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# Essays in Naturalism & Christian Semantics

## Introduction

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This volume presents some intermediate results of a research project on *Naturalism and Christian Semantics* that was generously funded for five years by the Rector of the University of Copenhagen, beginning in the fall of 2008, under the name of the *Centre for Naturalism and Christian Semantics* (CNCS). Since then a group of eleven researchers at PhD, post-doc and senior level have been intensively at work both individually and in a collaboration shared by all on a range of issues that fall under the project title. It is the aim of this volume to present some of the individual projects in a preliminary version before publication elsewhere – and of this introduction to sketch how they hang together within the overall framework of ‘Naturalism and Christian semantics’. In this way we hope to elucidate the tricky ‘and’ of that title and to give an impression of some of the convergences between the historical and the contemporary axes of the project. We also want to raise further questions that need to be studied before one can reach a final verdict on the project’s implications.

### **The initial queries**

From its beginning the project was conceived as having two prongs, a historical and a systematic one. The premise for our common work was the general assumption that Christian thought has never been isolated from more comprehensive philosophical ways of thinking, and that cosmological ideas, in particular, have been and continue to be of central importance for Christian self-reflection. The term ‘Christian semantics’ was chosen to indicate that the project would focus on theoretically elaborated forms of Christian thought in the past and the present, rather than on more popular forms of lived faith (the ‘pragmatics’ of the Christian tradition). By focusing on the Christian tradition as a multifarious semantic universe, we also wanted to counteract the impression that there exists anything like an independent, specifically ‘Christian worldview’ that is either in conflict with or to be accommodated within a naturalistic worldview. Worldviews, or general schemes of cognitive and axiological orientation, tend to be ‘in the air’. Sometimes they are remarkably stable, sometimes under reconstruction; sometimes they are shared by Christians and non-Christians alike; sometimes they are embraced or critically absorbed into Christian self-reflection by leading theologians of their time. Even though the semantic universe of

Christian thought exhibits quite a few enduring ontological commitments (e.g., on divine creativity and love, or on human nature), and even though the semantics of the biblical tradition are often sustained by persistent practices (such as continuous scriptural readings), no uniform ‘Christian ontology’ exists that can be put in a principled contrast to either ancient or contemporary worldviews or philosophies.

Against this background, we initially found it particularly pertinent within the contemporary axis of the project to address two aspects of contemporary ‘naturalism’: scientific naturalism and the varieties of philosophical naturalism, including the interface between scientific and phenomenological approaches to human consciousness and bodiliness.

From the outset, science-based naturalism had a high priority for the project, since the overall success of the natural sciences continues to fuel the more comprehensive, and sometimes quite aggressive, forms of contemporary philosophical naturalism. The idea that the sciences can exhaustively explain every domain of reality, including human consciousness and religion, continues to be one truth candidate amongst others. Two researchers within the group, the Belgian-Swedish philosopher Anne L.C. Runehov and the Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen, brought with them experiences from the field of science and religion. Gregersen had earlier written extensively on theories within evolutionary biology as well as on the new sciences of complexity, especially in relation to Christian theology. This work has continued. However, the CNCS project was also intended to provide space for a new emphasis on the study of some fundamental concepts of present-day science, such as mass, energy and information. A first fruit of this endeavour is the volume *Information and the Nature of Reality: From Physics to Metaphysics*, edited by Gregersen together with the physicist Paul Davies and published by Cambridge University Press (Davies and Gregersen 2010). Runehov had specialized in the vast field of neuroscience and came to the group with her newly published monograph, *Sacred or Neural? The Potential of Neuroscience to Explain Religious Experience* (Runehov 2007). A post-doc fellowship would allow her to work on empathy in theology and the neurosciences and also to work as co-editor of a forthcoming four-volume *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, to be published by Springer (Azari, Runehov and Palautzian 2011).

The broader philosophical concerns regarding naturalism were part of the initial queries, too, ranging from more ‘relaxed’, pragmatically oriented naturalisms onwards to more metaphysical proposals. René Rosfort came to CNCS with a scholarship from the *Carlsberg Foundation*, after having done his PhD at the Copenhagen-based *Center for Subjectivity Research* on

attempts to naturalize ethics and concepts of human personhood. Naturalism was here brought into contact with Continental hermeneutical traditions, especially as espoused by Paul Ricoeur (Rosfort 2008). Likewise Johanne Stubbe Teglbjærg came to CNCS with a fresh PhD on the relation between theological concepts of body and the body phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Teglbjærg 2009). Rosfort and Stubbe Teglbjærg started out from the assumption that the first- and second-person perspectives of phenomenology and theology cannot easily be fitted into the fundamentally third-person perspective of naturalism. They both assumed that even if a 'bald', science-based naturalism was supplemented by more 'relaxed' versions of a common sense kind, the ambiguities of human self-perception as well as the relations between socially interacting bodies cannot be fully accommodated within a naturalistic framework. However, even though they did not work under the flag of naturalism as usually defined, they shared the concerns of a philosophical naturalism to the effect that a mind-body dualism is obsolete, that a clear-cut separation between 'is' and 'ought' is not defensible and that theology needs to overcome the idea of a divide between God and nature.

Here the historical axis of the project, which we will discuss below, became important for the contemporary proposals. For if a historical case could be made for the view that already New Testament writers such as Paul and John used specifically Stoic resources not only in their ethical outlooks but also in their implicit cosmologies, then there would be ancient precursors for the attempts in contemporary theology to formulate some form of theistic naturalism (Peacocke 2007). In this light, it is understandable that Lars Sandbeck and Frederik Mortensen, who joined the project in 2010 and 2009 respectively, have added historical dimensions to their projects on contemporary naturalism. Sandbeck came into the project with a fresh PhD on the relationship of theology and philosophical concepts of imagination (Sandbeck 2009), but he had also published a book with the historian Lars Christiansen entitled *Godless Brains: A Rebuttal of the New Atheists* (Christiansen and Sandbeck 2009). One of their points was that writers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett underestimate the power of human self-reflection and the complexity of religious beliefs today. While Sandbeck's research project at CNCS is intended to focus on contemporary cognitive theory, including evolutionary cognitive theories of religion, he has early on pointed to a persistent Christian Neo-Platonic tradition, reaching from the 9<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher John Scotus Eriugena onwards to the Renaissance thinkers Nicolaus Cusanus and Pico della Mirandola. This raises the historical question whether the tradition of Chris-

tian Neo-Platonism absorbed Stoic motifs in its doctrine of creation and providence as well as in its Christologies. Likewise Frederik Mortensen has drawn attention to the German Idealist F.W.H. Schelling as espousing a naturalism in which cognitive and material elements, and God and humanity, are consistently coordinated with one another while also being analytically distinguishable. Mortensen's PhD project is intended to focus on the contemporary possibilities of a religious naturalism, including theistic and non-theistic versions. But the historical case study of Schelling raises the question whether one should operate with a third form of naturalism, from the Stoics onwards into Christian Neo-Platonism and German Idealism, in addition to the more well-known science-based and pragmatist forms of naturalism.

