servo necessitas, in liberto officium* (unchastity is a crime for the freeborn, necessity for the slave, and duty for a freedman) (Platter, 219–20).

*Officium* is neither a juridical or moral obligation nor a pure and simple natural necessity: it is the behavior that is expected among persons who are bound by a relation that is socially codified, but the compulsory nature of which is sufficiently vague and indeterminate that it can be connected—even if in a derisory way—even to behavior that common sense considered self-evidently offensive to decency. In the last analysis, it is a matter of taking up again the terminology of Zeno, of a question of “plausibility” and “coherence”: *officium* is what causes an individual to comport himself in a consistent way—as a prostitute if one is a prostitute, as a rascal if one is a rascal, but also as a consul if one is a consul and, later, as a bishop if one is a bishop.

4. Although the translation of *officium* as “duty” became common starting from the seventeenth century, the strong sense of (moral or juridical) obligation that duty would acquire in modern culture is lacking in the Latin term. Certainly when Seneca, responding to Hecaton’s question of whether slaves could benefit the master of the house, evokes the distinction between *beneficium*, *officium*, and *ministerium*, *officium* is defined as the necessity that obliges sons and wives to do certain things in encounters

with the father or husband (*officium esse filii, uxoris, earum personarum quas necessitudo suscitatur et ferre opem iubet* [a responsibility attaches to a son or a wife or to those roles in which a relationship motivates them and urges them to help out]; *On Benefits* 3.18.1), while in the case of the duties of slaves toward the master one speaks rather of *ministerium*. And moreover, even though *officium* toward parents had in this sense the character of a *necessitudo*, nothing shows better than a passage of the *Digest* that the necessity of *officium*, while having a character that was in some way juridical, was however formally distinct from a contractual obligation:

Just as the making of a loan for use is an act of free will or of *officium*, rather than of necessity, so also it is the right of the party who confers the favor to prescribe terms and limits with reference to the same. When, however, this has been done (that is to say, after the loan has been made), then the prescribing of terms and going back and unseasonably depriving the party of the property loaned, interferes not only with the *officium* displayed but also with the obligation created by giving and receiving the property [*non officium tantum impedit, sed et suscepta obligatio inter dandum accipiendumque*]. (*Digest*, Paul., 29 *ad ed.*, D. 13.6.17.3)

From this passage it becomes clear that, while *obligatio* derives from an action, *officium* derives, as we already know, from a condition or a status (in this case parentage or affinity: *necessarii sunt, ut Gallus Aelius ait, qui aut cognati, aut adfines sunt, in quos necessaria officia conferuntur* [as Gallus Aelius said, there must be either kinsmen or relatives upon whom the necessary *officia* are conferred]; Festus 12.158.22L).

8. A passage from Gellius (13.3.1) informs us that the Romans distinguished between *necessitas*, which indicated an absolute material necessity (*vis quae piam premens et cogens*) and *necessitudo*, which expressed a juridical obligation (of human or divine law, *ius quoddam et vinculum religiosae coniunctionis*). The same author informs us thus that to designate a law and an office, the term *necessitas* was less frequent (*infrequens*). The distinction seems to coincide with what, according

to Kelsen, opposes the two German words *müssen* and *sollen*, material necessity and juridical necessity.

5. Cicero suggests what the proper nature of *officium* may be when he formulates the argument of the work. Every question surrounding *officium*, he writes, presents two aspects: the first concerns the highest good (*finis bonorum*), the second the precepts “by which one can give form to the use of life in all its aspects [*in omnes partes usus vitae conformari possit*]” (*De officiis* 1.7). Although these precepts also in some way have to do with the good, what characterizes them is that “they seem rather to look to the institution of the common life [*magis ad institutionem vitae communis spectare videntur*]” (*ibid.*). What does “giving form to the use of life” and “instituting the common life” mean here? That the meaning of these expressions is not only juridical or moral but, so to speak, anthropological is clarified immediately after, when Cicero opposes the way of life proper to beasts to the properly human way of life. While the animal, moved only by sensation, adapts itself immediately to what is nearby and present (*quod adest quodque praesens est*) and does not concern itself with the past and the future, “the human being, because he is endowed with reason, by which he comprehends the connections among things [*consequentia*], perceives the causes of things, understands the relation of cause to effect and of effect to cause, draws analogies, and connects and associates the present and the future, easily surveys the course of his whole life and makes the necessary preparations for its conduct [*facile totius vitae cursum videt ad eamque degendam praeparat res necessarias*]” (*ibid.*, 1.11). This care of things and other human beings produced by reason “stimulates their souls and makes them more capable of governing things [*exsuscitat etiam animos et maiores ad rem gerendam facit*]” (*ibid.*, 1.12).

“Conducting life [*vitam degere*],” “governing things [*rem gerere*]”: this is the meaning of the “giving form to the use of life [*usum vitae conformare*]” and the “instituting the common life [*vitam instituere*]” that were in question in *officium*. If human beings do not simply live their lives like the animals, but

“conduct” and “govern” life, *officium* is what renders life governable, that by means of which the life of humans is “instituted” and “formed.” What is decisive, however, is that in this way, the politician and the jurist’s attention is shifted from the carrying out of individual acts to the “use of life” as a whole; that is, it is identified with the “institution of life” as such, with the conditions and the *status* that define the very existence of human beings in society.

It is from this perspective that Seneca can speak of an *officium humanum*, of an office that applies to human beings insofar as they are bound with their fellow humans in a relationship of *sociabilitas*: *cum possim breviter illi formulam humani officii tradere: omne hoc, quod vides, quo divina atque humana conclusa sunt, unum est: membra sumus corporis magni. Natura nos cognatos dedit, cum ex isdem et in eadem gigneret. Haec nobis amorem indidit mutuam et sociabile fecit.* (Meanwhile, I can lay down for humankind a rule, in short compass, for our duties in human relationships: all that you behold, that which comprises both god and humanity, is one—we are the parts of one great body. Nature produced us related to one another, since she created us from the same source and to the same end. She engendered in us mutual affection, and made us prone to friendship; *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* 95,51–52). *Officium* thus constitutes the human condition itself, and human beings, insofar as they are *membra . . . corporis magni* (parts of one great body), are beings of *officium*.

8. In 1934, Max Pohlenz, one of the greatest scholars of Stoicism, published a monograph whose subtitle was *Cicero’s “De Officiis” and Panaetius’s Ideal of Life*. Taking account of the date of publication, however, the choice of title is significant: *Antikes Führertum*. According to Pohlenz, the ultimate sense of Cicero’s work was that of furnishing a theory of *Führertum*, of political leadership, as “service performed for the people in its totality [*Dienst am Volksganzen*].” “Cicero,” he writes, “adhered to the ideal of the era of Scipio and dreamed of a new leader [*Führer*], of a new Scipio who by the authority of his person would be able to raise to new life the ancient Roman constitution and the good times of old. . . . The epoch of the *libera res publica*, in which a politician could guide the state

by relying solely on the love and trust of the people, had faded. A new leader [*Führer*] was necessary, who with an authoritarian power, even if perhaps still in the ancient form, would put an end to partisan struggles. Cicero himself felt that the ideal of the political leader [*das Führerideal*] which he recognized was no longer adapted to the present. Hence the tragic character of the *De Officiis*" (Pohlenz, 146).

However one wants to read the obvious parallelism with the situation in the Germany of his time, it is significant that Pohlenz situates *officium* in the sphere of the theory of political governance. *Officium* is *Führertum* understood as a *leitourgia*, as service performed for the people.

6. At this point Cicero's strategy becomes more clear: it is a matter of defining, between morality and law, the sphere of *officium* as that in which what is in question is the distinctively human capacity to govern one's own life and those of others. But the ambiguity of this strategy, which at least in part explains its influence on medieval and modern ethics, is that the definition of this sphere is carried out alongside a rereading in the light of *officium* of an essential part of ancient ethics: the theory of virtue. From the beginning, in fact, by establishing four *loci* of *honestum*, Cicero affirms that a certain type of *officia* arises from each of them (*certa officiorum genera nascuntur; De officiis* 1.5). But in the course of the discussion, these *officia* are then so closely tied up with the corresponding virtues that it is impossible to distinguish them from each other. *De officiis* in fact presents itself in this sense as a treatise on the virtues: not only is the first book made up essentially of an analysis of justice, beneficence, magnanimity, and temperance, but in the two following books, as well, ample space is dedicated to the analysis of liberality and being true to one's word and to the definition of virtue in general (*ibid.*, 2.18). If *officium* is what renders the life of human beings governable, the virtues are the apparatus that allows one to actualize this governance. This treatment of the duties (*uffici*) as virtues and of virtues as duties (*uffici*) is the most ambiguous legacy that Cicero's work was to transmit to the Christian West.

7. It can certainly come as a surprise that three centuries later Ambrose, setting about the task of writing what will be presented as a treatise on the ethics of the priests, had decided to take up again not only the title but also the structure and themes of Cicero's work. The text is, in fact, constructed from beginning to end in a tenacious parallelism—and at the same time in a taking of distance that is just as ostentatious but no less real—with respect to its pagan model.

The long preamble on silence, articulated around a detailed *midrash* on Psalm 38 (*dixi custodiam vias meas, ut non delinquam in lingua mea* [I have said: I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue]), apparently serves only to allow us to understand that the idea of the composition of the treatise had come to Ambrose almost by chance while meditating on the *silendi patientia* and the *opportunitas loquendi* that are at question in a verse of the Holy Scripture (“It was while I was meditating on this Psalm, then, that the idea came to me to write about *officia*” [*successit animo de officiis scribere*]; 1.7.23), rather than by the reading of Cicero's text, which was very familiar to those, like Ambrose, who had arrived at the priesthood from the halls of the tribunes and public administration (*raptus de tribunalibus atque administrationis infulis ad sacerdotium*; Epistle 1.4). In reality, the reference to Panaetius and Cicero that immediately follows and the resolution to turn to his “sons in the Gospel” precisely as Cicero had turned to his son (*sicut Tullius ad erudiendum filium, it ego quoque ad vos informandos filios meos . . . quos in avangelio genui* [In the same way that Cicero wrote to instruct his son, I too am writing to mold you, my sons . . . whom I have begotten in the gospel]; *De officiis* 1.7.24) show beyond a doubt what the author's strategy is: it is a matter of transferring the concept of *officium* from the secular sphere of philosophy to that of the Christian Church. To this end he inserts a brief etiological account, according to which the composition of the work derived from a suggestion of the Holy Spirit: “As though he was encouraging me to write on the subject [*quasi adhortaretur ad scribendum*], the Holy Spirit brought before me a reading which confirmed my view that we too are able to

speak of *officium* [*qua confirmaremur etiam in nobis officium dici posse*]” (ibid., 1.8.25). It is not an accident that the passage in question is the Latin version of Luke 1:23, which we have seen is one of only two places where the term *leitourgia* appears in the Gospel: *ut impleti sunt dies officii eius* (“that the days of his *officium* were completed,” a reference to Zachariah’s priestly functions). “From what we read here, then,” concludes Ambrose, “it is clear that we too are able to speak of *officium*” (a “we can” that, after the Holy Spirit’s exhortation, sounds more like a “we must”).

And not only Holy Scripture, he adds immediately, but also reason proves that Christians can use the term, if it is true, according to the etymology that Ambrose takes from Donatus, that *officium* derives from *efficere* (*quandoquidem officium ab efficiendo dictum*). The etymology will meet with success among Christian authors, who from Isidore and Sicardus to Durand will take it up again, adding to it the tautological (paronymic) formula *quia unusquisque debet efficere suum officium* (which does not mean “each must do his duty” so much as rather “each must render his social condition effective”).

From the very beginning the three essential points of Ambrose’s strategy are thus fixed, as though they go without saying: (1) to transfer into the Church and Christianize the concept of *officium*; (2) *officium* translates *leitourgia* and not only *kathēkon*; (3) it refers to the sphere of operativity that Ambrose, as we have seen (chap. 2, §10 above), knows to be precisely that of the Christian mystery.

