

# Kenosis as mirroring

JONNA BORNEMARK

*Jonna Bornemark is a PhD student in philosophy at Södertörn University, Stockholm. Her forthcoming dissertation has the preliminary title "The limit of knowledge – knowledge of the limit: A phenomenological investigation of body and transcendence" and includes an analysis of Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Mechthild von Magdeburg.*

I would like to explore some of the features that Sarah Coakley proposes in her first essay in the collection *Powers and Submissions: "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing."*<sup>1</sup> I will suggest an interpretation of *kenosis* not as an act performed by God, but as divinity itself, beyond any substantiated God, more in alliance with a Neo-Platonic tradition than with an idea of a God emptying himself of a primary substantiated divinity. And I will relate this to Coakley's question on vulnerability. This, I will argue, also sheds a certain light upon the question of the bodily and gendered human being.

## Coakley's question

In "Kenosis and Subversion" Coakley gives four different suggestions of how to understand kenosis. The background is the critique that has been leveled against this concept by feminists, especially by Daphne Hampson,<sup>2</sup> who understands it as an expression of a male compensatory need or guilt. Coakley presents these four interpretations of kenosis in the following way:

- 1) as a *temporary* relinquishing in the incarnation.
- 2) as *pretending* to relinquishing.
- 3) as a *choice* not to have certain false and worldly forms of power.
- 4) as revealing *divine powers to be humble* rather than grasping. (11) This could be

developed into an understanding of self-giving as the *essence* of divinity. (22-23)

And later on she adds the following interpretations. Kenosis:

- 5) not as a loss, but an *addition* of human flesh to the abiding, unchanging characteristics of a divinity that remains God in nature. (14)
- 6) as a temporary withdrawing of *some* characteristics into potency. (19)

The critique proposed by Hampson and others implies that kenosis as a redrawing of power implicates a preceding possession of power, and thus could be an ideal only for men. Coakley rightly questions the assumption that only men would have power and that kenosis would be a male category. She also shows that it is only in relation to 1) and 2) that such a criticism would be justified. But she is (as I understand her) afraid that interpretation 4) would mean to abandon the omnipotence and omniscience of God.

Coakley suggests instead that we should see kenosis as pointing toward an idea of vulnerability as a certain kind of human strength and not as a female weakness. Instead of trying to get rid of all vulnerability, she claims that Christian feminism should understand the necessary and fruitful sides of vulnerability beyond victimology. Her suggestion is that the practice of prayer could be understood as kenosis in use: Only through emptying oneself can one make possible the reception of the divine (32-39). But my question is: what does this imply for the concept of "God"? She criticizes the idea of God as an autonomous individual, or as a large disembodied spirit endowed with power and freedom, who

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions – Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

would be in control (28, 30). Instead she wants to emphasize a divine “strength made perfect in (human weakness),” and thus the investigation of human vulnerability (31). But I don’t understand what kind of God this would be. So this is one question I would like to ask, i.e. what implications the analysis of human vulnerability would have to the concept of God. But I would also like to sketch out *my* answer to this question.

I would like to try to develop this in line with the fourth interpretation above, self-emptying as divinity itself, but without abandoning the idea of God’s omnipotence and instead re-read it: Kenosis as the power to give, beyond any substantiated giver that is given in-itself.

### “Woman” as a central concept in contemporary philosophy

But before we continue to investigate kenosis as the essence of divinity, I would like to say something about “woman” as a central concept in contemporary philosophy. Picking up on the thread from Coakley, the question how we, as feminist philosophers and theologians, should relate to ideas such as vulnerability has been a central issue since the beginning of feminism. In the search for female empowerment, the question has been whether we should emphasize some kind of female essence, or abandon every gender-duality, since duality always tends to be structured hierarchically.

In relation to religion it has been seen as problematic that women would have no positive essence on their own, and that their spiritual journey only means to leave what they understand as themselves in order to strive towards a male divinity. Feminist philosophers have developed different strategies to deal with this problem: Irigaray, for instance, argues that women need to find a core and female essence on their own, and that they need to found a new religion in order to formulate a female ideal to aspire to. The opposite tendency has been to claim that gender has never been fixed, that it really doesn’t matter in relation to God, and that it throughout history has never really played a significant role, since males could be female in

relation to God and females could be described as male if they displayed great spirituality.