We are here approaching an early intuition behind the CNCS project that has gradually developed into a shared research assumption among the philosophers and theologians working on the contemporary axis of the project. God is not an entity to be added to an inventory of the universe; for the God that Christians speak about is the living bond in and between everything that exists: "In him we live and move and have our being", as Paul is reported to have said to his contemporary Athenians (Acts 17:28, NRSV), backing up this claim with a reference to the Stoic poet Aratus. The initial research questions thus combined the historical and the contemporary profile of the project by putting two correlative questions on the research agenda:

(1) To what extent does the Christian tradition, in a historical perspective, offer examples of what might be termed a theological naturalism? Such forms of naturalism would not see material entities as primary in relation to the cognitive aspects of reality, but would understand either the reality of God or minimally divine agency as coterminous with the world of creation.

(2) Is it possible to develop a contemporary theology along this line which is in contact with contemporary science but does not fall prey to the assumption that only the natural sciences can illuminate reality, and that they can do so exhaustively, without recourse to the human sciences, including theology?

In addition to the modern perspective, the project had an historical axis of its own from its very beginning. Basing ourselves on an earlier research project (funded in 2003-2007 by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities) on *Philosophy at the Roots of Christianity*, we had a suspi-

cion that the relationship of the earliest form of Christianity with Greco-Roman philosophy was rather more complicated than had hitherto been recognized. In particular, it appeared that even the earliest forms of Christianity as known to us from the New Testament had been quite extensively involved with Greco-Roman philosophy. In other words, the interaction between these two types of thought had begun a long time before the latter half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, which had normally been taken to be the earliest date of such interaction. Furthermore, we felt that there might be an interesting development in that interaction to the effect that whereas the kind of late 2<sup>nd</sup> century interaction on which scholars had traditionally been focusing was between early Christianity and Platonism, at an earlier date the major point of contact for the Christians might have been Stoicism.

As noted, these suspicions arose out of the preceding research project. Some of the results from that project have been published internationally as part of the present project, and since they provided the foundation for our later work, they deserve to be mentioned here. Thus in the fall of 2009, Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen, who has been a post-doc fellow at CNCS for two years beginning on 1 November 2008, published his PhD dissertation (2007) as a book on *Allegory Transformed. The Appropriation of Philonic Hermeneutics in the Letter to the Hebrews* in the prestigious German series, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* (Svendsen 2009). In the spring of 2010, Gitte Buch-Hansen, who has been a post-doc fellow at CNCS also for two years beginning on the same date (but with leave to work as a temporary university lecturer at the University of Oslo), published her PhD dissertation (2007) as a book entitled “*It is the Spirit that Gives Life*”: *A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in John’s Gospel* in the equally prestigious German series *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Buch-Hansen 2010). Later in the spring of 2010, Troels Engberg-Pedersen published his book *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul. The Material Spirit* (a book that was basically written in 2008-2009) with Oxford University Press (Engberg-Pedersen 2010). And even later in the same spring, Runar Thorsteinsson, who was not involved in the preceding project, but became a post-doc fellow at CNCS for two years as from 1 February 2009, published his book *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality* also with Oxford University Press (Thorsteinsson 2010).

These books all laid the ground for our conviction that at least with regard to the apostle Paul (Engberg-Pedersen and Thorsteinsson), the letter to the Hebrews (Nordgaard Svendsen) and the Gospel of John (Buch-Hansen) philosophy was far more central to earliest Christianity than might have

been expected – and that it was Stoicism, in particular (Engberg-Pedersen, Thorsteinsson and Buch-Hansen), and not Platonism that fulfilled that role.

Combining the systematic theological and the historical approaches, we therefore aimed at addressing with renewed vigour both the modern issue of the relationship between modern, scientific and philosophical naturalism and Christian ways of thinking and the historical issue of Stoicism versus Platonism and early Christian ways of thinking – and also the question whether these two issues might possibly throw light on one another.

### **Intermediate results: the modern query**

Early in the process the research group as a whole has intensively studied and discussed contemporary versions of naturalism (e.g. Putnam 2004; Stroud 2004; Fink 2006; Flanagan 2006, Peacocke 2007). Later on some varieties of religious naturalism were introduced to the group (Stone 2008; Drees 1998, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

In these discussions of naturalism two things became clear. The first was that the spread of a full-blown naturalism in analytic philosophy is a fairly recent phenomenon that began around 1960, with the downfall of the distinction between analytic and synthetic aspects of language in analytic philosophy (Kitcher 1992), a development that was promoted first and foremost by American philosophers (Kim 2003).

A second insight was that naturalism comes in a bewildering variety of stripes, each with its own distinctive commitment. The vagueness of the term ‘naturalism’ was already noted by one of the early twentieth-century protagonists of naturalism, the American philosopher Roy Wood Sellars. In his *Evolutionary Naturalism* he stated, almost prophetically, “We are naturalists now. But, even so, this common naturalism is of a very vague and general sort, capable of covering an immense diversity of opinion. It is an

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<sup>1</sup> In discussing the challenges and opportunities of contemporary naturalism we have held three workshops with invited speakers, while also providing our own responses. One was devoted to the relationship between *Naturalism, pragmatism and hermeneutics* (featuring Prof. Hans Fink, Aarhus University, and Prof. Arne Grøn, Copenhagen University), followed at a later date by a lecture by Prof. Eberhard Hermann, Uppsala University. Another workshop was on *Biocognitive theories of religion* (with Prof. Donald Braxton, Juniata College, PA, USA, and Prof. Luis Oviedo, Pontifical University, Rome), supplemented by lectures by the cognitive scientist Prof. Peter Gärdefors, Lund University, and the psychologist, Prof. John Teske, Elizabethtown College, PA, USA. A third workshop has been held on *Charles Sanders Peirce’s relevance for theology* by the US-funded STARS Researchers Dr Christopher Southgate and Dr Andrew Robinson from Exeter University, UK.

admission of a direction more than a clearly formulated belief” (Sellars 1922, vii).