8. Exactly like its Ciceronian model, whose disorganized and “improvised” character scholars have emphasized (Testard, 14), Ambrose’s book has also appeared incoherent, repetitive, and above all without originality to modern readers. In reality the often slavish tracing of Cicero’s text and the lack of originality cease to appear surprising if one understands that they are perfectly functional for the goal that Ambrose puts forward, which is nothing other than the introduction of the concept of *officium* into the Church. It is for this reason that he can follow Cicero’s argumentation point by point, except each time substituting for

the pagan *exempla* examples drawn from Holy Scripture. To the episodes from Roman and Greek history there now correspond events from the history of the Hebrews. In the argumentation, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jacob take the place of Cato, Pompey, Scipio, Philip of Macedon, and Tiberius Gracchus.

Just as rigorous is the interweaving of *officia* and the virtues that the biblical examples are called upon to document. Just as Cicero derived from the four parts of *honestum* the same number of offices and virtues, so Ambrose, taking up Cicero's list punctiliously (*prudencia, iustitia, fortitudo, temperantia*), affirms that "whatever category of duty you look at derives from one of these four virtues [*ab his quattuor virtutibus nascuntur officiorum genera*]" (*De officiis* 1.15.116). In this way, through the simple substitution of examples, the pagan *officia* become Christian, the Stoic virtues Christian virtues, the decorum of the Roman senator and magistrate the dignity and *verecundia* of Christian ministers.

One can understand, then, why a master of prose like Cicero and a subtle orator like Ambrose can apparently fall into "disconnected fragments" (according to the editor of a recent Italian edition) and into a "lack of internal coherence" (Steidle, 19). The meaning of the two books is neither in *inventio* nor in *dispositio*—the two pillars of Latin rhetoric. What is at stake in both cases is, rather, essentially terminological and political. That is to say, in the one case it is a matter of bringing a concept extraneous to politics and morality into those spheres and—under the pretext of a Greek translation—technicizing it. In the other case it is a matter of transferring Cicero's *officium* point-by-point into the Church to found on it the praxis of priests. But as often happens, a terminological transformation, if it expresses a change in ontology, can turn out to be just as effective and revolutionary as a material transformation. Putting on the garments and mask of *officium*, not only the virtues but the entire edifice of ethics and politics along with them meets with a displacement whose consequences we must perhaps still weigh.

9. Neither Cicero nor Ambrose gives a definition of duty (*officio*). The first, who affirms in the preface of his work that every

discussion of the problem must begin by defining *quid sit officium*, afterward neglects to do so and limits himself to articulating his discussion of it by means of a twofold division. The second explicitly declares that he is renouncing a definition in favor of exemplification. In the absence of a definition, it then becomes convenient in Ambrose's case to reflect on the etymology of the term suggested by him, which perhaps contains a useful indication. Repeating Donatus's etymology (*ab efficiendo*), as we have seen, he adds to it, however, a striking specification: *officium ab efficiendo dictum putamus, quasi efficium: sed propter decorum sermonis una immutata littera* (for the word *officium* is, we believe, derived from *efficere*, as though it were *efficium*, "achievement"; but in the interests of euphony, one letter has been changed) (1.8.26). In this way, through the fabulation of an inexistent word (*efficium*), the term is forcefully brought back to the sphere of effectiveness and *effectus* (*efficere* means *aliquid ad effectum adducere*): *officium* is not defined by the *opus* of an *operari* but by the *efficium* of an *efficere*. Thus it is pure effectiveness.

Diezinger has brought to light the close correlation that liturgical texts establish between *officium* and *effectus*. The liturgical action (*officium* in the broad sense) results from the coming together of two elements that are distinct and at the same time inseparable: the *ministerium* of the priest—*officium* in the strict sense, which acts only as instrumental cause—and the divine intervention—the *effectus*—that completes it and renders it effective. A series of texts pulled from ancient sacramentaries and the *Missale romanum* almost obsessively articulate this correlation: *id quod fragili supplemus officio, tuo potius perficiatur effectu . . . ut quod nostro ministratur officio, tua benedictione potius impleatur . . . quod humilitatis nostrae gerendum est ministerio, virtutis tuae compleatur effectus . . . ad piae devotionis officium et ad tuae sanctificationi effectu* (Diezinger, 76, 106). And the extent to which this correlation is strict and is to be understood as a genuine biunity appears beyond a doubt in the most ancient formulary for the defrocking of an unworthy bishop: *Sic spiritualis benedictionis et delibationis mysticae gratiae, quantum in nobis est, te privamus,*

*ut perdas sacrificandi et benedicendi et officium et effectum* (Thus of the spiritual blessing and portion of divine grace, insofar as it is in us, we deprive you, that you may lose the power of sacrificing and the power of blessing and your *officium* and your *effectum*) (ibid., 79). *Officium* and *effectus* are distinct but somehow indistinguishably connected, in such a way that their biunity constitutes the effectiveness of the liturgical action from which the bishop is now excluded.

10. Let us reflect on the paradoxical circular structure that appears in these examples and the implications that it may have for the conception of human action and ethics. Action is divided into two elements, the first of which, *ministerium* (or *officium* in the strict sense), defines only the instrumental being and action of the priest and, as such, is presented in terms of humility and imperfection (*fragili officio . . . humilitatis nostrae ministerio*). The second, which actualizes and perfects the first, is divine in nature; moreover, it is, so to speak, inscribed and contained in the first, in such a way that the correct fulfillment of the priestly function necessarily and automatically implies the actualization of the *effectus* (one will recognize here the duality of *opus operantis* and *opus operatum* by which the scholastics will define the liturgical mystery).

The divine *effectus* is determined by the human minister and the human minister by the divine *effectus*. Their effective unity is *officium-effectum*. This means, however, that *officium institutes a circular relation between being and praxis, by which the priest's being defines his praxis and his praxis, in turn, defines his being*. In *officium* ontology and praxis become undecidable: the priest has to be what he is and is what he has to be.

What is at stake in Ambrose's strategy is clear at this point: it was a matter of singling out—beyond the principles of ancient ethics and nonetheless in continuity with it—a concept with which to think and define the action of the priest and of the Church in its totality.

If the problem of the early Church was that of reconciling a spiritual dignity (the possession of charismas) with the carrying

out of a juridical-bureaucratic function and the celebration of the divine *mysterium* as the fulfillment of a human *ministerium*, the Ciceronian concept of *officium*, which did not designate an absolute ethical principle so much as rather a “duty in a situation” (according to the formula that Durand takes up from Isidore: *proprius vel congruus actus uniuscuiusque personae secundum mores et leges civitatis vel instituta professionis*; Durand, bk. 2, 14), furnished a coherent model to allow these two aspects to coincide to the greatest possible degree.

What results from this is, as we have seen, a paradoxical ethical paradigm, in which the connection between the subject and his action is broken and, at the same time, reconstituted on another level: an act that consists entirely in its irreducible effectiveness and whose effects are nonetheless not truly imputable to the subject who brings them into being.

11. In a passage from the *De lingua latina* Varro distinguishes three modalities of human acting, which “on account of their similarity are erroneously confused by those who think that they are only one thing”: *agere, facere, gerere*:

For a person can make [*facere*] something and not act [*agere*] it, as a poet makes [*facit*] a play and does not act it [*agere* also means “to recite”], and on the other hand the actor acts [*agit*] it and does not make it, and so a play is made [*fit*] by the poet, not acted, and is acted [*agitur*] by the actor, not made. On the other hand, the *imperator* [the magistrate invested with supreme power] in that he is said to carry on [*gerere*] affairs, in this neither makes [*facit*] nor acts [*agit*] but carries on [*gerit*], that is, assumes and supports [*sustinet*], a meaning transferred from those who carry burdens [*onera gerunt*], because they support them. (Varro, 6.77.245)

The distinction between *facere* and *agere* derives, in the last analysis, from Aristotle, who in a celebrated passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* opposes them in this way: “doing [*praxis*] and making [*poiēsis*] are generically different, since making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing the end cannot be other than the act itself: doing well [*eupraxia*] is in itself the

end" (1140b4–5). What is new and typically Roman, by contrast, is the identification of a third type of human action: *gerere*.

*Gerere*, which originally meant "to carry," means in political-juridical language "to govern, administer, carry out an office" (*rem publicam gerere, gerere magistratum, honores, imperium*). With an analogous semantic evolution, the verb *sustinere* also acquires the political meaning of "assuming an office" (*munus sustinere in re publica*). While for Aristotle the paradigm of political action is praxis, *gerere* designates, then, the specifically Roman concept of the activity of the one who is invested with a public function of governance. The *imperator*, the magistrate invested with an *imperium*, neither acts nor produces; his action is not defined, like doing or making, by an external result (the work), nor does it have its end in itself: *it is defined by its very exercise, by the magistrate's assuming and fulfilling a function or an office*. In this sense Varro can say that the magistrate "assumes and supports" (*sustinet*) his action: inverting the effective circle between *munus* and exercise, between *ministerium* and *effectus*, the action here coincides with the effectuation of a function that is itself to be defined. *Gerere* is, in this sense, the paradigm of *officium*.

8. In the last sentence of the passage cited, the most authoritative manuscript of the *De lingua latina* (Laurentian LI, 10) does not have *onera gerunt*, but *honera gerunt*. While *sustinere* can also be said of weights (*onera*), *gerere* is never used with *onera*, while the expression *gerere honores* is common. The scribe who copied the manuscript in the eleventh century did not know the classical sense of *gerere* in relation to *honores* and substituted for this term the more banal *onera*, forgetting to cancel the *h*. Emending *onera* to *honores*, the passage would read: "a meaning transferred from those who exercise public functions, because they assume and support them," which gives what is certainly a better sense.

12. The nature of office and its *gerere* is strikingly illuminated if one puts it in relation with the sphere of command, that is, with the action proper to the *imperator*.

Let us reflect on the entirely special nature of the command, which is not properly an act (for this reason Varro can say that

the one who commands “neither does nor acts” but assumes and supports; 6.77.245) but has sense only insofar as it takes as its object and assumes onto itself the action of another (who is assumed to have to obey, that is, to execute the command). It is in this sense that, as Magdelain has noted (34–42), the imperative defines the proper verbal mood of law (*ius esto, emptor esto, piaculum dato, sacer esto, exta porriciunto, paricidas esto*), insofar as the decree of the norm, otherwise void in itself, always has as its object the behavior or action of an individual external to it. But precisely for this reason, it is not easy to define from the semantic point of view the meaning of the imperative, which in Indo-European languages coincides morphologically with the verbal root. There is in fact no substantial difference between the action expressed on the constative level (“he walks”) and the same action carried out in the execution of an order (“walk!”). And moreover, the goal of an action carried out in order to execute an order is not only that which results from the nature of the act, but it is (or claims to be) also and above all the execution of the order. (For this reason—at least up until the Nuremberg trials—it was maintained that someone who was following an order was not to be held responsible for the consequences of his act.)

Here one can see the proximity between the ontology of command and the ontology of office that we have sought to define. Both the one who executes an order and the one who carries out a liturgical act neither simply *are* nor simply *act*, but are determined in their being by their acting and vice versa. The official—like the officiant—is what he has to do and has to do what he is: he is a being of command. The transformation of being into having-to-be, which defines the ethics as much as the ontology and politics of modernity, has its paradigm here.

8. The peculiar structure of *officium* is reflected in canonist circles in the discussions between those who consider office as an objective matter and those who consider it as a subjective matter. According to the former, office as an institutional reality (*ministerium, dignitas, honor*) is something like an objective element, defined by a normative scheme of

behavior and substantiated in a *titulus* and a *beneficium* (an economic profit). For the latter, by contrast, it is essentially *munus*, an activity carried out by a subject in the exercise of a function (cf. Vitale, 101).

It is sufficient, however, to consider the terms of the dispute with greater attentiveness to establish that in reality it is a question of two aspects of the same phenomenon. Certainly the canonistic tradition seems to emphasize the priority of the subjective element of the exercise of office (*officium datur principaliter non propter dignitatem, sed propter exercitium*; *ibid.*, 98). But the fact that the two elements represent two poles of one single system, in terms of which they are founded and defined in turn, becomes clear, beyond the terminological oscillations, in the very close correlation that the texts establish between the objective element and the subjective element of *officium*. Thus, according to Panormitanus, the prelacy is a position (*honor*), which is however conferred not for the sake of honor but for the service that it implies (*non datur propter honorem, sed propter onus*). Precisely for this reason, honor is nevertheless due to the prelate (*in consequentia praelato debetur honor*; *ibid.*), and in the decretal that regulates the ceremony of ordination, under the heading *de sacra unctione*, one reads that *caput inungitur propter auctoritatem et dignitatem, et munus propter ministerium et officium* (*ibid.*, 132).