But we can also claim that the concept “woman” today names a philosophically interesting position precisely *because of* women’s supposed lack of stable and autonomous subjectivity. Instead it allows us to investigate subjectivity in its relation to passivity, bodiliness, dependence, and affectivity. This philosophical interest can be seen in relation to kenosis as divine essence: the one interprets subjectivity beyond autonomous substantiality, the other divinity beyond a likewise autonomous substantiality.

But this doesn’t mean to make neither subjectivity nor divinity powerless and insignificant. In both these philosophical ideas there is instead an interest in the limit as such, not only in the two sides that are produced through the limit. This is also where my interest lies, i.e. in what happens at the limit: where passivity and activity touch each other; where the lived bodiliness is both an inside and outside of itself; where dependence becomes independent, and every independence touches its limit and shows itself as dependent; where affectivity is connected to reason, etc. This also leads to the interest in a concept of a God that would be most intimately present and at the same time fully absent. My focus lies on the limit between what is understood as opposites, and such a discussion could of course also shed light on the human being as gendered. Because of the limited space I will here only come back to dependency, the living body, and gender.

### Kenosis as mirroring

I think that there are resources for such a discussion in the concept of kenosis, as the connection between God as an omnipotent power and a humble and obedient servant. Not only does he relinquish power and becomes powerless, but, as Philippians 2.9-11 has it, because of this emptying of power, God exalted Jesus above every other name. In this sense, kenosis is not only a movement from power to lack of power, but it is also the return of power.

So let us look a bit closer on the *movement* of kenosis, i.e., the movement between the divine

power and the servant that is exalted as the central event of kenosis. I would like to suggest that this movement could be related to the phenomenon of mirroring. Mirroring includes a prototype that is mirrored, a reflecting medium, and a reflected image. In the reflecting medium the prototype is thrown out of itself, received somewhere else, and then given back. But the mirror, in contrast to a statue or a photograph, is constantly in movement. The mirror image unfolds in time, i.e. in a continual and processual contact with its prototype. If I raise my hand, the mirror image follows instantly. But, and this is central, the image is inverted. When I raise my right hand, the image raises its left hand. This is also a difference with respect to photography, even to the moving pictures. If I have a film camera in front of me together with the recorded image, it will not be a mirror image; it will raise the wrong hand and do the opposite of what I am doing. The mirror follows me exactly *only since* it is an inversion of me in terms of left and right. Only because the mirror image inverts its prototype, can it be in close alliance with it. The condition for the proximity of mirroring thus lies in its inversion. But it also lies in its temporality. As stated above, the nearness lies in the common movement, which is so tightly knit together that one sometimes can get the feeling of not knowing whether it is the image that guides me, or I that guide the image. This intrinsic temporality of mirroring allows us to look differently on the whole phenomena. If we focus on the process, *mirroring* is not constituted through three different parts (a prototype that is mirrored, a reflecting medium, and a reflected image), but through the inverted movement itself. This means to focus on the relational character between what we experience as substances, rather than starting out from substances and only subsequently see them in connection to each other. The *process* of mirroring would thus be central for us to experience ourselves *as* a prototype that can be reflected. It is also important to note that the prototype is invisible to itself other than through its image – both which have their possibility in the event of mirroring.

So, what does this have to do with kenosis? Kenosis means “emptying,” not mirroring. In mirroring one still has oneself at the same time

as one is thrown out of oneself, whereas in emptying one loses oneself. But what if emptying is a way to formulate the divine itself? Then the movement of emptying, which could also be understood in terms of giving, would mean not only to erase oneself, but also, and necessarily, to keep oneself. It would be the only way *not to* erase oneself. The emptying movement (mirroring) would be the only way to produce a prototype as something stable and continual, but this stability is only possible through the continual change and movement of self-emptying. On the other side the mirror image, as a metaphor for the world, is fully dependent upon this mirroring movement. In creation divinity gives itself, and thus also preserves itself as a hidden prototype.