The situation is hardly different today. In his overview article in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the British philosopher of science David Papineau points out that it “would be fruitless to adjudicate some official way of understanding the term” (Papineau 2007, 1). Sometimes naturalism is taken as a whole-sale package that explains all-that-is; at other times it marks a sustained attempt to ‘naturalize’ specific regions of human life (be it morality, consciousness, or religion), while at the same time arguing that other aspects of life, such as the rational enterprise of science or philosophy itself, may not be naturalized on the same terms. Even though rationality only exists in embodied minds, the world of reasons and meanings may exceed the world of causes.

Nonetheless some directions of thought are common to most forms of naturalism. One is the conviction that philosophy does not constitute a ‘first philosophy’ that can establish its own domain (whether one of linguistic analysis or phenomenological investigation) prior to science. Rather, philosophy is always a kind of ‘second philosophy’ that is to be guided by scientific knowledge, at whatever appropriate level, of the way the world is. This is the line of ‘methodological naturalism’. Another conviction is the claim that all-that-exists somehow relies on material entities of a physical nature, even though there might well be cognitive aspects to some parts of reality such as the human species. This is the line of ‘ontological or metaphysical naturalism’. A third general direction of thought is that anything traditionally understood as being ‘supernatural’ should be eliminated from the inventory of reality, and hence also as part of a causal explanation of the way nature actually works. This is the line of ‘anti-supernaturalism’.

Comprehensive metaphysical assumptions and methodological precepts are often intertwined in naturalist proposals. Even though most philosophers are prepared to admit that methodological naturalism does not logically entail an ontological naturalism, the typical proponent of a *science-based ontological naturalism* will argue that the latter is the only reasonable conclusion based on the empirical success of the sciences, while there is a corresponding lack of evidence of anything substantive beyond that which can be known through the sciences (e.g. Forrest 2000). Other philosophers of science, however, argue that a methodological naturalism based on science should be *worldview neutral*, since the explanatory repertoire of science is methodologically limited to what we can formulate empirical hypotheses about. A philosopher of biology of the stature of Elliott Sober thus argues that theories of selection within evolutionary biology

cannot claim to be causally complete and that biology should not make assumptions about unknown ‘hidden variables’; they may be *legio* but they would not be relevant to a Darwinian theory of selection. In Sober’s view, biology certainly relies on methodological naturalism but in virtue of its own explanatory model, it should refrain from discussing questions of ultimate causality. Biology would certainly exclude the idea of external divine intervention (as in the case of Intelligent Design) but would not in principle exclude meta-scientific explanations of the principle of natural selection (as in the proposals of theistic evolution). Rather, the discipline of biology ‘screens off’ the existence or non-existence of God (Sober 2010, 4).

Certainly, a methodological naturalism lies at the core of naturalism. And there are good reasons why *practising scientists* tend to see naturalism as the only game in town. After all, the scientist’s task is to explain natural processes by other (usually more general) features of nature. Naturalism is, as it were, the ‘natural’ attitude when investigating natural processes. Similarly, it should be added, a methodological naturalism is the taken-for-granted view in historical theology. No serious church historian would attempt to explain, say, revivalist movements with reference to supernatural interventions. Historical and sociological factors would be assumed to do the job.

The controversial issue is whether a methodological naturalism invariably leads to scientific findings that coalesce into a unified ‘scientific worldview’. This is what is assumed by proponents of a science-based ontological naturalism. As a matter of fact, however, within the sciences themselves the reigning paradigm seems to be one of an *explanatory pluralism*. Even though all explanations are naturalistic in orientation (in the aforementioned sense), scientific explanations are eventually so variegated that there only exist ‘loose couplings’ between, for example, physics and evolutionary biology or between biology and the psychological and social sciences (Galison and Stump 1996). Philosophers of biology routinely argue for the autonomy of biology as a science. No viable model exists for reducing evolutionary processes as a whole to the more general processes described by physics. The same goes for psychology and sociology in relation to evolutionary biology (despite earlier excitements within the sociobiology of the 1980s). In general, scientific disciplines have autonomous rules. This does not mean, however, that the sciences contradict one another or simply neglect one another. There are important cases of bridging fields (such as quantum chemistry), and natural explanations are often hierarchical in nature. Hence there are physico-chemical *constraints* within evolutionary biology and biological constraints within psychology and so-

ciology. But after the demise of the idea of a unified science in the 1930s, the idea of a general interdisciplinary *reduction* has largely been given up. Promoters of the idea of a ‘convergence’ of the natural sciences (such as the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson) do not make many converts among scientists, not to speak of philosophers of science. Proponents of synthetic theories of science are few and their proposals will have to be judged by scientific and philosophical standards; usually they have stayed in the rhetorical mode without proposing any viable research programs.

At our CNCS discussions, we have tried to escape a general bashing of reductionism within science. Indeed, we believe that reductionist methods should be followed and even preferred wherever possible. But it is one thing to reduce one natural state to another at the same basic level (say, when using chemical bonding laws to explain the stable connections in DNA strings between adenine and thymine and between cytosine and guanine). It is quite another thing to explain the social behaviour of animals or human beings in terms of chemical bonding laws. Here it is important to be a realist about real-world science, also when one is discussing the strengths and weaknesses of ontological naturalism. No serious scientist today claims to be able to describe the world of nature within a uniform causal model. Not even a future ‘theory of everything’ (a TOE combining relativity and quantum theory) would be able to predict the existence of mosquitoes and mosques. Physical explanation will always have to be supplemented by higher-level explanations coming from more domain-specific sciences (e.g., biology, psychology, sociology or even cultural history). By implication, the idea of a ‘causal closure’ functions more like a regulative precept for research than as a scientifically warranted ontological position.