When modern canonists, in order to reconcile the two positions, conceive office as a “subjective situation” or as a “competence-duty” that establishes for a certain subject the legitimation (and correlative duty) to carry out certain acts in virtue of his position or function, they do nothing but confirm the circularity that we have seen to define liturgical praxis.

8. One can now understand the pertinence of the concept of instrumental cause, by means of which Aquinas explains the sacramental action. Just as the instrument by definition acts only insofar as it is acted upon by the principal agent, so also the efficacy of the ministerial action derives not from the person of the minister but from the function and the office that he carries out. In this sense, in the words of Varro, the minister does not act but assumes and “supports” the action implied in his function.

From this perspective it is interesting to reflect on the concept of a “function,” which seems to be closely connected to that of office (*officio*

*fungi; munere, consulatu fingi*). It has been rightly observed (Gasparri, 35) that “to function means to act as if one were another, in the capacity of someone’s *alter ego*, either an individual person or a community. To have a function means not only to be competent to carry out acts for which others carry the responsibility for the agent, but to act declaratively, openly as such.” The term *function* names the constitutive vicariousness of office. The analogy with the paradigm of instrumental cause in Aquinas, in which God acts by means of the one who exercises the priestly function, is obvious.

# Threshold

Perhaps the most decisive influence that *officium* as the paradigm of priestly praxis has exercised on Western ontology is the transformation of being into having-to-be and the consequent introduction of duty into ethics as a fundamental concept.

Let us reflect on the striking circularity that we have seen to define *officium*. The priest must carry out his office insofar as he is a priest and he is a priest insofar as he carries out his office. Being prescribes action, but action completely defines being: “having-to-be” means this and nothing else. The priest is that being whose being is immediately a carrying out and a service—a liturgy.

This insubstantiality of the priest, in which ontology and praxis, being and having-to-be enter into an enduring threshold of indifference, is proven by the doctrine of the *character indelebile* that confirms priestly ordination starting with Augustine. As the absolute impossibility of identifying any substantial content for it shows, the *character* expresses nothing but a zero degree of liturgical effectiveness, which is attested as such even when the priest has been suspended *a divinis*. This means that the priesthood, of which the *character* is the cipher, is not a real predicate but a pure signature, which manifests only the constitutive excess of effectiveness over being.

Hence the tendentially vanishing quality of the subject whom the signature marks and constitutes. Since he has to be what he does and does what he is, the subject of a liturgical act is not

truly a subject (on the theological level this is expressed in the thesis according to which his action, as *opus operatum*, is done by another, namely Christ). In reality, whoever believes himself to have to perform an act claims not to be, but to have to be. He claims, that is, to dissolve himself entirely into a liturgy. Action as liturgy, and the latter as a circular relation between being and praxis, between being and having-to-be: this is the disquieting inheritance that modernity, from the moment it put duty and office at the center of its ethics and its politics, has more or less consciously accepted without the benefit of an inventory. It is toward this transformation of being into having-to-be—and the ontological proximity between command and office implied in it—that we must now orient our investigation.

## § 4 The Two Ontologies; or, How Duty Entered into Ethics

1. Anyone who goes through the pages of the *Genealogy of Morals* cannot fail to notice a curious lacuna. The three essays into which Nietzsche divided the book lay out, respectively, a critical genealogy of the opposition “good/evil, good/bad”; of guilt and the bad conscience; and, finally, of ascetic ideals. It lacks, however, a genealogy of perhaps the fundamental concept—at least starting from Kant—of modern ethics: duty. It is certainly evoked in the second essay, in connection with guilt, which is traced back to the notion of debt and to the creditor-debtor relationship (the German term for guilt, *Schuld*, also means “debt”). But Nietzsche is focused here above all on the connection between the feeling of guilt, bad conscience, and remorse. That the importance of the concept of duty naturally cannot be avoided is proven by the fragments that come from the time of the drafting of the work, in which we read, for example: “The problem: *You must!* An inclination that fails to give itself a foundation, similar in this to the sexual instinct, would not fall under the censure of the instincts, but on the contrary would be their criterion of value and their judge” (Nietzsche, 265; cf. *ibid.*, 151). And nonetheless, despite this and similar notes, a fourth essay on duty was not included in the book.

There are generally good reasons for exclusions, and in this case they are perfectly understandable. The fact is that Nietzsche’s teacher, Schopenhauer, had dedicated a chapter to the genealogy of duty in his 1840 work *Über die Grundlage der Moral* (*On the*

*Basis of Morality*). Here, under the heading “Von der imperativen Form der kantischen Ethik” (“On the Imperative Form of the Kantian Ethics”), we read that “putting ethics in an *imperative* form as a *doctrine of duties* [*Pflicht*], and thinking of the moral worth or worthlessness of human actions as the fulfillment or violation of *duties*, undeniably spring, together with the *obligation* [*Sollen*], solely from theological morals, and accordingly from the Decalogue” (Schopenhauer, 123/56). According to Schopenhauer, the theological imperative, which made sense only in view of a punishment or reward and could not be separated from them, has been surreptitiously transferred by Kant into philosophy, where it has assumed the contradictory form of an “absolute or categorical duty.” Insofar as Kantian morals are founded, in this sense, on “concealed theological hypotheses”—it is, in truth, a “moral theology” (*Moraltheologie*)—one can say that it has made “the result that which ought to have been the principle or presupposition (theology), and . . . as presupposition that which should have been deduced as result (the order or command)” (*ibid.*, 124/57).

Once its theological origin has been identified, Schopenhauer can unmask or, at least, read in a new light the definition of “the fundamental idea of the whole Kantian ethics, namely, *duty*. It is ‘the necessity of an action out of respect for the law’ [*die Nothwendigkeit einer Handlung, aus Achtung vor dem Gesetz*]” (*ibid.*, 134/67). The syntagma “necessity of an action” is, according to Schopenhauer, nothing but a “cleverly concealed and very forced paraphrase of the word ‘you must’ (*soll*),” which, as such, refers to the language of the Decalogue (*ibid.*, 135/67). Consequently, the cited definition “‘duty is the necessity of an action out of respect for the law,’ would therefore read in natural and undisguised language, ‘*Duty* signifies an action which *ought* to be done out of *obedience* to a law.’ This is the gist of the matter” (*ibid.*, 135/68).

The genealogy sketched by Schopenhauer, which is certainly correct, shows how little has been done in removing the mask from something, laying bare its hidden origin. By relating Kantian ethics to its theological presuppositions one does not gain much, in fact, as far as what would be of interest above all,

namely, the understanding of the practical paradigm that has produced both the structure and the specific characteristics of human action that is in question in it. As Foucault had suggested, doing a genealogy does not mean “removing the mask in order to finally unveil a primary identity” (Foucault 2, 138). It means, rather—by means of the fine-grained analysis of details and episodes, of strategies and tactics, of lies and truths, of *détours* and main roads, of practices and knowledges—to attempt, in the case that here interests us, to replace the question that can be taken for granted, namely, “What is the origin of the idea of duty?” with the no less obvious questions “What are the stakes in the strategy that leads to conceiving human action as an *officium*?” and “What is the nature of a liturgical act, of an act that can be defined totally in terms of *officium*?”

2. It is decisive that, in the liturgical tradition, the relation between the two elements of the action, the *officium* and the *effectus*, is conceived according to the model potential-act. Not only, as we have seen, does *effectus* translate the Greek *energeia* in the earliest versions, but in the missals and sacramentaries the divine *effectus* completes and perfects (*perficiatur, impleatur, compleatur . . .*) each time what was in some way in potential in the priest’s action. According to the appeal that the test of the *Missale Romanum* addresses to God: *vere dignum . . . aeterne Deus, qui invisibili potentia tuorum sacramentorum mirabiliter operaris effectum* (you are truly worthy, O eternal God, who by the invisible potency of your sacraments wonderfully work your effect) (Diezinger, 78).

Here as well, however, the passage from the paradigm of *energeia* to that of effectiveness implies a novelty that is not negligible. While in Aristotle *dynamis* and *energeia* were two ontological categories, two “ways in which being is said,” which designated as such two different modes of presence, now what is in question is instead the constitution of praxis, the relation between a certain function—the *munus* or *ministerium* of the priest—and its being rendered effective (*effectus*).

It will be helpful to reflect on the differences and, at the same time, the analogies between the Aristotelian and Christian models. If in the Aristotelian model of the architect (*Metaphysics* 1046b32ff.) *dynamis* and *energeia* are two distinct and homogeneous modes of presence of being-an-architect, in the case of the priest, *officium* and *effectum* are two (heterogeneous) elements whose concurrence defines liturgical praxis. In both cases, however, what is decisive is the problem of what permits the passage from potential to act and from *ministerium* to *effectus*. In the Aristotelian tradition the element that secured this passage was *hexis* (in Latin, *habitus*) and the *locus* in which the problem was dealt with was the theory of the virtues (this explains why in both Cicero and Ambrose the analysis of *officium* is worked out in a treatise on the virtues). An archaeology of *officium* will therefore necessarily have to confront the way in which theologians, in taking up the Aristotelian approach, articulate the doctrine of *habitus* and of the virtues.

3. Any understanding of the Aristotelian theory of the virtues must begin from the passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1105b19–20) in which they are defined as “habits” (*hexeis*): “Since in the soul there are produced three things: passions [*pathē*], potencies [*dynamēis*], and habits [*hexeis*], virtue [*aretē*] therefore must be one of these three things.” The inscription of the virtues in the sphere of the habits, which immediately follows, is motivated solely by exclusion: insofar as they are neither passions nor potentials, “it remains that the virtues are habits” (1106a12). For this reason a virtue will be that *hexis* “from which [*aph’ēs*] one becomes good [*agathos gignetai*] or will do one’s function well [*eu to heautou ergon apodōsei*]” (1106a24).

The correct interpretation of a concept or a theory depends on the preliminary comprehension of the problem that it is meant to confront. As often happens, however, this problem cannot be singled out while remaining solely within the treatise on ethics but demands a confrontation with the theory of *hexis* that Aristotle unfolds in book Theta of the *Metaphysics*. The theme of this

book is the division between being in *potential* (*dynamis*) and *act* (*energeia*). Only starting from this division of ontology is it possible to comprehend why Aristotelian ethics must take the form of a theory of the virtues, which is to say of the habits (*hexeis*). If being is divided into potential and act, something will in fact be needed to render possible, regulate, and operate the passage from the one to the other. This element, which defines and articulates the passage of potential from the merely generic (the potential according to which we say that the child can learn to write or play the flute) to the effective potential of the one who already knows how to write or play the flute and can therefore put it in action, is *hexis*, the habit (*hexis* from *echō*, “to have”) of potential.

It is on this second mode of potential that Aristotle concentrates his attention. In *On the Soul* (417a22–30) he thus places two modes (*tropoi*) of being in potential in opposition to the one who exercises in action a knowledge or a technique:

One sense of “instructed” is that in which we might call someone instructed because he is one of a class of instructed persons who have knowledge; but there is another sense in which we call instructed a person who has [*echonta*] knowledge, for example, of grammar. Each of these two has potency, but in a different sense: the former, because the class to which he belongs and his matter [*to genos kai hē hylē*] is of a certain kind, the latter, because he is capable, whenever he likes, of knowing in act [*hoti boulētheis dynatos theōrein*], provided that external causes do not prevent him. But there is a third kind of instructed person—one who, in exercising his knowledge, is in act [*entelecheiai ōn*, possesses himself in his end]; he is in actuality instructed and in the strict sense knows, for example, this particular A. The first two men are only potentially [*kata dynamin*] instructed; but whereas the one becomes so in actuality through a qualitative alteration by means of learning, and after frequent changes from a contrary state [that is from privation, *sterēsis*, which for Aristotle is the opposite of *hexis*], the other passes by a different process from having [*echein*] sensation and grammar without exercising it in act, to exercising it in act [*eis to energein*].

Habit is therefore the mode in which a being (in specific, a human being) “has” in potential a technique, a knowledge, or a faculty,

“has” a potential to know and act. It is, that is to say, the point where being crosses into having. But it is precisely this that constitutes *hexis* as an aporetic concept. It is in fact essential to the Aristotelian theory of habit that this “having” maintains itself in a constitutive relation with its privation (*sterēsis*). “So a thing is potential,” one reads in *Metaphysics* 1019b6–10, “in virtue of having a certain habit, and also in virtue of having the privation [*esterēsthai*] of that habit . . . and if privation [*sterēsis*] is not in a sense habit [*hexis*] . . . , then everything will be potential by having [*echein*] a certain habit or principle and through having the privation of it, if it can ‘have’ a privation.”