This could be understood as a development of the fourth alternative above. Giving would then be God’s central power: The power of becoming, and thus of constant transformation, since what is given is constantly “new”. But this way of thinking is not new; on the contrary, it is older than Christianity. In Christianity it can be found in Christian neo-platonism and the idea of emanation, especially as it was developed by John Scotus Eriugena in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Eriugena does not discuss the idea of kenosis, but nevertheless develops a logic of mirroring that is close to the one above. God is both identical and utterly different from the world; it both shows itself through the image of man and is hidden through this image in its inversion of the divine.<sup>3</sup>

The fear of such an interpretation always lies in the dread of pantheism, i.e. that God would be nothing but its creation. But this is exactly what I take to be the strength of the analysis of the mirror. If “God” would be understood more in line with the event of inverting mirroring, rather than as a prototype, its omnipotence would lie in

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon, Liber 1-4*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1968. See for example 568A, 574B, 754B-D, 759B. The analysis of mirroring above is developed through a reading of Eriugena, see my “Jaget som evighetens spegelbild – Spegelbild som central metafor för relationen mellan människa och gud hos Johannes Scotus Eriugena” in *Det främmande i det egna: filosofiska essäer om bildning och person*, Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2007, ed. Jonna Bornemark.

the giving that never ends—not in the giver, but in giving. The giver is not what is primary, but only a possible objectification after the act. “God” would be the event, not a substance. The world, as a place of relational objects, would not empty the concept of God, instead worldly objects would have their origin in the event. Relating to this event, searching for it as one’s own origin would be to search for God.

When Coakley discusses self-giving and self-limiting as the essence of divinity, which she formulates as “the identification of ‘God’ as permanently ‘limited’,” she asks: “Does this not then also make God intrinsically non-omnipotent and non-omniscient (as opposed to temporally non-omnipotent and non-omniscient under the conditions of incarnation)? And how, then, could such a being be ‘God’?” (23) I would like to suggest that this is only so if “God” is understood as one side of a limit, as something that could depart from itself. But this is, as we have seen, not the only way to understand a self-giving God. In relation to the concept of “limit” we could understand it as *the limit itself*, or even as the event of drawing a limit. God would then, once again, not be a substance with different powers such as omnipotence and omniscience that could be relinquished. The omnipotence would instead lie exactly in the power of constantly giving.

I think Coakley too points in this direction when she discusses the image of God as an autonomous and free individual in her chapter on “Analytic Philosophy of Religion in Feminist Perspectives.” There she examines such an image of God and brings forth its one-sidedness and male prerogatives, and claims that a feminist analysis would give an expanded notion starting out from experience. She also points out that such an analysis would give affectivity a different status, as well as erotic images (102-104). I would like to add that an analysis starting out from experience also necessarily needs to focus on temporality, and on the flowing character of the divine rather than divinity as a stabile substance. The divine is thus also seen as relational and in connection to the world rather than purely absent and redrawn.

## Dependency, body and gender from the perspective of kenosis as mirroring

So, what happens to questions of gender and body if we see them from the perspective of kenosis as mirroring? To begin with we need to say something about God as ideal pattern for the human being. In Philippians 2:1-11 it is explicitly stated that the kenosis of Christ is an example for all human beings. For instance in the writings of Eriugena, the divine is not only what the human being should try to resemble, but he focus on the intimate similarity between God and the human being. The human being is, as it is said, “made in God’s image.” To Eriugena this means that the mirroring of God also lies at the heart of the human being. He claims that the human being is a mirror image of God to such an extent that it does not only constitute a simple image of God, but contains the same mirroring as God.<sup>4</sup> This mirroring similarity shows and hides at the same time, the image has both a similarity and an essential dissimilarity or inversion.

So lets briefly come back to what consequences a kenotic starting-point could have in relation to the question of the mutual dependence of God and the human being, the lived body, and finally to the relation between men and women.

This mirroring can, to begin with, be understood as a mutual though asymmetric dependence between the human being and God. Through the mirroring kenosis man becomes manifest. But this movement does not only show the human being as dependent upon God, but also that God is dependent upon man. The self-giving of God means that something is given, but a giver also needs a gift to give and a receiver in order to be a giver. This might sound like a very (post-)modern way to phrase it, but the dependence of God upon man has been present also in the Christian tradition, for example in the beguine Mechthild von Magdeburg’s *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*The flowing Light of the Godhead*), written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> *Periphyseon*, 579A-B, 771B, 790C see also Bornemark p. 190-194.

Mechthild states that God is longing and yearning for her, and in need of her to heal his wounds. Mechthild is dependent on God as her presupposition, but God is dependent on Mechthild in order to be whole. He is wounded and incomplete without her.<sup>5</sup> In her text there is a continual weaving, often in erotic terms, between the divine and the human. God is *her God*, i.e. God only in relation to her (or in relation to the living). There is never any talk of God as a pre-existent substance independent of his creation (or self-emptying).