In order to chart the live options within current naturalism we have worked in the group with the usual philosophical distinctions between a purely *science-based naturalism* and more flexible or *pragmatic versions of naturalism*. In this connection we have not failed to notice what may be seen as a permanent dilemma with regard to naturalism. Either one defines naturalism in such a strict manner that it tends to lose its scope when one begins to address important issues of human society, including questions of meaning, ethics, aesthetics and religion. Or else one defines naturalism in such a liberal manner that all human forms of cognitive enquiry and axiological practices are included, apart from anything ‘supernatural’. Thus, in their otherwise positive account of naturalism in current philosophy, Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, rightly point to the curious fact that “part of the attraction of naturalism depends upon a tendency to vacillate between uncontentious and contentious senses of the term” (De

Caro and Macarthur 2004, 3). While opting for a liberal and pluralistic version form of naturalism, they themselves point to the weakness of defining naturalism by what it excludes, especially when it is not clear what is actually excluded. “[T]he most familiar definition is in terms of the rejection of supernatural entities such as gods, demons, souls, and ghosts. However the category of the supernatural is no clearer and no less controversial than the category of the natural” (2004, 2).

In the group we share this difficulty with the concept of ‘the supernatural’. None of us finds it appropriate to define what is meant by ‘God’ in Christian semantics as a ‘supernatural’ being, that is, as a separate, or an a-cosmic, higher being somehow ‘added’ to the universe. Supernaturalism may be one way of articulating the Christian view of God, as this was done under the influence of Middle Platonism, in the Aristotelian ‘perfect-being’-theism of the Middle Ages, or in some Enlightenment traditions. But we share the historical assumption that Christian semantics has not always been bound to such a philosophical framework and we believe that a classic-style theism is unconvincing in the light of today’s scientific worldview and philosophical reflection. Thus the historical work that is done at CNCS serves to counteract the imprisonment of theology within a supernaturalist framework, and the systematic endeavour is to articulate viable alternatives today. One such candidate is the idea of ‘deep incarnation’ to be further explored by Niels Henrik Gregersen (cf. 2010). Most of those of us who are working on the contemporary axis believe that we can do so by tapping from the resources of historical theology, although we are still in the process of discussing how much can be purchased from Stoic resources and how much from Neo-Platonic and later resources. What is at stake here is the extent to which we believe that God-Nature is at bottom a rationalizable unity (as in Stoicism) or whether there has to remain an ‘apophatic’ element in our reflections about divine no less than human nature (as in Neo-Platonism and Romanticism). Among the systematic theologians in the group there is a certain leaning towards the latter rather than the former alternative. ‘Apophaticism’, however, should not be taken as a refuge for laziness, but rather as a final acknowledgment of the limits of rationality when it comes to express ultimate realities.

The controversial issue of the limits of rationality that we are constantly running up against is coupled to another equally controversial issue: that of the relationship between *naturalism and transcendence*. Some forms of naturalism emphatically want to exclude any notion of transcendence by arguing, as summarized by Charley Hardwick, “(1) that only the world of nature is real; (2) that nature is necessary in the sense of requiring no suffi-

cient reason beyond itself to account either of its origin or ontological ground; (3) that nature as a whole may be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agent; and (4) that all causes are natural causes so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events” (Hardwick 1996, 5-6). Even if one is ready to adopt premise 1, it would be hard to find any causal role for human rationality or divine purposiveness under such constraints, even when premises 3-4 might be reformulated so as to include the role of human reasoning, the goal-oriented behaviour of biological organisms, and informational aspects of physics. In general, it seems difficult to exclude a priori any concept of *epistemological transcendence*, by which we simply mean that human rationality cannot know everything there is to be known about the universe that we inhabit. Already on information-theoretical grounds it can be shown that the informational events of our universe, measured in terms of Planck time squared with the combinatorial pathways of organismic evolution, by far exceed the computational power of any conceivable computer, even one that is operating directly on quantum processes. Physicists are fully prepared to accept a ‘finitized epistemology’ (Gierer 1988, 50-57). Such in-principle limits of what can be known about nature show that the much-referred-to idea of ‘causal closure’ of the world remains a metaphysical gesture without scientific evidence. Similarly, phenomenologists refer to the irredeemable ambiguity of human self-awareness, which, as pointed out by René Rosfort in this volume, shows the impossibility of a corresponding notion of ‘rational closure’.

Certainly, such in-principle limits of what can be known about nature and human existence do not make up an argument for a more substantive notion of the transcendence of God vis-à-vis the unity of the world – or indeed of the necessity of speaking of God in the first place. Within our team it has been debated whether the idea of transcendence is at all necessary, or even relevant, in order to form a philosophical conception of God. Stoicism may be seen as articulating a fully-fledged concept of divinity without assuming any world-transcending properties of God. However, both infinity-based concepts of God (as in the Trinitarian theology of Gregory of Nyssa in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) and ground-of-being types of theology (as in Schelling or in 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologians like Paul Tillich and K.E. Løgstrup) do imply a certain concept of divine transcendence vis-à-vis nature. Here the term ‘transcendence’ is used as a linguistic placeholder for expressing the assumption that God is ‘more’ than the totality of the world as present in any given cosmic situation. It goes without saying that divine transcendence is not to be understood here as a *spatial location* ‘outside nature’, as this is

sometimes understood in traditional ‘perfect-being’-theisms. Rather, the term transcendence is taken to refer to the *divine self-identity* in and through the flux of cosmic change, that is, to the view that God cannot simply be identified with any given cosmic situation.

Those within the team who argue for such a more robust notion of divine transcendence have theological reasons for doing so. But they are also motivated by philosophical concerns to explain, at a meta-scientific level, some persistent features of nature as known to us by the sciences. Thus, recurrent themes in the contemporary contributions to the present volume are features such as (1) the malleability of matter and the immense plasticity of the brain, (2) the fact of cosmic creativity as exemplified throughout biological evolution up to human freedom of decision, and (3) the general fertility with respect to life and consciousness of the laws of nature, of nature’s self-organizing principles and of domain-specific natural capacities. What is at stake here are the following two issues. (i) To what extent do the aforementioned pointers towards transcendence carry philosophical weight? (ii) And can it be maintained that theological concerns can lead to constructive philosophical proposals that have an ‘added value’ in relation to the standard discussion of philosophical naturalism?<sup>2</sup>

The individual contributions from the contemporary axis address different aspects of the challenges and prospects of naturalism for theology. In his essay, “From Laws of Nature to Natural Capacities: A Theological Thought Experiment”, Niels Henrik Gregersen discusses the status of laws of nature in contemporary philosophy of science. This work is indebted to a three-year project at Heidelberg University, headed by Prof. Michael Welker, on the relations between concepts of law in the sciences, in legal studies, and in theology, and it also takes up Gregersen’s earlier work on law and self-organization, developed under the aegis of the *International Society of Science and Religion* (Gregersen 2008). Using a typology developed by the philosopher Peter Hodgson, Gregersen proposes a distinction between the constraining C-laws of physics, the guiding G-laws of natural selection and empowering E-laws of more local causal capacities. A theological thought experiment is conducted that shows the relevance of this model for conceptualizing a notion of divine action that understands divine creativity to be internal rather than external to the world of creation.