This relation with privation (or, as he can also say, with *adynamia*, impotential or potential not to) is essential for Aristotle because it is only through it that potential can exist as such, independently of its passing into action. The strategic meaning of the concept of habit is that, in it, potential and act are separated and nonetheless maintained in relation. Only insofar as habit is also habit of a privation can potential endure and have mastery over itself, without always already losing itself in action. For this reason the decisive thesis on potential-habit reads, “Every potential is an impotential for producing the same result in respect of the same subject [*tou autou kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamia*]” (*Metaphysics* 1046a30). Having the *hexis* of a potential means being able not to exercise it. In *On the Soul* (412a35) habit is thus compared to sleep, in which a person has knowledge but does not put it into action: “waking is analogous to the exercise of a knowledge, sleep to its possession but not its exercise [*echein kai mē energein*].” Something like a subject of *hexis* is constituted only through this possibility of not using it. As Aristotle never stops repeating against the Megarians, someone truly has a potential who can both put it and not put it into action (cf. *Metaphysics* 1046b29, 1047a25).

8. In the passage cited from book Theta of the *Metaphysics* (1046a30), the Ross edition has *pasa dynamis adynamiai*, “every potential is in impotential,” which is not much different in terms of the sense, but

betrays the editors' discomfort before such a radical affirmation. The most authoritative manuscripts and, significantly, the commentary of Alexander of Aphrodisia, have the reading *adynamia*, "every potential is impotential."

8. In the seminar of Le Thor of September 1966, Heidegger asked the participants in an improvised way, "What is the fundamental concept of Aristotle?" Since no one responded, the youngest of them suggested, not without fear: "*Kinēsis*, movement," a response that proved to be exactly correct. The theory of potential and habit is in truth a way for Aristotle to introduce movement into being, and the passage cited from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1106a22–23) is the proof of that. Aristotle does not say "is good" but "becomes good" (*agathos gignetai*): what is in question is not only the crossing from being into having, but also of being into acting and of acting into being. According to a paradigm that has marked Western ethics with its aporias, the virtuous person becomes what he is and is what he becomes.

4. Only if one situates it in the context of the theory of habit does the Aristotelian conception of virtue acquire its proper sense. By means of the concept of *hexis*, Aristotle had given reality and consistency to potential and rendered thinkable its peculiar relation with act (a potential that always already passed blindly into act or that, like generic potential, had no relation with action could not have interested him). But precisely what had assured philosophical citizenship to *hexis*, namely its relation with privation, now rendered problematic how to think concretely its passage into action. If habit is always also privation, a potential not to pass into action, who and what will be in a position to define that passage for it?

While assigning to habit an essential place in the relation between potential and act and in this way situating *hexis* in a certain sense beyond the opposition potential/act, Aristotle never stops repeating, however, the supremacy of the *ergon* and the act over simple habit. "And the end of each thing," he writes in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1219a9–10), "is the *ergon*, and from this, therefore, it is plain that the *ergon* is a greater good than the habit."

And in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1098b30–31), the image of sleep as a cipher of the one who has a *hexis* but does not use it returns, but with a completely negative meaning: “it makes a great difference whether we put the greatest thing in possession [*en ktēsei*] or in use [*en chrēsei*], in habit [*en hexei*] or in act [*en energeiai*]. For one may possess the habit without its producing any good result, as for instance when one is asleep or is otherwise inoperative; but virtue in *energeia* cannot be inoperative—it will of necessity act, and act well.”

The theory of the virtues is the response to the problem of the inoperativity of habit, the attempt to render governable the essential relation that links it to privation and potential-to-not (*adynamia*). Hence the insufficiency and the aporias of the aretology that Aristotle transmitted to Western ethics. Virtue (*aretē*) is, in fact, “a certain habit” (*hexis tis*: *Metaphysics* 1022b14) and at the same time something that, in habit, renders it capable of passing into action and of acting in the best way. For this reason the above-cited Aristotelian definition of virtue is, in a certain sense, twofold and is situated on the plane of being as much as on that of action: “virtue is a habit from which [or thanks to which, *aph'ēs*] one becomes good [*agathos gignetai*] and from which [or thanks to which] one will do one's work well [*eu to heautou ergon apodōsei*]” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a22–23). The repetition of *aph'ēs* underlines the twofold status of habit-virtue, at once ontological (“it becomes good”) and practical (“it does its work well”).

However, the way in which this species of habit that virtue represents can obtain this result is not defined in any way, unless it is through the frequent exercise that transforms it into “custom” (*ethos*). In a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics* (1220b1–5), which was to exercise a strong influence on the scholastics, this connection between custom and the becoming operative of virtuous habit is forcefully expressed: “As even its name implies that it derives from habit [*ethos*], by our often moving in a certain way a character [*ēthos*] not innate in us is finally trained to be operative [*energētikon*] in us (which we do not observe in inanimate objects, for not even if you throw a stone upwards ten thousand times will

it ever rise upward unless a force moves it.)” And that the connection between ethical virtue and habit serves to render habit governable in view of action and passage to the act is stated in the definition of moral character that immediately follows: “let moral character then be defined as a quality of the spirit in accordance with governing reason that is capable of following reason [*kata epiktatikon logon*].”

8. Precisely because Aristotle thinks action starting from potential-habit, which maintains an originary connection with privation and the potential not to pass into action (*echein kai mē energein*, to have without exercising), his ethics must necessarily run up against an aporia (that is, an “absence of a way”). The theory of virtue, which was to render this passage possible, remains in its essence an ethology, a theory of custom-character, because all the elements that Aristotle has recourse to in order to govern action by means of virtue (like choice, *proairesis*, and will, *boulēsis*) are obviously adventitious and, in presupposing a subject external to potential, have no basis in the habit that they are supposed to guide. For this reason Aristotelian virtue is now presented as an ontological property (a modality of habit), now as a quality of the work and of the action, and one same work defines both *hexis* and the action and its subject (“the same work belongs to a thing and to its goodness (although not in the same way): for example, a shoe is the work of the art of shoemaking and of the act of shoemaking; so if there is such a thing as shoemaking goodness and a good shoemaker, a good shoe is the work of both”; *Eudemian Ethics* 1219a19ff.). For the same reason, Aristotle can affirm that “the *ergon* is better than the *hexis*” and at the same time assert, with perfect circularity, that “the better the *hexis*, the better the *ergon*” (ibid., 1219a6).

It remains the case that habit is the logical place where something like a theory of subjectivity could have arisen. Melville’s *Bartleby*, a man who by definition has the potential to write but is not able to exercise it, is the perfect cipher of the aporias of Aristotelian ethics.

5. It is against this aporetic background of Aristotelian ethics that the scholastic theory of the virtues in their relation with *officium* becomes fully intelligible. The joining of *officium* and virtue

that is already implicit in Cicero and Ambrose, and constitutes the specific work of the ethics of late scholasticism, in fact has the goal of conferring effectiveness to virtue in the governance of habit and potential. For this reason, in Aquinas's *Summa* the treatment of the virtues is preceded by a theorization of the problem of *habitus* (*Summa theologiae* IaIIae, qq. 49–54), which articulates and unfolds in a systematic way the hints scattered in Aristotle's work.

First of all, habit is presented here as a specifically human form of potential. While natural potentials are particular to only one operation (*secundum se ipsas sunt determinatae ad unum*), and for this reason have need of a habit to be able to pass into action, human potential can operate in different ways and with different ends (*se habet ad multa*) and thus has need of a principle that disposes it to the operation. This principle, which leads human potential (in itself constitutively undecided) to action, is *habitus* (*ibid.*, q. 49, art. 4). But habit also distinguishes human potential from natural potential for another reason. The potential of a natural agent is always and only an active principle of its action, as one sees in fire, which can only burn (*sicut in igne est solum principium activum calefaciendi*). The act of such an agent can never be translated into a habit: “for this reason natural things cannot become accustomed or unaccustomed (*et inde est quod res naturales non possunt aliquid consuescere vel dissuescere*).” For human acts, by contrast, there is both an active principle and a passive principle of their action, and in this second aspect they produce habits. Passivity is therefore the specific foundation of human *habitus*: “For everything that is passive and moved by another is disposed by the action of the agent; wherefore if the acts be multiplied a certain quality is formed in the power which is passive and moved, which quality is called a habit” (*ibid.*, q. 51, art. 2).

What properly defines habit is, according to Aquinas, its essential connection with action. Responding positively to the question “whether habit implies a disposition to action,” Aquinas specifies that every habit, insofar as it is related to a potential, is constitutively ordered to the act (*primo et principaliter importat ordinem*

*ad actum*; *ibid.*, q. 49, art. 3). It is because of this essential proximity to the act that habit is defined as “first act” (*actus primus*) with respect to the operation, conceived as *actus secundus* (*ibid.*). Developing Averroës’s affirmation according to which “habit is that whereby we act when we will,” the seat of habit is located in the will:

In the will and in every appetitive power there must be something by which the power is inclined to its object. . . . And therefore in respect of those things to which it is inclined sufficiently by the nature of the power itself, the power needs no special quality to incline it. But since it is necessary, for the end of human life, that the appetitive power be inclined to something fixed, to which it is not inclined by the nature of the power, which in humans has a relation to many and various things, therefore it is necessary that, in the will and in the other appetitive powers, there be certain qualities to incline them, and these are called habits. (*ibid.*, q. 50, art. 5)

The aporetic connection between habit and the ability not to pass into action, which defined the *echein kai mē energein* of Aristotle’s sleeper, is thus bracketed.

6. It is this constitutive ordering of habit to action that the theory of the virtues develops and pushes to an extreme. From the beginning of the treatise on the virtues in the *Summa* (*Summa theologica* IaIIae, qq. 55–67), virtue is defined unreservedly—with a term that recalls the one (*operatorius*) with which Ambrose had defined the operativity of the word of Christ—as “operative habit” (*habitus operativus*). If virtue is a perfection of potential and this is both potential to be (*ad esse*), which has to do with the body, and to act (*ad agere*), which concerns the rational faculty, human virtue refers only to the potential to act: “human virtue, of which we are speaking now, cannot belong to the body, but belongs only to that which is proper to the soul. Wherefore human virtue does not imply reference to being, but rather to act. Consequently it is essential to human virtue to be an operative habit” (*ibid.*, q. 55, art. 2). If, with respect to the Aristotelian *hexis*, the Thomistic *habitus* was already oriented toward action, virtue is the apparatus

that must guarantee its belonging to the act, its being in every case “operative.”

However, because a habit can be operative also with respect to evil, it is necessary that virtuous habit be defined as “good.” With respect to simple potential, which can be disposed to good as much as to evil, good habit is distinguished from bad not because it has a good object but because it is in harmony with the nature of the agent (*habitus bonus dicitur qui disponit ad actum convenientem naturae agentis*; *ibid.*, q. 55, art. 3). In the same way, virtue implies the perfection of a potential, but evil knows no perfection and is, so to speak, constitutively “infirm” (*omne malum defectum quemdam importat; unde et Dionysios dicit quod omne malum est infirmum*). If in the last analysis “every virtue is necessarily ordered to the good, therefore human virtue, which is an operative habit, is a good habit and operative of the good [*bonus habitus et boni operativus*]” (*ibid.*).

What is decisive here is not the coherence of the argument, from which one can in any case draw the consequence that the good does not define potential, but the perfection or imperfection of potential determines what is good and what is bad. What is essential, once more, is the effectiveness of virtue, its rendering habit operative. The goodness of virtue is its effectiveness, its pushing and orienting potential toward its perfection. And for human beings this does not consist in being but in working. Only through action is the human being assimilated to God:

Virtue which is referred to being [*virtus ad esse*] is not proper to humanity; but only that virtue which is referred to works of reason, which are proper to humanity. . . . As God’s substance is His act, the highest likeness of man to God is in respect of some operation. Wherefore . . . happiness or bliss by which man is made most perfectly conformed to God, and which is the end of human life, consists in an operation [*in operatione consistit*]. (*ibid.*, q. 55, art. 2)

7. The definition of virtue that follows (which the article significantly places under the heading: “Whether virtue is suitably defined?”) repeats observations already made, without contending

with the problems and aporias that the discussion had come up against. Both the absolutely operative character of virtue and its unfailing orientation to the good are repeated. But what confers its power to virtue and what differentiates it from vice, the other operative power, is in no way explained: "The end of virtue, since it is an operative habit, is operation. But it must be observed that some operative habits are always referred to evil, as vicious habits: others are sometimes referred to good, sometimes to evil; for instance, opinion is referred both to the true and to the untrue: whereas virtue is a habit which is always referred to good" (*Summa theologica* IaIIae, q. 55, art. 4).