One special feature in Mechthild's relation to God, connected to God's dependence upon her, is her bodiliness and sensibility. She says to God: "You are the sun of all eyes", and he answers: "You are a light unto my eyes".<sup>6</sup> I understand these phrases exactly in terms of their mutual dependency. The ability to see is dependent upon the light of God, i.e., upon the given capacity to see, but God also depends on Mechthild (as a representative) in order to constitute the full phenomena of sight. Without bodily beings there could not be any visibility, i.e. without something to see, there would be no seeing—just like the prototype is invisible to itself without its mirror image. She is thus a reflecting light in front of God, but she is also seeing through God, doubling God's seeing and thus mirror the mirroring at the same time as God's seeing goes beyond the seeing of all beings (just as we accept that the backside of the moon is visible without anyone ever seeing it). The bodily being both has the capacity to see and to be seen. The living body is exactly the connection between experiencing capacity and something experienced.

Whereas Gregory of Nyssa (at least in Coakley's reading in the last chapter, "The Eschatological Body") strives toward a desire beyond gender, my reading of Mechthild would stick to gender as the difference between erotic bodies. Mechthild and her God are dissimilar, but deeply connected, their meeting goes beyond the similarity / dissimilarity of prototype and image – it goes into their erotic meeting in the inverting

movement of mirroring, i.e. the point that connects them and at the same time draws them apart. In Mechthild, gender is a name of this simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity between lovers. This could of course be understood as locked into hetero-normativity, but I'm not sure that this is a necessary consequence. Maybe gender does not name two biological sexes, but two positions in a play of erotic tension. It would then not name a fixed order that we are bound to, but a fluid field of tensions, where power, domination, submission, passivity, and activity are central aspects, and between which the world comes forth. The kenotic mirroring demands difference, craves for difference—and thus creates difference. Without this divine drawing of limits there is no world and no God. The relation between God and the world is thus inherently gendered, as the name of an erotic tension that needs simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

God as dependent and vulnerable is a large and complex question in the Christian tradition. Here I only wanted to point to tenets that connect kenosis with God as an event – as self-giving and as mirrored in man – with God as dependent. These tenets are most apparent in texts that we understand as parts of a mystic tradition.

Coakley argues that kenosis should be understood as a positive vulnerability and that the repression of vulnerability would be a danger to Christian feminism. I would like to argue that the human being can not be truly vulnerable if this is not understood as mirroring a divine vulnerability, which I have discussed here as a dependency. But Coakley, as I understand her, does not want to end up in a position where divine essence is understood as self-emptying, since she understands this as giving up the omnipotence of God. My suggestion here would be to re-read omnipotence: Instead of understanding it as a characteristic of a substance, it could be

<sup>5</sup> *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003, see for example II:4, III:2.

<sup>6</sup> *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, III:2

<sup>7</sup> The analysis of Mechthild is developed further in my forthcoming dissertation, *Vetandets gräns – gränsens vetande: transcendens och kroppslighet utifrån tidig fenomenologi*.

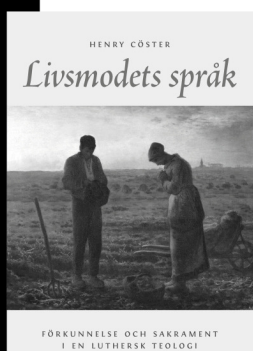
understood as the capacity of continual giving, thus locating the divine in the mirroring, the event of drawing a line.

To investigate such an understanding of God would also mean to develop a concept of subjectivity that connects activity to passivity, autonomy to dependence, and spirituality to bodiliness. And these resources, it could be argued, can to a large extent be found in a tradition of

female subjectivity, not only among female writers, but also among men in a mystic and queer relation to God. Similarly as in the concept of kenosis, this does not mean to take leave of power, but implies a different kind of power – and thus that the play between power and dependency are two sides of the same coin.

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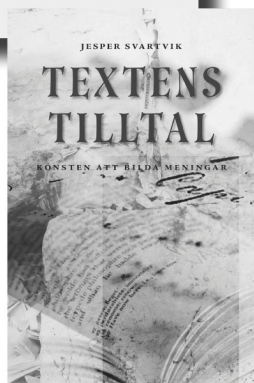


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