Anne Runehov discusses in her essay, “Naturalistic Understandings of Religious Experiences”, the relevance of neuroscience for explaining relig-

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<sup>2</sup> A symposium is being planned between members of CNCS and members of the 10-year project on *The Impact of Religion* at Uppsala University. The idea is to publish a book on “Naturalism and Transcendence”.

ious experiences, using Michael Persinger's and Andrew Newberg's studies as her test cases. With Gregersen she shares the idea of explanatory pluralism, that is, the view that it is mandatory for any scientific subdiscipline to be clear about the inevitable gaps between *explanans* and *explanandum* in order to be able to engage in interdisciplinary work. In particular, she points to the gaps between the narrow scope of Persinger's and Newberg's empirical studies and the broad scope of the conclusions they draw, such as that God cannot exist or the opposite conclusion that some sort of Absolute Unitary Being is suggested by neurological findings. She shows in detail how each of the two empirical studies are methodologically limited, points to their explanatory power and weaknesses and uses methods of analytic philosophy to identify the argumentative gaps of their conclusions. In this process she also calls for contributions from cultural studies when aiming to explain so-called mystical experiences.

Lars Sandbeck and Frederik Mortensen present two historical cases that show the use of all-inclusive concepts of nature within philosophical and theological traditions. In "Indefinability: Apophatic Theology and the Modern Denial of Human Nature", Lars Sandbeck points to the Neo-Platonic philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (d. c. 877), whose *Periphyseon* continued to influence Christian theology even though he was declared a heretic in the thirteenth century. Scotus, and later Nicolaus of Cusa (1401-1464), developed a theology according to which God is radically manifested in the world of creation, in such a way that, in Cardinal Cusanus' own terms, the world of creation is the *explicatio* of the *complicatio omnium* that is God. The 'surplus' of God in relation to created reality is that God is the creative nature (Scotus), or the *ipsum posse*, the principle of new potentialities, as Cusanus put it. Sandbeck points out that these thinkers are driven by a philosophical concept of God as infinity. As such God is not ultimately describable in definite descriptions (which would finitize God). Moreover, Sandbeck shows the route from an apophatic theology to an apophatic anthropology in Renaissance thinkers like Cusanus and Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). They argue that the role of humanity is not to imitate nature, but to imitate God. Creativity in the human race thus takes place by a participation in God's *ars infinita*, a view further radicalized by Pico, who argues for the restless plasticity of human nature. Here Sandbeck points to the parallels in contemporary postmodern philosophy. Catherine Malabou refers to the plasticity of the human brain; nature here evolves temporally through explosions of emergence that both destroy and give new shape to life. Similarly, the human mind can itself be seen as an environmentally 'extended mind', as the cognitive philosopher Andy Clark

argues. The theological and ethical question is then whether human beings mirror the fullness of divine nature or the extensive void of a godless world.

While Scotus and Cusanus make a case for an infinity-based concept of God, F.W.H. Schelling (1775-1854) develops a ground-of-being variety of theology, as is shown by Frederik Mortensen in his study of “Vitality and Personhood in Schelling’s Anthropology”, with particular reference to the *Treatise on Human Freedom* (1809). Mortensen shows how Spinoza’s pantheism remains the subtext as well as the explicit challenge for Schelling’s own work. For Schelling, idealism and realism constitute two complementary and equally important aspects of his *Naturphilosophie*, which he explicitly called ‘the Spinozism of physics’. Schelling, however, argued that the irruptions of human freedom need an explanatory framework other than the one offered by Spinoza. Human freedom is grounded in divine freedom. However, just as human freedom emerges out of an organic vitality, so also the personhood of God only arises out of a ground of Being which at the same time remains an unfathomable abyss of Being, even to God. Neither divine decisions nor human freedom are fully transparent. In this view, nature is seen as a vast living whole which is under constant development and reshaping. Life, freedom and creativity lie at the bottom of the universe, yet are prompted by the ground and abyss of Being, which is also the ground and abyss of God. This view of the Absolute is a far cry from the ‘perfect-being’ theism of medieval theology, but it has obvious similarities with the aforementioned infinity-based concept of divinity. God is not a system but rather life, as Schelling put it. The main point for Mortensen, however, is the turn to anthropology that takes place with Schelling’s 1809 treatise. The actualization of divinity is nowhere more visible than in the yearnings of human life. The process from emotion to will, from yearning to human decision, both reflects and reveals divine personhood. The charge of anthropomorphism raised against Schelling by his contemporaries was thus taken lightly by Schelling. For why should one assume that prehuman characteristics, such as ground and matter, should be more appropriate to God than human-like concepts? The manifestations of the Absolute belong as much to reality as does its hidden ground.

The role of bodily based emotions and of more fluid states of moods is the particular topic of René Rosfort in his essay, “The Fragile Mind: Transcendence and Feelings”. Rosfort is currently working on a monograph on the interface between psychopathology and phenomenology, written together with the Italian psychiatrist, Professor Giovanni Stanghellini of Chieti University, Italy, and to be published by Oxford University Press.