On the one hand, the end of virtue consists in its very operativity, but on the other, insofar as it is a form of habit, it refers necessarily to the nature of the subject with which it must fit. The very expression "operative habit" seems in itself contradictory, insofar as it refers at once to ontology (habit) and to praxis (operativity). Virtue is that by means of which being is indeterminated into praxis and action is substantialized into being (or in the words of Aristotle, that thanks to which a human being "becomes good" and, at the same time, that thanks to which "he does his work well").

In this sense the definition of virtue presents more than an analogy with the circularity that characterizes the effectiveness of *officium*. The priest has to carry out his office as priest, but he is a priest insofar as he carries out his office. And just as the subject of the liturgical act is not truly such, but is acted upon by Christ *ex opere operato*, so also the subject of the virtuous act is acted upon by operative habit, so that Aquinas can write that in virtue, "God works in us without us" (*Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur*; *ibid.*).

It is not surprising, then, that in the person of the priest virtue and office enter into a durable constellation. For this reason, already starting with Ambrose, treatises on the priestly office are also treatises on the priests' virtues. Both office and virtue are brought into the same circle: the good (the virtuous) is such because it acts well and acts well because it is good (virtuous).

8. The place where virtue and office enter into a threshold of indetermination is the theory of *religio*. Here, in the definition of the *status religionis* as virtue, the liturgical tradition of *officium* and that of the moral treatise on the virtues are united in the figure of a virtue whose essential content is a duty and an *officium* that appears in every sense as a virtue.

Let us consider the discussion of *religio* in the *Summa*, in which “religion” is counted among the “virtues attached to justice” (*Summa theologica*, IIaIIae, q. 81). Aquinas opens with a brief analysis of the etymologies of the term, both that of Isidore (which goes back to Cicero) from *religere* (*religiousus a religione appellatus, qui retractat et tamquam relegit ea quae ad cultum Domini pertinent* [a man is said to be religious from *religio*, because he often ponders over and, as it were, reads again (*relegit*) the things which pertain to the worship of God]) and the Augustinian etymology from *religare* (*a religando, ut Agostinus: religet nos religioni uni omnipotenti deo* [from *religare*, wherefore Augustine says: May religion bind us to the one Almighty God]). In both cases religion designates a special and exclusive relationship of the human being with God (*religio ordinat hominem solum ad Deum* [religion directs the human being to God alone]; *ibid.*, art. 1).

But it is in article 2, in response to the question “whether religion is a virtue,” that the essential relation between virtue and duty is formulated for the first time. If virtue, according to the Aristotelian definition, is “that which makes its possessor good, and his act good likewise [*virtus est quae bonum facit habentem et opus eius bonum reddit*],” then every good action will necessarily belong to virtue. And since by all appearances, rendering someone his due (*reddere debitum alicui*) is a good, religion, which consists in rendering to God the honor that is owed to him (*reddere honorem debitum Deo*), is a virtue par excellence.

To the objection according to which virtue presupposes a free will and not an obligation like that which defines the service that the human being owes to God, Aquinas responds that “even a slave can voluntarily do his duty by his master, and so he makes a virtue of necessity [*et sic facit de necessitate virtutem*]. . . . In a

similar manner, to render due service [*debitam servitutem*] to God may be an act of virtue." Further, "insofar as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God, religion excels among the moral virtues [*praeminet inter alias virtutes morales*]" (ibid., art. 6).

Let us reflect on the striking practical paradigm that is in question here, which seems to constitute in some way the model of the Kantian and pre-Kantian "duty of virtue" (*Tugendpflicht*). In the concept of a virtue whose sole object is a *debitum*, of a being that coincides totally with a having to be, virtue and *officium* coincide without remainder. The "duty to be" is, therefore, the apparatus that permits the theologians to resolve the circularity between being and acting in which the doctrine of the virtues remained caught. The act carried out thanks to the operative inclination of virtuous habit is, in reality and to the same extent, the execution of a duty. Literally making "a virtue of necessity," the religious person is at once inclined to duty and obligated to virtue.

9. A gauge of the process that brings the liturgical tradition and the ethical tradition to coincide is the evolution of the concept of "devotion." Theologians never lost awareness of the pagan origin of *devotio*, with which the commander consecrated his own life to the infernal gods to obtain victory in a battle. Aquinas still knows perfectly well that *olim, apud gentiles, devoti dicebantur qui se ipsos idolis devovebant in mortem pro sui salute exercitus* (in olden times among the heathens a devotee was one who vowed to his idols to suffer death for the safety of his army) (*Summa theologica* IIaI-Iae, q. 82, art. 1) and that therefore "those persons are said to be 'devout' who, in a way, devote themselves to God, so as to subject themselves wholly to Him." And moreover, already with Tertullian and Lactantius, while the term *votum* maintains its originary technical sense, the meaning of the term *devotio* is progressively transformed to designate both the cultic activity of the faithful and the interior attitude with which this is carried out. Students of Casel's school, who have analyzed the use of the term in the earliest sacramentaries, speak in this connection of two meanings

of the term, one moral and one liturgical (thus in Leo the Great *devotio* means at times simply the celebration of the Eucharist; cf. Daniels, 47). In reality one must speak not of two meanings but two aspects of one meaning, one practical and exterior and one psychological and interior. Outside of liturgical texts in the strict sense, in fact, and particularly in the monastic sphere, the term more and more often indicates the unconditional interior dedication that accompanies the carrying out of the exterior acts of the religious life. In this sense devotion is assimilated to a virtue. In Cassian's *Cenobitic Institutions* devotion is not only presented as the willing abnegation with which the monastic offices are carried out (*quae explere tanta devotione et humilitate*; Cassian, 146), but as such it is classified among the virtues, alongside faith and justice (ibid., 438: *tantae iustitiae, tantae virtutes, tanta fides atque devotio*).

It is therefore not surprising that in Aquinas the discussion of devotion immediately follows that of *religio*. It is part of the interior acts of religion and designates in this sense the *prompta voluntas*, the willing impulse and promptness in carrying out the acts of divine worship: "It belongs to the same virtue, to will to do something, and to have the will ready to do it. . . . Now it is evident that to do what pertains to the worship or service of God belongs properly to religion. . . . Wherefore it belongs to that virtue to have the will ready to do such things, and this is to be devout [*quod est esse devotum*]" (*Summa theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 82, art. 2). As in the *religio* of which it forms a part, in devotion *officium* becomes immediately virtue.

10. The problem of *religio*-virtue, to which Aquinas dedicates only one question in the *Summa*, assumes in Suárez the dimensions of an entire treatise in three books. According to the characteristic strategy of the Spanish theologian, the *De natura et essentia virtutis religionis* is not only—as it in fact is—a detailed and faithful commentary on the text of the *Summa*, so much as its systematic and almost imperceptible dislocation into a new systematic-juridical context. The concept of *debitum*, which in Aquinas was

hardly formulated, becomes first of all the formal definition of religion and the nucleus around which the entire treatise revolves.

Already in the preface the declared goal of the treatise is not the theoretical analysis of the essence of *religio* but the practical and juridical presentation of the *debitum* that is in question in it. Just as the divine wisdom does not limit itself to illuminating the mind with knowledge, but also furnishes a norm to the will, so also would theology be less praiseworthy if it limited itself to illuminating the mind without guiding customs (*si mentem illustraret, non mores dirigeret*). “For this reason,” concludes Suárez, “I could do no less than to become immersed in the explanation of these questions, which teach us to render to God the worship that is due to him [*quae nos Deo debitum cultum edocerent*]” (Suárez, 1).

To the citations from Isidore and Augustine, to which Aquinas referred for the etymology of the term *religio*, Suárez thus adds one from Lactantius, which has at its center the juridical notion of the *vinculum* that obliges the human being to God (*religionem dictam esse ab illo vinculo naturali, quo Deo obligamur*). The definition of religion that follows strictly unifies duty and habit in the idea of a virtue that is at the same time an *officium*: “the name of religion can thus be correctly explained: since the rational creature is bound by a natural debt and by an intimate inclination to offer worship to its author, it is bound anew [*religatur*] by a voluntary choice and by a habit added to it. Therefore the virtue that fulfills this *officium* can be called *religio*” (ibid., 5).

Thanks to this coincidence of virtue and duty, in the following chapters *debitum* can be constituted as the “definition and formal object” (*ratio et objectum formale*) of religion. What defines *religio* as a virtue is not simply the fact that by means of it worship and honor are rendered to God, but that these are rendered to him *solo in quanto dovuti*: “the function of justice is to render duty, but religion is part of justice. . . . Moreover the honor and worship of God form a part of religion only insofar as they are duties [*honor et cultus Dei non cadit in religione, nisi ut ei debitus*]” (ibid., 20). For this reason, against those who distinguish religious duty (which is owed to God solely by reason of his excellence) from

legal duty (which also derives from a juridical precept), Suárez affirms the properly legal nature of the *debitum religionis*: “religion . . . renders to God the worship that is owed to him by right [*iure proprio illi debitum*] and moreover the duty that it fulfills is not generically moral, but proper and legal [*non utcumque morale, sed proprium et legale*]” (ibid., 22). In the idea of a being that is totally dissolved into a debt, into a having to be, law and religion necessarily coincide.

II. Two points in Suárez’s treatise are of particular interest to us. The first is where he specifies the legal nature of the bond that unites the human being and God in religion with the term *respect* (*reverentia*—the same word with which Kant will translate the German term *Achtung* in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where it defines the nonempirical feeling that the human being experiences before the moral law). Respect does not coincide with obedience because while the first has to do with the excellence of the person (*directe respicere personam excellentem*), the second concerns solely the concrete norm that emanates from it (*personae excellentis praeceptum*; Suárez, 13). If one remembers that for Suárez religious duty has a juridical character, the subtlety with which he distinguishes respect (which is a duty, but so to speak to the law as such *propter excellentiam*, independently of the concrete content of the norms) from obedience (which has to do solely with a certain normative content) is all the more striking. Religion is the virtue that applies to God by means of a duty that derives not from a norm but from the respect that the law as such—or rather, the legislator—inspires.

The second point is where Suárez defines religious duty as an “infinite debt.” In contrast with other human duties, the debt that is in question in *religio* cannot be satisfied once and for all, because it is in its essence inexhaustible: “It cannot happen, in fact, that the material and debt of religion can be exhausted [*exhauriri possit*], because it is proper to this virtue that its debt can never be absolved and fulfilled [*impleri solutione*], both because it is a matter of a debt that is in some way infinite [*debitum quodammodo*]

*infinitum*] and because it grows with its very satisfaction, insofar as through this the human being receives a further benefit. This does not happen in justice with respect to human beings, whose debt can be wiped out with its satisfaction, in such a way that there is no place to display justice any further. Through the acts of religion, by contrast, the human being can never exhaust the debt that he has before God” (ibid., 22).

In the figure of a virtue that can never fully satisfy its debt, the idea—so dear to the moderns—of an infinite task or duty makes its first appearance in Western ethics. As Kant will write almost two centuries later, “Virtue is always *in progress* and yet always starts *from the beginning*.—It is always in progress because, considered *objectively*, it is an ideal and unattainable, while yet constant approximation to it is duty” (Kant I, 409/537).

Here one clearly sees that the idea of a “duty-to-be” is neither solely ethical nor solely ontological; rather, it aporetically binds being and praxis in the musical structure of a fugue, in which acting exceeds being not only because it always gives it new precepts but also and above all because being itself has no content other than a pure debt.

12. In the genealogy of the idea of duty Samuel Pufendorf’s letter to Christian Thomasius of July 17, 1688, occupies a peculiar place. In it we in fact find clearly affirmed for the first time, even if in a cursory way, the principle according to which the category that must guide the discussion of ethics is not virtue but duty. “On the other hand,” Pufendorf writes to his friend, “I consider it a strong argument for rational people that one must not organize morality according to Aristotle’s eleven virtues, from the moment that I could demonstrate that they were adapted only to a certain type of republic. And in general [*in universum*] my opinion is that one must not organize and discuss morality according to virtues, but according to duties [*die Morale nicht secundum virtutes, sed secundum officia einrichten und tractiren soll*]” (Pufendorf I, 197).

Since this peremptory thesis marks the entrance into modern ethics of the idea of duty that was never again to leave it, it will

be useful to linger on the modalities and context of its enunciation. First of all, the objection against the virtues is articulated in two moments, one specific and one general (*in universum*). The first refers to the fact that, as Pufendorf had suggested in the immediately preceding letter of June 19, in formulating his ethics Aristotle in reality had in mind those Greek democracies that he considered the best type of republics. This narrow formulation is followed by the more general affirmation according to which ethics must not be treated according to virtue but according to duty.

It is characteristic of Pufendorf's letters that they are often presented as a series of digressions (each time introduced by a brusque *sonsten*, "on the other hand") that, at least in appearance, seem to have no connection among them. In this case the passage that immediately precedes, from which the paratactic *sonsten* would be taking distance, contains a fierce critique of the thought of Spinoza. Pufendorf, who in his letter of June 16 had evoked his encounter with the philosopher, ironically defined as "*ein leichtfertiger vogel* [a thoughtless character], *deorum hominumque irrisor*, who has bound in one volume the New Testament and the Koran," shows that he knows the thinker well, because he indicates the root of his "brazen atheism" (*welcher ein unverschämter atheist ist*) in the concept of immanent cause: "to the extent to which he calls God *causam immanentem omnium rerum*, he says nothing different from what Orpheus had said according to Aristotle, Apuleius in the *De mundo*, and Virgil in book six of the *Aeneid*" (ibid., 195).

The three passages in question (in particular the last two) do not in any way contain a negation of the existence of God but a radical formulation of pantheism (*omnia Iove plena esse* in the words of Apuleius, *De mundo*, 34; the citation from Virgil refers to the celebrated *spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus / mens agit molem et magno se corpore miscet* [one primal Mind, immingled with the vast and general frame, fills every part and stirs the mighty whole]; *Aeneid* 6.724–27). Atheism, in the philosophical discourse of the time, does not designate those who deny the existence of God but those who deny the divine governance of the

world, that is, providence. It is in this sense that Leibniz could write of Spinoza that “he was truly an atheist.” Perhaps there is therefore a connection between the critique of Spinoza and the affirmation of *officium* for ethics, which it will now be helpful to investigate.

13. In 1673 Pufendorf published *De officio hominis et civis* (*On the Duty of Man and the Citizen*), in which he summarized the results of his magnum opus, *De iure naturae et gentium* (*On the Law of Nature and of the Nations*, 1672), organizing them around the concept of *officium*. At the same time, he actualized the project earlier enunciated in the letter to Thomasius of an ethics articulated according to duties and not according to virtues. In the book of 1672 the sphere of ethical-juridical phenomena had been defined as that of *entia moralia* (that is, with a terminology borrowed precisely from the atheist Spinoza), the “modes” of which are added to physical beings “for the purpose of directing and regulating the free, voluntary actions of human beings, and for giving human life a certain order and grace” (Pufendorf 2, 14/100). And just as physical substances presuppose a space in which they consist and move, so also to moral beings there corresponds a “state” (*status*), in which they “exercise their actions and their effects.” The action of moral beings (in particular of persons) in the sphere of the “state” is defined by their *imputativitas*, that is, by the fact that they and their effects can and must be imputed to agents. The obligation that arises from these actions does not coincide with external constraint but penetrates into the very will of the agent, as a sort of intrinsic moral sense (*obligatio vero moraliter voluntatem afficiat et peculiari quasi sense eandem intrinsece imbuat*; *ibid.*, 72/121), which leads it to conform to the prescription of the norm.

In *De officio*, *duty* (*officium*) is the term that designates human action insofar as it conforms to the obligation that arises from the prescription of natural law (*officium . . . vocatur actio hominis, pro ratione obligationis ad praescriptum legis recte attemperata*; Pufendorf 3, 13/17). The fundamental principle of the law of nature, to

which *officium* must conform, is *socialitas*, which is formulated in these terms: “every man ought to do as much as he can to cultivate and preserve sociality [*cuilibet homini quantum in se colendam et servandam societatem*]” (ibid., 23/35). To found this precept and confer the force of law to it, Pufendorf has need not only of a God but of a transcendent God who governs the world with his providence: “these precepts get the force of law [*vim legis obtineat*] only upon the presuppositions that God exists and governs all things by his providence [*deum esse et sua providentia omnia regere*]” (ibid., 23/36). Unlike other creatures, in fact, the human being is constituted in such a way that it cannot survive as a human being without society (*citra socialem vitam*): “the human being is obligated by God to observe natural law, which is not a product of human will and changeable at his pleasure, as the means which God himself has established expressly to achieve this end” (ibid., 23/36). For this reason there is no difference between denying that God exists and denying that God cares for human affairs: “both opinions utterly undermine all religion [*cum utrumque omnem religionem plane tollat*]” (ibid., 25/40). There is therefore a connection between the critique of Spinozism and putting forth duty as a fundamental category of ethics: it is a matter, in both cases, of affirming the solidarity between divine governance of the world and imputability of human actions. The threefold division of duties into duties toward God, toward oneself, and toward others confirms this solidarity. Situated on the hinge between human *socialitas* and divine providence, *officium* renders governance possible and guarantees its effectiveness.

8. The specific service of Pufendorf’s work is that of diverting the tradition of natural law into the concept of *officium*. Before him, Hobbes had already declared in the preface of the *De cive* that the goal of his treatise was to define “the duties [*officia*] of men, first as men, then as citizens” (*On the Citizen*, 7), and it is likely that the very title of Pufendorf’s book was only a summary of this program. But as Strauss showed already in a 1933 review and then in the 1936 book *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, in reality Hobbes substitutes for the notion of duty that of right (the right to the conservation of life, founded not on

a divine precept but on human beings' fear in the face of violent death). Naturally, this right can also be presented as a duty, as happens at times in Strauss himself: "in Hobbes there is only one basis for duty: the fear of violent death" (Strauss, 258).

8. In Jean Domat the articulation of law in terms of duty is already complete. When, at the beginning of his treatise on public law (1697), the great French jurist defines the foundation of the *police générale d'un État* with the term *devoir*, what he names with this term is, however, nothing but the *officium* of which we have sought to reconstruct the genealogy. "Tout le monde sait," he writes, "que la société des hommes forme un corps dont chacun est membre, et cette vérité que l'Écriture nous apprend et que la lumière de la raison nous rend évidente, est le fondement de tous les devoirs qui regardent la conduite de chacun envers tous les autres et envers le corps. Car ce sort de devoirs ne sont autre chose que les fonctions propres aux engagements où chacun se trouve par le rang qu'il tient dans le corps." (Everyone knows that human society forms a body of which each is a member, and this truth that Scripture teaches us and that the light of reason renders evident to us is the foundation of all the duties that concern the conduct of each toward all the others and toward the body. For these kinds of duties are nothing but the functions proper to engagements where each is found according to the rank that he holds in the body.) (Domat, 2). For this reason the term *devoir* is closely connected in Domat with the term *conduite*: the life and action of human beings in society is always "conduct," the object of a guidance and a governance.

14. It is obvious that the paradigm of duty or office [*officio*] finds its most extreme and aporetic formulation in Kantian ethics. Since this is certainly not the place for an exhaustive investigation of Kantian ethics in light of duty or office, we will limit ourselves to indicating the most obvious connections, which others will be able to integrate in detail.

It is in the last work that Kant dedicated to morality, the *Metaphysics of Morals* of 1797, that these connections are clearly shown even on the lexical level. At the center of his treatise Kant places the concept of a "duty to virtue" (*Tugendpflicht*), the concept of "an end that is also a duty" (Kant I, 395/525). In identifying duty

and virtue, it is a question of bringing the dimension of ethics to coincide with that of an action whose sole motive and impulse (*Triebfeder*) is duty. But this is precisely what defines the paradigm of duty or office, in particular in its extreme figure of *religio*, in which, as we have seen, the theory of the virtues had been firmly joined with liturgical office, opening up the road to the project, already clearly formulated in Pufendorf, of an ethics founded on duties. If the whole theological tradition that we have examined, from Ambrose to Suárez, tends in the last analysis to arrive at a zone of indifference between virtue and duty or office, Kantian ethics, with its “duty of virtue,” is the complete realization of this project. Here it is not a matter, however, so much of verifying the immediate genetic connections (the idea of a “duty of virtue”—*Pflicht der Tugend*—is already explicitly formulated in Crusius and Meier, and Kant did not have any need to extract it from the theory of *religio* in Suárez). Instead, what is at stake is to understand that if the aberrant idea of an action carried out only for the sake of duty (that is, in obedience to a command, and not for the sake of a natural inclination) was able to penetrate into ethics and impose itself there, this is only because the Church, by means of a centuries-long praxis and theorization, had elaborated duty or office as a model of the highest human activity, embodied in the office of the priest and, even before that, in the priesthood of Christ. The “duty of virtue” is not, in this sense, anything but the definition of the devout life that Kant had assimilated by means of his pietistic education.

8. In his *Directive to Live Reasonably* (1744) Crusius had defined the concept of a duty of virtue in this way: “the foundation of moral necessity lies in a law and in our responsibility to observe it: moreover we call the corresponding duty a duty of virtue [*Pflicht der Tugend*]” (Crusius, 201).

15. If in office the guarantee of the effectiveness of the liturgical action *ex opere operato* is in Christ, what takes the place of Christ as guarantee of the effectiveness of duty in Kant is the law. In the

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, duty is in fact defined as “the necessity of an action from respect for the law” (Kant 2, 400/55). The essential connection between duty and law is constantly repeated by Kant: “The concept of duty stands in immediate relation to a law” (Kant 1, 388/520); it is resolved, however, into “an obligation [*Nöthigung*] or constraint [*Zwang*] of free choice through the law” (ibid., 379/512).

Since the constraint that is in question in the moral law is not, as in juridical law, an external force but an autoconstraint (*Selbstzwang*), which must overcome the resistance of natural inclinations, Kant has need for an apparatus that would render the autoconstraint of moral duty operative. This apparatus is “respect” (*Achtung, reverentia*), the same bond that, according to Suárez, immediately unites the human being with God in *religio*.

When Kant introduces the concept of respect in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, defining it as the subjective counterpart of the law, he must have felt so unsure of it that he accompanied it with a long note, in which he is anxious to forestall possible objections against this “obscure feeling,” whose provenance in the theological sphere must have been familiar to him in any case: “It could be objected,” he writes, “that I only seek refuge, behind the word *respect*, in an obscure feeling, instead of distinctly resolving the question by means of a concept of reason” (Kant 2, 402/56, footnote). The rational explanations that he supplies at this point, however, risk being even more obscure than the “feeling” that they are supposed to clarify. In fact it is not, by contrast with the other feelings that can be traced back to an inclination or to fear, “a feeling *received* by means of influence” (that is, a pathological feeling), but is “a feeling *self-wrought* by means of a rational concept” (ibid.). The *Critique of Practical Reason* repeats this anomalous origin, proposing that respect for the moral law “is a feeling that is produced by an intellectual principle” and that it is, moreover, the only feeling “that we can cognize completely *a priori*” (Kant 3, 73/199–200). Such an *a priori* feeling is not, in reality, a feeling but “signifies merely consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law” (Kant 2, 402/56, footnote). It is in fact

nothing but the recognition and the effect of subjection to a command, which defines the very form of the law: “Only what is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or at least excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice—hence the mere law for itself—can be an object of respect and so a command” (ibid., 400/55); “What I cognize immediately as a law for me I cognize with respect. . . . Immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that this is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject and not the *cause* of the law” (ibid., 402/56, note b).

Like *reverentia* in Suárez, which is not owed to a concrete norm (*praeceptum personae excellentis*) but to the excellence of the person as such (*persona excellens*), respect does not refer to a specific command but to the law in general, conformity with which must become the only motive for the action: “Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law . . . , which is that *I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*” (ibid., 402/56–57).