Rosfort's suspicion is that even if one adopts a more relaxed or soft version of naturalism that gives room for human reasons in an otherwise causally defined universe, one would not be able to find room for the opaqueness of human existence as described in detail by phenomenology. In his criticism of John McDowell's defence of a common sense rationalism, Rosfort argues that McDowell's assumption of a 'rational closure' of human reasoning is not tenable in light of a phenomenology of human feelings, in particular not when regarding the phenomenon of falling into moods. He argues, too, that McDowell's appeal to Aristotelian virtues and a good portion of cultivation (in the terms of German *Bildung*) is insufficient, if one is not willing, with Immanuel Kant, to assume a transcendent safeguard of moral reasoning. The interplay between the apprehension of infinite demands and the finite solutions of everyday life remains a problem in the moral experience of human beings, and this critical interplay provides the impetus for further self-reflection. In such conflicts, Rosfort argues, a sort of transcendence (like Kant's *Ding an sich*, or his *Moral Law*) comes to light when human beings are forced to accept the persistence of moral conflicts that cannot be explained or solved within the space of common sense reasoning. The formation of the human sense of meaning and obligation discloses a transcendence that is "neither smothered by the light of the natural sciences nor reined in by a rational closure".

In her essay, "Trinitarian Theology and Naturalism: Beyond the God-Nature Divide", Johanne Stubbe Teglbjærg also uses phenomenological resources in her argument for overcoming the God-nature divide. Defining naturalism as a denial of supernaturalism is, philosophically speaking, an unsatisfying position. Furthermore, within Trinitarian theology God is not understood as something supernatural. For as argued by the eminent theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, the point of Trinitarian theology is to argue that God's transcendence as Father is always united with God's immanence in the world through the Son and the Spirit, so that God cannot be Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, just as they cannot be divine without their relation to the Father. Within this conception, divine and human reality are originally and totally mediated through each other, only existing in a living yet differentiated unity. Moreover, Teglbjærg argues that Pannenberg's theological project is not only informed by G.F.W. Hegel's concept of God as genuine infinity, but even more by Wilhelm Dilthey's phenomenology of the formation of human meaning. Pannenberg starts out neither 'from below', from objective empirical states of the world, nor 'from above', from an idealized God's eye view, but always works on the basis of concrete experience. Reality cannot be grasped apart from an interpretative

stance. More precisely, a particular apprehension of meaning can only be made in the context of open boundaries, including the horizon of future experiences. But even if any concrete experience always presupposes a conception of the whole, the whole of experience is only actually present to human interpreters in anticipations. At this point Teglbjærg brings Pannenberg's more time-oriented way of thinking into dialogue with the more spatially oriented body phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. More precisely, she suggests a new way of articulating the presence of the Trinitarian God in the world of nature and humanity. She thus proposes the contours of a theology of the body, in which Pannenberg's reference to the universal history of the union between God and world is transposed into a notion of God's universal body, the complex reality of God, nature and humanity.

### **Intermediate results: the ancient query**

As part of the new quest with regard to the ancient part of the project, it was planned that Troels Engberg-Pedersen should (among other things) attempt to analyse the Gospel of John in the light of his own work on Paul and Stoic cosmology as presented in the book referred to above. The aim was to see whether one could reinforce exegetically the view so forcefully presented by Gitte Buch-Hansen to the effect that not only is there philosophy behind that gospel (as many have previously been prepared to accept): it is also specifically Stoic philosophy. In his essay in this volume, "Logos and Pneuma in the Fourth Gospel", Engberg-Pedersen initially sketches a view of the relationship between Stoicism and Platonism both intrinsically during what he calls the 'transitional period of ancient philosophy' (from 100 BCE to 200 CE) and also vis-à-vis early Christianity in the first two centuries. This view is argued in more detail in an introductory essay entitled "Setting the Scene: Stoicism and Platonism in the Transitional Period in Ancient Philosophy" (Engberg-Pedersen 2010b) in a forthcoming book on *Stoicism in Early Christianity* co-edited by Engberg-Pedersen (Rasmus et al. 2010). The view is that within ancient philosophy a shift can be observed in what was considered to be 'the leading' type of philosophy. In the earlier part of the transitional period it was Stoicism. Then it became Platonism. Furthermore, the shift came about as a result of some kind of battle. But very noticeably, it was Platonism (witness: Plutarch, who attacked Stoicism) that was on the war path, not Stoicism (witness: Seneca, who was merely curious about Platonism). This fact in itself tends to support the picture of a shift. In that case, the kind of philosophy

that might have influenced Christian thinkers to begin with was a materialist and monistic one, which would then be overtaken by the kind of (Middle) Platonic, idealistic and dualistic worldview with which the Christian thinkers would gradually become involved from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century onwards. In this contrast, Stoicism is very close to later forms of religious naturalism (Spinoza springs to mind), while the Platonic influence has been formative with regard to what has traditionally been understood ever since as specifically Christian semantics. In his essay in the present volume Engberg-Pedersen attempts to show – in a manner that both complements and supports Buch-Hansen’s earlier claim – that a Stoic matrix gives a precise and added point to John’s account of the incarnation in John chapter 1 and his epistemological and ontological reflections in John chapters 3 and 6, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

Within such an overall setting, it is obvious that it would be valuable to try to follow the relationship between Stoicism and Platonism into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and then also to consider the precise character of the engagement of Christian writers of the same century with either type of philosophy. The first part of this strategy has been on the agenda in several meetings of the research group with specialists from abroad who have been invited to come to Denmark and share their expertise with us.<sup>4</sup> The second part has been taken up directly at CNCS in the individual research projects of Runar Thorsteinsson, Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen, Gitte Buch-Hansen and Tilde Bak Halvgaard, who together with Engberg-Pedersen constitute the ‘ancient’ part of the project.

Runar Thorsteinsson is focusing on Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) as a Christian who also had a vivid relationship with non-Christian Greco-Roman philosophy. In addition, Justin has the further attraction to Thorsteinsson that he is an exponent of the interaction between early Christianity and philosophy in the imperial capital of Rome, which Thorsteinsson also studied (in relation to other writers than Justin) in the book referred to above. In his first essay in the present volume, “Justin Martyr on the Philosophical Schools: A Research Tool”, Thorsteinsson presents a much needed catalogue of places in the transmitted works by Justin where he

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<sup>3</sup> At a two-day workshop in June 2009 organized by Buch-Hansen and Engberg-Pedersen, an international group of scholars including Prof. Harold W. Attridge, Yale University, USA, Prof. Ismo Dunderberg, University of Helsinki, Finland, Prof. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, University of Göttingen, Germany, and Prof. George van Kooten, University of Groningen, The Netherlands, discussed the related theme of *John and Philosophy*.