16. In the first part of the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant defines the nature of the command and duty stemming from the law in terms of an external constraint and immediately afterward transfers this definition to morality in the form of autoconstraint (*Selbstzwang*). The structure of the imperative and of duty cited in the definition—the constraint of free will by means of a law—nonetheless remains the same, independent of whether it comes from the outside (juridical constraint) or from the inside (ethical constraint) (Kant I, 379/512).

The paradox of autoconstraint, which renders necessary the determinate introduction of the concept of will, is that it must have the objective form of constraint and, at the same time, the subjective form of an impulse (*Triebfeder*): “But since the human being is still a *free* (moral) being, when the concept of duty concerns the

internal determination of his will (the impulse), the constraint that the concept of duty contains can be only self-constraint (through the representation of the law alone); for only so can that *necessitation* [*Nöthigung*] (even if it is external) be united with the freedom of his choice. Hence in this case the concept of duty will be an ethical one" (ibid., 380/512–13). In the *Critique* ethical duty (the "duty of virtue") is defined as that duty which, owing to respect, presents itself at the same time as an impulse: "The concept of duty, therefore, requires of the action *objective* accord with the law but requires of the maxim of the action *subjective* respect for the law, as the sole way of determining the will by the law" (Kant 3, 81/205). Precisely for this reason, however, Kant is constrained—so as to be able to define the *monstrum* of a duty that is also an impulse and of a will that can be freely determined by the law—to conjugate the modal verbs in a paradoxical way among one another: the human being "must judge that he *can* do [*können*] what the law tells him unconditionally that he *ought* to do [*dass er thun soll*]" (Kant 1, 380/513). Ethical duty is "to be able to do what one must." In the *Groundwork* this paradoxical conjugation reaches its extreme form: if all imperatives, juridical as much as moral, are expressions of a duty (*Sollen*), that duty will be truly ethical which has the form of a "one must be able to will [*man muss wollen können*]" : "We must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law: this is the canon of moral appraisal of action in general" (Kant 2, 424/75). The verb *to be able to* (*potere*), which expresses the possibility of an action, a power to do, is subordinated in a contradictory way to a "having to do" and has as its object not a doing but a "willing": and it is this empty, unintelligible interweaving of the modal categories that defines the paradigm of the command of the moral law. Tied up together in this formula, the modal verbs sustain and annul each other. When one considers the centrality of the notion of will in Kant, one must not forget that it has its foundation in this paradoxical interweaving.

17. When he seeks in the *Critique* to give an emotional content to this empty feeling (which consists, so to speak, solely in the

elimination of all emotional content and all inclinations), Kant finds nothing but the “*negative effect*” of humiliation (Kant 3, 78/203): “the effect of this law on feeling is merely humiliation, which we can thus discern a priori though we cannot cognize in it the force of the pure practical law as incentive but only the resistance to incentives of sensibility” (ibid.). That is to say, respect is the feeling—purely negative and in itself devoid of all pleasure—of subjection to a command: “As *submission* to a law, that is, as a command (indicating constraint for the sensibly affected subject), it therefore contains in it no pleasure but instead, so far, displeasure in the action” (ibid., 80/205). Respect is, then, the degree zero of feeling, or that feeling (or that displeasure) which remains when all natural inclinations and all “pathological” (or passive) feelings have been excluded as motives for the action.

At his point Kant can join respect (*Achtung*) and duty (*Pflicht*) together. The action carried out only for the sake of respect for the law is in fact named “duty”: “The consciousness of a *free* submission of the will to the law combined with an unavoidable constraint put on all inclinations though only by one’s own reason, is respect for the law. . . . An action that is objectively practical in accordance with this law, with the exclusion of every determining ground of inclination, is called *duty*, which, because of that exclusion, contains in its concept *necessitation*, that is, determination to actions however *reluctantly* they may be done” (ibid., 80/204–5).

It is not surprising that Kant has to confess that the feeling of respect thus defined remains, despite the explanations that he has supplied for it and the decisive function it develops in ethics, “impenetrable for speculative reason,” and he refers, in the last analysis, to an artificial statement that is as simple as it is improbable: “one cannot wonder,” he writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, “at finding this influence of a mere intellectual idea on feeling quite impenetrable [*unergründlich*] for speculative reason and at having to be satisfied that one can yet see a priori this much: that such a feeling is inseparably connected with the representation of the moral law in every finite rational being” (ibid., 80/204).<sup>2</sup>

If the origin of respect remains, even in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “inscrutable” (*unerforschliche Ursprung*; Kant I, 400/529), this is because respect, exactly like duty, has no content other than subjection to the command of the law. For this reason Kant must insist on the precedence of respect over duty and be on guard against the vicious circle that would otherwise be verified between respect and duty: “A duty to have respect would thus amount to being put under obligation to duties [*zur Pflicht verpflichtet*]” (*ibid.*, 255). As an empty or zero-degree feeling, respect is only the shadow that duty—that is, compulsion before the command of the law—throws on the subject.

8. In a celebrated 1963 essay, Jacques Lacan proposed a parallel reading of Kant and Sade (Lacan, *passim*) in which the object of the law and the object of repressed desire were identified. We can ask ourselves whether, as Gilles Deleuze was to suggest five years later, the subversion of the Kantian law had not been accomplished more effectively by Sacher-Masoch than by Sade. The virtuous Kantian and the masochist indeed coincide precisely in the fact that both find their proper element solely in duty and humiliation, that is, in the execution of a command. In this sense Kantian ethics—and, with it, a great part of modern ethics—is essentially masochistic. At first glance, however, the masochist differs from the virtuous Kantian, because while for the latter the command contains no pleasure, the former finds its pleasure in humiliation. It is not sufficient to say, however, that the masochist finds pleasure in being humiliated by the command of the law. It is necessary to add that the masochist finds pleasure in the fact that the law finds pleasure in humiliating him. The masochist does not find pleasure in pain and humiliation, but in procuring for the sadist a pleasure that consists in inflicting pain and humiliation. The masochist—the subtlety of his strategy consists in this—causes the law (embodied by the sadist) to get off and only achieves pleasure in this way. The law is maintained and its command is executed with zeal, but it no longer has anything respectable in itself, because its command contains pleasure. While the operation of the Sadean turns immediately against the law as such, the masochist’s operation is turned against respect, which it undermines at its base and destroys. It is an ephemeral victory, however, because—as the modern masochistic masses, who do not respect the leader they

acclaim, effectively show—they certainly cannot for this reason be called more free. The downfall of the leader, which reveals to them the possibility of contempt, is also the sanction of their servitude.

18. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger asserts that the process that leads to the separation between being (*Sein*) and having-to-be (*Sollen*) finds its completion in Kant (Heidegger 3, 151/212). The having-to-be that is in question in this separation is not, however, something “that is assigned and referred to being from who knows where”; rather, it comes from being itself (*ibid.*, 150/211). The moment has come to attempt to interrogate, from the perspective of the archaeology of duty or office that interests us here, the ontological sense and the historical-philosophical strategies implicit in this separation, which is also, and to the same extent, an articulation. What in Kant reaches completion in the form of having-to-be is the ontology of operativity, whose fundamental outlines we have sought to reconstruct. In this ontology, as we have seen, being and acting are indeterminated and contracted onto one another, and being becomes something that does not simply *exist* but *has to be* brought about. It is not possible, however, to understand the nature and the proper characteristics of the ontology of operativity if one does not understand that it is, from the very beginning and to the same extent, an ontology of command. That contraction of being and having-to-be has the form of a command, is essentially and literally an “imperative.” Having-to-be is not, in this sense, a juridical or religious concept that is added to being from the outside: it implies and defines an ontology, which is progressively affirmed and is historically set up as the ontology of modernity.

Let us consider the linguistic form of the imperative, which we have evoked several times before. Meillet has observed that in Indo-European languages, it usually coincides with the verb’s root and suggests that it could therefore represent the “essential” form of the verb (Meillet, 191). What defines the imperative from the semantic point of view is, however, that it does not refer denotatively to the world, does not describe or declare a state of things:

it is limited to commanding and demanding (as a rule, someone else's action). Not even the action of the one who obeys the command can be considered as the semantic content of the imperative. As Kelsen has noted, "If an individual by his acts expresses a will directed at a certain behavior of another . . . then the meaning of his acts cannot be described by the statement that the individual *will* (future tense) behave in that way, but only that he *ought* to [*soll*] behave in that way" (Kelsen I, 13/5). Aquinas did not express anything different, saying that the command does not have the action of the other as object, but his free will. The imperative presupposes as its foundation and, at the same time, as its object not a being but a willing.

If the ontology of the tradition of classical philosophy has a substantial character, in the sense the being implies a denotative connection between words and things, the imperative, as the primitive form of the verb, presupposes another ontology, which claims to refer not to the world "as it is" but to how it "has to be." In this sense, despite the identity between the two forms "you walk" and "walk!" from the ontological point of view *esti* and *estō* are—or at least claim to be—essentially heterogeneous.

It is significant, then, that the imperative defines the verbal mode proper to law and religion. Not only are the laws of the Twelve Tables (*sacer esto*, *paricidas esto*, *aeterna auctoritas esto*) and the formulas of juridical transactions (*emptor esto*, *heres esto*) in the imperative, but the oath, perhaps the oldest of the juridical-religious institutions, also implies a verb in the imperative (*martys estō*, *istō Zeus*). And it is superfluous to recall that in the monotheistic religions God is a being who speaks in the imperative and to whom one speaks in the same verbal mode in worship and prayer.

One understands, from this perspective, why juridical-religious formulas (of which the oath, the command, and the prayer are eminent examples) have a performative character: if the performative, by the simple fact of being uttered, actualizes its own meaning, this is because it does not refer to being but to having-to-be. It presupposes an ontology of *estō* and not of *esti*.

There are, that is to say, two distinct and connected ontologies in the tradition of the West: the first, the ontology of the command, proper to the juridical-religious sphere, which is expressed in the imperative and has a performative character; the second, proper to the philosophical-scientific tradition, which is expressed in the form of the indicative (or, in a substantivated form, in the infinitive or participle—*esti*, *einai*, *on*, “is,” “to be,” “being”). The ontology of *estō* and of “be!” refers to a having-to-be; that of *esti* and of “is” relate to being. Clearly distinct and in many ways opposed, the two ontologies live together, struggle with each other, and nevertheless never cease to intersect, to hybridize, and to prevail over one another by turns in the history of the West.

8. In twentieth-century thought a veritable anthropology of command was developed by Arnold Gehlen. According to this author, who in the last analysis aimed to found a theory of the institution, the central function of the imperative in human society derives from the absence in human beings of an instinctually preestablished conduct. The human being does not simply live like the other animals, whose conduct is instinctively regulated, but must “lead his life [*sein Leben führen*].” The institution, with its laws and imperatives, is situated precisely in this gap: “The imperative is thus the form in which the entity is thought as valid and obligatory and in which it is rendered autonomous by transcending the simple representation that one has of it. It . . . exonerates the will from choice: behavior is already decided in a preliminary way, and it is so independently of the affective situation, from the state of the soul in which it is found from time to time and from circumstances. . . . This is the only form—beyond that of blunt habit—owing to which a behavior can be rendered durable: the imperative is virtually the being-already-completed of the action” (Gehlen, 170).

It is in the light of the specific situation of the human being’s instinctual lack that Gehlen intends to make his social justification of the imperative and the command hold unconditionally, with a radicality with respect to which a more thorough consideration of his own youthful unconditional adhesion to National Socialism should perhaps have counseled more prudence: “The obligatory modality, the being-already-decided of behavior, the inhibition of analytic reason, the component

of social reciprocity: these are all the moments of the imperative but also of the dynamics of the residual human instincts when we imagine them transposed into the consciousness of a being that acts according to its own will. An elementary rite, for example: 'This is taboo! It is forbidden to touch it!' would be, so to speak, the analogy of an authentic inhibition, instinctive and rigidly directed at a specific subject, if, naturally, a similar inhibition existed in the human being" (ibid., 172). In this anthropological perspective, Gehlen also explains the Kantian imperative: "Already Kant had recognized how the imperative responds to a social need and by depriving it of any content, had made of the simple interest for universal validity . . . the content of duty" (ibid., 171).

19. Kant represents the moment when the ontology of command and having-to-be reaches its most extreme elaboration and, by penetrating into the ontology of substance and being, seeks to transform it from within. If this is obvious as far as ethics is concerned, it is less obvious that the *Critique of Pure Reason* can also be read from this perspective. The possibility of metaphysics coincides here with the use of "pure" reason, that is, its use without reference to beings and experience. The replacement of the "glorious name of ontology" with that of "transcendental philosophy" means precisely that an ontology of having-to-be has already taken the place of the ontology of being. The transcendental object and the noumenon therefore do not designate any being, but an X, "of which we know nothing, nor in general . . . can we know anything." They are not beings but demands, not substances but imperatives, to which nothing corresponds on the level of experience. In the same way, the ideas of reason are "regulative" ideals, "commands," and not denotative words. That is to say, having-to-be corresponds in Kantian ethics with the function that the noumenon and the thing in itself take on in metaphysics: just as these impose on thought the opening of a space that must however remain empty, so also the categorical imperative commands practical reason in a determinate way and nonetheless does not say anything (it is not surprising, from this perspective, that Schopenhauer had been able to identify the dimension of the will

with that of the thing in itself and to entitle one of the supplements to his principal work “Transcendental Considerations on the Will as a Thing in Itself”).

At the threshold of modernity, when theology and metaphysics seemed to definitively cede the field to scientific rationality, Kant’s thought represents the secularized reappropriation of the ontology of *estō* in the bosom of the ontology of *esti*, the catastrophic reemergence of law and religion in the bosom of philosophy. In the face of the triumph of scientific knowledge, Kant sought to secure the survival of metaphysics, engrafting the ontology of command and having-to-be into that of being and substance and allowing it to act there. He believed himself to have secured in this way the possibility of metaphysics and to have founded, at the same time, an ethics that was neither juridical nor religious. Yet on the one hand, he welcomed the inheritance of the theological-liturgical tradition of *officium* and operativity without rendering an account of it, and on the other, he took leave of classical ontology in a lasting way.

The “Copernican revolution” worked out by Kant did not consist in having put the subject at the center in place of the object, so much as rather—but the two services are, in truth, inseparable—in having substituted an ontology of command for an ontology of substance. And one does not understand the history of post-Kantian philosophy if one does not know how to make out in it the succession of crossings, conflicts, and compromises between the two ontologies, which with phenomenology and *Being and Time* reach their provisional rendering of accounts, in which *estō* and *esti*, “be!” and “is” seem for an instant to be indeterminated.

8. During his trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann declared at a certain point that he had “lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty.” Asked to specify what he intended to say, he added, thus showing that he actually had read the *Critique of Practical Reason*: “I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws” (Arendt, 135–36).

Curiously, Arendt, who is certainly ironic toward this “version of Kant ‘for the household use of the little man’” (ibid., 136), seems to maintain that Eichmann’s thesis was to be taken seriously in some way. “Much of the horribly painstaking thoroughness in the execution of the Final Solution . . . can be traced to the odd notion, indeed very common in Germany, that to be law-abiding means not merely to obey the laws but to act as though one were the legislator of the laws that one obeys. . . . Whatever Kant’s role in the formation of ‘the little man’s’ mentality in Germany may have been, there is not the slightest doubt that in one respect Eichmann did indeed follow Kant’s precepts: a law was a law, there could be no exceptions” (ibid., 144).

Kant’s blindness is not to have seen that, in the society that was arising with the industrial revolution, in which human beings had been subjected to forces that they could not in any way control, the morality of duty would habituate them to consider obedience to a command (it matters little whether external or internal, because nothing is easier than interiorizing an external command) as an act of freedom.

20. That the Kantian ontology is in truth an ontology of command becomes most evident in Kelsen. He moves from an absolutization without reserve of *Sein* and *Sollen*, being and having-to-be, assumed unconditionally as a dualistic postulate: “My studies begin from the presupposition of separating two opposed fundamental principles: being and having-to-be, content and form. I am aware that a monistic conception cannot and must not recognize as definitive the dualism between being and having-to-be, content and form. If, however, I here take into consideration two opposed principles and remember that I have to renounce the attempt to link together being and having-to-be, form and content, on a higher level that would comprehend these two concepts that exclude one another, it is with justification that from my point of view I have not, at bottom, found a sincere response other than this: I am not a monist” (Kelsen 2, v–vi). The difference between being and having-to-be cannot be further explained: it is an immediate given of our consciousness. “Nobody can deny that the statement: ‘something is’—that is, the statement by which an existent fact is described—is fundamentally different from the

statement: 'something ought to be'—which is the statement by which a norm is described. Nobody can assert that from the statement that something is, follows a statement that something ought to be, or vice versa" (Kelsen I, 14/5–6).

The pure theory of law presupposes, that is to say, two ontologies that are irreducible to one another and, like Kant, chooses as its proper sphere that of command and having-to-be. It is "pure" because it claims to maintain itself constantly in the sphere of the *Sollen*, without ever trespassing into that of *Sein*. Juridical duty does not coincide, in fact, with a being or a state of things, that is, with due behavior, but expresses only the fact that a certain behavior is decreed by a norm and that this norm refers to another norm (coercive sanction) and this again to another: "Legal obligation is not, or not immediately, the behavior that ought to be. Only the coercive act, functioning as a sanction, ought to be. If we say, 'He who is legally obligated to a certain behavior, "ought" to [soll] behave in this way according to the law,' we only express the idea that a coercive act as a sanction ought to be executed if he does not behave in this way" (ibid., 141/119).

The relationship between norm and behavior is not, that is to say, a relation of being but a relation of having-to-be. Norms, considered in themselves, are not concrete facts but "meanings [*Sinngehalte*] and precisely the sense of the acts in which the norm is established. This sense is a *Sollen*. Both ethics and jurisprudence are normative sciences, having as their object norms containing a *Sollen* [*Soll-Normen*], understood as meanings" (ibid., 73n1).

And just as the sense of the norm is not identified with the factual behavior prescribed, so also the command, which is in question in the norm, does not coincide with the act of will of which it constitutes the sense, which already has the form of a being. The norm does not decree that one behave in a certain way, only that one *has to* [soll] behave in a certain way.

Kelsen's program of constructing a theory of law without any reference to being cannot be completely actualized. The two ontologies (being and having-to-be), while clearly distinct, cannot be entirely separated, and they refer to and presuppose one

another. This appears clearly in the theory of sanction and penalty. To say that the norm that establishes the sanction affirms that the executioner *must* apply the penalty and not that he in fact apply it, takes away any value from the very idea of a sanction. The problem of violence—like that of pleasure—cannot easily be expunged from law and ethics and constitutes a tangent point between the two ontologies. As in Kant, being and having-to-be are articulated together in the pure theory of law in the manner of a fugue, in which separation refers to a tangent and this latter again to a separation.

# Threshold

The moment has perhaps come to attempt to read the ontology of operativity and command, which we have here sought to define by means of an archaeology of office, in parallel with the “metaphysics of will” that Ernst Benz has reconstructed in a book whose importance for the history of philosophy is still far from being fully appreciated (Benz, *passim*). Benz’s studies show that the concept of will, which in Greek philosophy of the classical era did not have an ontological meaning, was elaborated (probably developing motifs drawn from Hermetic texts) by Neoplatonism and later by Christian theology beginning in the fourth century, to explain the process of hypostatization of the One and the trinitary articulation of the Supreme Being.

If at the beginning of this process there stood the production in the One of an inclination toward itself (*neusis pros heauton*), this is defined, in the treatise of the sixth *Ennead*, which bears the significant title “Free Will and the Will of the One,” as “will” (*thelēsis, boulēsis*) and “love” (*agapē, erōs*): “all therefore was will and in the One there was nothing unwilled or prior to will: he was above all will [*prōton ara hē boulēsis auto*]” (Benz, 302). Will, which is originally will of self, names the intradivine movement through which the One, unfolding itself toward itself, is constituted as intellect (*nous*) and gives itself reality and existence in three primary hypostases. From this perspective, will and potential are identified: “the power (of the One) is absolutely sovereign

over itself [*hautēs kyrian*], being what it wills to be [*touto ousan ho thelei*]” (*Enneads* 6.8.9; cf. Benz, 298). And not only is potential essentially will, but the good is also only will of self (“the nature of the good is in reality the will of itself [*thelēsis hautou*]”; *Enneads* 6.8.13; cf. Benz, 299). With a gesture in which one can make out the birth of the modern metaphysics of the will, Plotinus ultimately identifies will with being itself: “will [*boulēsis*] and substance [*ousia*] must in itself coincide necessarily with being in itself” (*Enneads*, *ibid.*; cf. Benz, 301).

By means of this identification of being and will, the progressive unfolding of the divine unity into the hypostases is already conceived “in a homoousian way” (Benz, 414), as it will be in Christian theology. Will is at once the origin of the movement of the hypostases and the principle that agrees to lead them back to unity. It is precisely this “voluntarization” (*Voluntarisierung*, *ibid.*) of Greek metaphysics that, by transforming from within both the image of the world of the *Timaeus* and the Aristotelian unmoved mover, will render possible the elaboration of the Christian creationist paradigm.

With a consistent analysis Benz can show at this point how it was precisely the assimilation of the Plotinian model—through Marius Victorinus, the Gnostics, Irenaeus, Origen, and Athanasius—that permits the articulation together of trinitarian theology and Christian anthropology that will find its complete formulation in the Augustinian triad of memory, intellect, and will (*ibid.*, 365–413).

Solely preoccupied with the argumentation of his archaeology of will, Benz—who is surely perfectly aware that the doctrine of the hypostases implies a “dynamic conception” of the divine being (*ibid.*, 414)—does not seem to be interested in the definition of the characteristics of the new operative ontology that is here in question. What our archaeology has intended to show is that, on the contrary, only a point-by-point definition of these characteristics allows us to explain the appearance and centrality of the concept of will. It is not only a matter of the fact that here being is “mobilized” and put in movement (which was already achieved

in Aristotelian ontology): what is decisive is that the movement of being is here not produced in itself and by nature but implies an *energeia* and an incessant “putting-to-work,” that is to say, that it is thought as an *ergon* that refers to the effectuation on the part of a subject that will be, in the first and last instance, identified with the will. This is perfectly evident in Plotinus, who can write: “For if we were to grant activities [*energeias*] to the One, and ascribe his activities to what we might call his will [*hoion boulēsei autou*—for he does not act without willing [*ou gar aboulōn energei*]—and his activities are what we might call his substance [*ousia*], his will and his substance will be the same thing” (*Enneads* 6.8.13).

And it is for this reason that according to Christian theology, the process of trinitarian autohypostatization as much as the creation of the world are produced not *a necessitate naturae* but *a voluntate divinae maiestatis* (Victorinus, qtd. in Benz, 78): the trinitarian economy and the creation are thought according to the model of putting to work and *energeia* and not as an impersonal natural process. Hence also the necessity of identifying the potency of God with his will: *haec semper voluntas a Deo et in Deo est potentia* (ibid.).

When the metaphysics of the will finds its extreme expression in modern thought in Schelling (“In the final and highest judgment, there is no other Being than will. Will is primal Being [*Ursein*] to which alone all predicates of Being apply. . . . All of philosophy strives only to find this highest expression” [21]), one must not forget that the concept of will was introduced into ontology between the third and fourth centuries because the concept of being was progressively being transformed in an operative sense. Just as duty was introduced into ethics to give a foundation to command, so also the idea of a will was elaborated to explain the passage from potency to effectiveness. If being is something that must be realized, if it necessarily implies a putting-to-work, it will be necessary to presuppose a will that renders it possible. This demand is already embryonically present in Aristotle, in whom the concept of will appears for the first time in an ontological context precisely to explain the passage from potential to act: that

which has the *hexis* of a potential can pass to the act “when it wills [*hoti boulētheis*]” (*On the Soul* 417a26–27). In the same sense, because human potential, as a rational potential, can produce a thing and its contrary, “it will be necessary that the sovereign element [*kyrion*] be something else, by which I mean desire or choice [*orexin ē proairesin*]” (*Metaphysics* 1048a11).

The ontology of command and the ontology of operativity are therefore closely bound: as a putting-to-work, the command also presupposes a will. According to the formula that expresses the prince’s command (*sic volo, sic iudeo*), “willing” can only mean “commanding,” and “commanding” necessarily implies a will. Will is the form that being takes in the ontology of command and operativity. If being does not exist, but must actualize itself, then in its very essence it is will and command; and vice versa, if being is will, then it does not simply exist but has to be. The problem of the coming philosophy is that of thinking an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will.



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## *Abbreviations*

*PG*, Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*.

*PL*, Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina*.

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