<sup>4</sup> Thus in the spring of 2009 we had a seminar day with Prof. George Boys-Stones of Durham University, UK, and in the spring of 2010 a similar seminar day with Dr Carl O’Brien of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

speaks either explicitly or implicitly about the philosophical schools, and with a special emphasis on just the two schools that are in focus in the overall project: Stoicism and Platonism. In his second essay, “Stoics and Stoic Cosmo-Theology: Justin’s Criticism in the *Second Apology*”, he presents an entirely new interpretation of the enigmatic figure of Crescens, the ‘Cynic’, in the *Second Apology*, arguing – quite persuasively to many in the group – that Crescens was in fact a Stoic. This proposal is of considerable interest to the overall project. If Thorsteinsson is right, it yields more material to show precisely what the philosophical tenets of Stoicism were to which Justin objected when he turned, first to Platonism and then to Christianity.

Here we already see one research result that has already become clear during the work at CNCS, a phenomenon that one might capture by speaking of *the principle of interaction*:

- that the early Christians – at least, some of them – were involved with Greco-Roman philosophy in a genuine *interaction*;
- that they *literally* saw Christianity as ‘the better philosophy’, and distinctly not as something *different from* philosophy;
- and that in their involvement with non-Christian Greco-Roman philosophy they therefore argued in a philosophical manner in exactly the same way as the non-Christian Greco-Roman philosophers did among themselves.

One might have thought that this way of understanding the ancient situation around ‘Christianity’ and ‘philosophy’ would have been clearly recognized a long time ago. After all, some early Christians (from Justin Martyr via Clement of Alexandria to Origen – and with roots for a similar view in the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria) did speak of Christianity as ‘the better philosophy’. However, it is one thing to note this and another to take it seriously. At CNCS we have come to take the point quite seriously.

Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen focuses on the great Origen at the end of the transitional period, well into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (185-254). In the essay presented in this volume, “Origen and the Possibility of Future Falls”, Nordgaard Svendsen situates Origen’s reflections on the possibility of renewed falls after the final *apokatastasis* (‘restoration’) within the ancient philosophical reflections on freedom and responsibility that was one of the central issues in the battle between Stoicism and Platonism in the transitional period. Highly interestingly, Nordgaard Svendsen is able to lay bare a tension in Origen’s account of the possibility of future falls that reflects the fact that Origen draws on *both* Platonism *and* Stoicism. In one of Origen’s answers he bases himself on a Platonic sense of human freedom. In an-

other, however, which does not sit at all well with the former one, he draws on Stoicism. Here again we see the principle of interaction to be straightforwardly at work. Origen did not relate to non-Christian Greco-Roman philosophy as something extrinsic to his 'own' Christianity. Rather, it was part of it. The next step is then to ask exactly what it was – as seen in the light of the principle of interaction – that made the Christians (Justin and Origen and the others) take the step from Stoicism and, gradually more often, Platonism into the Christian philosophy. Where did Christianity have its *philosophical* 'added value'? Nordgaard Svendsen's study lays the ground for addressing this question head-on.

In her essay, "The Spirit in Origen's *Commentary on St. John's Gospel: The Stoic Foundation of Origen's Theory of Universal Restoration*", Gitte Buch-Hansen extends her major work on the Gospel of John into the early Christian reception of that gospel, focusing here in particular on Origen and his *Commentary on John*. Very interestingly, Buch-Hansen is able to show that on the one hand Origen feels that he must reject a Stoic understanding of the Johannine claim that 'God is Spirit' (cf. John 4:24) since – as the also Stoically informed Origen was well aware – this would turn God into a bodily entity; on the other hand he also uses so many Stoic terms in his account of the world that one must conclude that Origen's cosmology was in fact if not a completely Stoic one, then at least heavily influenced by Stoicism. Thus Buch-Hansen's study shows, along the lines of the previous essays, *how* much Stoicism is in fact present in the reflection of the early Christians also of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries when one reads the texts in the light of the image of an ongoing battle between Stoicism and Platonism up until the end of the transitional period. Towards the end of her study Buch-Hansen also explicitly addresses the issue of how these results are relevant for the overall theme of naturalism and Christian semantics. Here she rightly focuses on the best way of thinking the relationship between God and the world and on the idea of God's bodiliness.

Tilde Bak Halvgaard, who has been a PhD student at CNCS since 1 September 2008, concludes the historical section of the volume with an essay entitled "The Sound of Silence: Theology of Language in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and *The Trimorphic Proténnoia*". These two enigmatic texts, written in Coptic and found just after World War II in Nag Hammadi in Middle Egypt, belong in general terms among the so-called 'Gnostic' writings. Their dating is extremely difficult, but it is probably not false to take them to reflect intellectual currents of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE when the church father Irenaeus wrote his famous denunciation of the 'Gnostic' heretics. In the specimen of her work printed in this volume, Bak Halvgaard

argues that the two texts display a ‘theology of language’ that she seeks to elucidate by drawing on certain basic ideas in the Stoic philosophy of language that focus on the relationship between thought, sound, voice and speech. Once again, non-Christian Greco-Roman philosophy may be seen to form *part of* the reflection of these religious thinkers, whose relationship with Christianity is itself an issue for reflection. However, Bak Halvgaard’s claim is not just that the two writers were themselves, as it were, Stoics. On the contrary, she claims that they turned the Stoic philosophy of language ‘upside down’ in order to bring out their own notion of the divine, which was focused, not on rational, articulate speech (*logos*), but rather on a notion of a ‘silence’ that was itself full of sound and meaning, though only to be grasped by the few (if any). It is interesting to speculate about the extent to which this idea fits the idea of ‘apophatic’ theology which Lars Sandbeck focuses on in his essay later in the volume.

Summarizing on these contributions to the distinctly historical part of the overall project, one may conclude that the work done so far at CNCS has articulated two comprehensive perspectives of major importance for a better understanding of early Christianity. The two perspectives are these:

(1) In the transitional period between 100 BCE and 200 CE a battle was going on between Stoicism and Platonism to win the role of the ‘leading’ philosophical position, not only in ethics but also in cosmology and fundamental metaphysics. To begin with, Stoicism was the leading philosophy. Eventually, a shift occurred that would make Platonism assume that position. Still, the influence of Stoicism as part of a ‘reformed Platonism’ was considerable.

(2) Early Christianity interacted with this development as one more philosophy among the others – the principle of interaction.

These results need to be corroborated, however, and their implications further investigated:

(3) Corresponding to point 1: As presented here, the understanding of the transitional period in ancient philosophy has the backing of the work done so far within CNCS. However, for this perspective to become a ‘new paradigm’ in international scholarship, quite a lot more needs to be done on the character of the interaction of Stoicism and Platonism in the first two centuries CE. A major figure to be further studied in this context is the Greek philosopher Plutarch (around 100 CE), who was a Platonist but who

also wrote extensively on and against the Stoics. However, the whole field of the relationship of Stoicism in relation to the upcoming Platonism in the transitional period *and* the way this interaction is reflected in specifically Christian writers (e.g. Clement of Rome and Tertullian) needs to be further investigated, not in order to try to cover the field as a whole, but rather to give a sufficient amount of substance to the new perspective for it to gain international credibility.

(4) Corresponding to point 2: Once the principle of interaction has been established, it becomes particularly important to consider in detail the philosophical topics and the philosophical reasons that made the early Christians choose to see Christianity, in particular, as *the better* philosophy. This issue has not yet received the attention it deserves in the work done at CNCS. But it is obvious that it calls for as precise answers as one can get. Again the aim is not to cover the whole field, only to keep this issue sharply in focus with respect to some selected major Christian thinkers.

In addition to these results and further queries there is another perspective that has been centrally in focus during the work at CNCS, but not so clearly articulated in the introduction so far even though it underlies a great deal of what was said above with regard to the contemporary axis. Up until now we have spoken of the relationship between Greco-Roman philosophy on the one hand and Christianity on the other a little bit as if these two entities represented ‘naturalism’ and ‘Christian semantics’, respectively. In one respect, that is fair enough. After all, ‘philosophy’ would off-hand appear to be more ‘naturalistic’ than Christianity. On the other hand, the principle of interaction already makes such a view rather doubtful when applied to ancient philosophy. Furthermore, what makes the historical work at CNCS particularly interesting is the fact that *within* the category of Greco-Roman philosophy itself, one type of philosophy, viz. Stoicism, has a distinctly naturalistic profile, whereas the other type, Platonism, is far closer to Christianity *as Christianity developed from the moment Platonism had won the battle with Stoicism*. It is not least this feature with regard to the kinds of Greco-Roman philosophy that interacted with early Christianity which makes the historical part of the project directly relevant to the systematic part.

## **The interface between the historical and the systematic parts of the project**

As is clear from the accounts given above of the various individual research projects, a mixture of historical and systematic perspectives is involved in almost all the projects presented in this volume. Almost all the systematic essays include some historical material in their attempt to address the systematic issues. The converse situation may appear to be less strongly present inasmuch as only a few of the historical essays explicitly address the systematic issues. In fact, however, a systematic relevance is implicitly present all through the historical essays.

This is precisely due to the fact that they are all focusing on the question of Stoicism vis-à-vis Platonism in relation to the Christian texts. As already noted, in this contrast Stoicism is understood as a prime example of a type of philosophy that is distinctly ‘naturalistic’ in the sense that it sees *everything* in the world, including the Stoic God, as *part of* the world of nature and hence takes God as in principle having the same fundamental character as everything else in that world. By contrast, ancient Platonism was a prime example of a type of philosophy that might well be called ‘non-naturalistic’ since God was here understood to be ‘beyond’ the world of ‘what is’ – in fact, ‘beyond substance’ (*hyperekeina tês ousias*), as Plato himself had famously claimed. With this contrast we meet the contrast between ‘naturalism’ and ‘transcendence’, of which we have already spoken above.

Seen in this light, one may summarize the interaction between the systematic and the historical parts of the project as follows. In the systematic part the aim is constantly to tease out to what extent there is a need to employ the notion of ‘transcendence’ vis-à-vis a ‘merely’ ‘naturalistic’ account of the world, including the ‘human world’, in order to provide an account that is genuinely satisfactory. Also, if in some respect there is such a need, the aim is to clarify and define the precise meaning and scope of the use of talk of ‘transcendence’. All through, since the project is one of systematic *theology*, the aim will also be to correlate the philosophical claims with the conceptuality of Christian thought. Indeed, the project can only be carried out by scholars who have a distinctly theological expertise – but who are *also* both willing and able to appreciate on their own the non-Christian naturalistic approaches of contemporary natural science and philosophy. Similarly, in the historical part the aim is constantly to tease out to what extent the Christian texts take over or differ from a Stoic, ‘naturalistic’ conceptuality and if they differ, precisely why they do so. For

historical reasons, but also because of its intrinsic clarity and forcefulness, Stoicism has proved to be a strikingly fruitful ‘tool for thinking’. Take a Stoic-like, monistic naturalism as the default position. Examine – in relation to either a more Platonizing philosophical position *or* a distinctly Christian one – where any boundaries of the naturalistic perspective come to light. Then try to ascertain the philosophical ‘added value’ (if any) of the ‘more than’ naturalistic (and hence ‘transcendent’) perspectives. And you will have become much wiser both on the texts and on the issues themselves.

With such an agenda and within such an understanding of the interface between the historical and the systematic parts of the project, one may note a number of quite striking correlations between the various individual parts of the overall project. For instance, it is in fact highly noticeable to what extent Schelling, as described by Frederik Mortensen, is struggling with exactly the same issues of the relationship between God and the world, human freedom and the like that are also at the centre of the engagement of Justin and Origen with Stoic and Platonic philosophy, as exegeted by Runar Thorsteinsson, Stefan Nordgaard Svendsen and Gitte Buch-Hansen. Similarly, Lars Sandbeck develops some striking similarities between traditional ‘apophatic’ theology and modern, deconstructionist ‘theology’. The point here is certainly not that there are no differences between then and now. On the contrary, there certainly are, not least the difference that the ancient, Stoic brand of philosophical naturalism was also an explicitly religious kind of naturalism. Still, by sitting around the same table and working on the same texts, both ancient and modern, the participants in the work done at CNCS have come to realize that there are in fact surprisingly many similarities between then and now *within* a framework that also recognizes the differences. It is perhaps not wrong to say that this is one of the most striking and surprising results of the common work that has hitherto been done.

What all this points towards is the chance of getting a better understanding of how to employ the two basic notions of ‘naturalism’ and ‘transcendence’ in connection with Christianity, both ancient and modern. If this goal can in fact be reached, the project will have fulfilled its function.

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