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the Self & the Political

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CONTENTS

Introduction – <i>Marc De Kesel</i>	1
PART I – MYSTICISM	
Varieties of Mystical Annihilation in Seventeenth-Century France <i>Bernard McGinn</i>	9
A Small Note Concerning Bernard McGinn’s Varieties of Mystical Annihilation in the Seventeenth Century <i>Huib Welzen</i>	30
Incarnation, <i>Anéantissement</i> , and the Formation of the Modern Self in Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle’s Christocentric Mysticism: A Critical Appraisal in Dialogue with Charles Taylor <i>Cliff Knighten</i>	33
Meister Eckhart, A Man for all Creeds? <i>Kees Schepers</i>	55
To Learn the Truth is to Learn Ourselves <i>Michel Dijkstra</i>	72
Schwenckfeld and Sudermann as Mediators of Late Medieval Spirituality in the Baroque Period <i>Wolfgang Christian Schneider</i>	75
Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Politics of the Natural <i>August Higgins</i>	91
Emerson, a Beautiful Surprise! <i>Gerrit Steunebrink</i>	107
PART II – DOWN TOWN	
Love Thy Neighbour Purely: Mysticism & Politics in Fénelon <i>Marc De Kesel</i>	113
Conjectural Politics: Nicholas of Cusa’s Very Early Modern Mystical Foundation of Political Consensus <i>Inigo Bocken</i>	129

Mystique et supraconfessionalisme dans les stratégies politiques des chrétiens d'Orient <i>Jad Hatem</i>	145
Money and Interior Life: The Spirituality of the Treasurer in Early Modern Religious Houses <i>Eduard Kimman</i>	159
Consumerism Supported, Consumerism Opposed: A Look at Orthodoxy and Mysticism in <i>Ancien Régime</i> France <i>Joost Vandernet</i>	175
Jean de Labadie: Mystic – Activist – Politician <i>Herman Westerink</i>	187
PART III – DOWN SOUL	
'Where Then Is the Self?': Pascal's Critique of the Ego <i>Dominiek Hoens</i>	199
The Imaginary Pilgrimages and the Outbreak of the Subjectivity in the Early Modernity <i>François Manga</i>	209
Self and Loss of Self in Modern Literature <i>Liesbeth Eugelink</i>	221
The Fractured Self of a Modern Mystic: Christian Wiman's <i>My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer</i> (2013) <i>Theo Witkamp</i>	231

MARC DE KESEL

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR PURELY

Mysticism & Politics in Fénelon

*Unfortunately, you do not understand these truths.
How could you appreciate them? You do not know
God at all. You do not love Him at all. You do not
pray to Him at all with all your heart, and you do
nothing to try to know Him.*
(Fénelon to Louis XIV)

Christian love is thoroughly social. Since its very beginning, Christianity has been imbued with the ideal of *agape*, the term for the way the first Christians organized their communities. In those, so to speak, proto-communist societies no one was poor because all possessions were common property and all lived in perfect harmony. Such were the consequences of the fact that the participants defined God as love. The ‘Kingdom of God’, which Christians believed was about to be realised on earth, was meant to be the reign of love. ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’: this biblical commandment was practised in a radical way, so we read in the Acts of the Apostles.¹ When later on, Christianity had become part of society’s official power, that power was again and again criticized by reference to the very idea of *agape*. Under all kinds of Christian regimes, ‘love’ was part of the slogans by which the sharpest criticism against them was expressed. To this day, Christian love has always been a motor behind all kinds of social revolt and political change.

However, is Christian love not rather the name for that intimate relation the faithful have with God? Is love for God not first of all what matters to the soul

¹ ‘The group of followers all felt the same way about everything. None of them claimed that their possessions were their own, and they shared everything they had with each other. In a powerful way the apostles told everyone that the Lord Jesus was now alive. God greatly blessed his followers, and no one went in need of anything. Everyone who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles. Then they would give the money to anyone who needed it’ (Acts 4:32-35).

– the soul considered neither in its relation to other souls nor in some social or political commitment, but the soul on her own, hoping to find in that loneliness a direct intimacy with God? Here, love is not something social, let alone political. Here, love is explicitly solitary and intimate, a matter of introspection, of inner life.

This kind of love, too, has a long tradition in Christianity. Here, however, the background is not only *agape*, but *eros* as well. The intimate love for God is highly erotic, albeit in a sublimated way: ‘carnal’ longing is transformed into spiritual desire for truth or, what amounts to the same thing, for God. In other terms, it is Platonic *eros* that is at stake in this tradition, a tradition that started with Origenes’ comment on the *Song of Songs* and plays a dominant role in the entire Christian narrative, and is most explicitly expressed in what is commonly known as the tradition of Christian mysticism.²

Christian mystics love God by going an inner path that leads them deep down into their soul. And yet, at the same time, they pretend that this love is not in contradiction with explicitly social engagement. According to them, the inner path leading to God simultaneously leads beyond the boundaries of their own self. To them, mystical love is perfectly compatible with neighbourly love and with social commitment in general. Going down into the soul even coincides with going inside society’s political ‘downtown’.

This essay follows an early modern defender of mystical love, François de Fénelon (1651-1715), in the way he considers mystical – or, as he calls it, spiritual – love to be compatible with social and political commitment. Even though my conclusion will be critical of the theoretical possibility of this compatibility, it must be said that, in fact, Fénelon combined an extremely intimate conceptualization of the love for God with one of the sharpest critiques of the political absolutism of his time. Fénelon did not succeed, however, in properly arguing the compatibility of the two kinds of Christian love he both practised: the intimate love and the social one. What is at stake in this failure, is – as I will show – the impact of the then emerging Cartesian *cogito* that became the new, typically *modern* subject. I will argue that the modernity of the subject position is problematic, both at the level of intimate love and at that of social love. In this sense, the social problem of Fénelonian love can shed light on the profoundly problematic character of the modern social and the modern political.

² See for instance: E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990; Ann W. Astell & Catherine Rose Cavadini, ‘The Song of Songs’, in: Julia A. Lamm (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, Chichester (UK): Blackwell, 2013, 27-40.

1. Loving Purely...

Rather than a mystic, Fénelon considers himself a theorist defending the spiritual movement of his age and the mystical tradition this movement bases itself upon. This mystical tradition needs defence, so he repeats again and again, since it puts forward the very core of Christian life, which is love. In an age of religious wars, when God is no longer audible through the evidence of nature and the reality of everyday life, the inner path of love turns out to be the most appropriate manner to relate to God. Love – more precisely ‘pure love’, *pur amour* – became the core concept of the *spiritualité* movement, which dominated the devotional culture of seventeenth-century France.³

That century is already at its end when, confronted with the personality and the writings of Madame Guyon in 1688, François de Fénelon, an *abbé* affiliated to the Versailles Court, discovers this kind of spiritual love and makes its defence the central mission of his life. He gets involved in a committee that screens Guyon’s works and signs the document that condemns several passages of it. This, however, does not prevent him in the years that follow from striking a blow for the *pur amour* – as well as for the entire mystical tradition – as the core of both doctrine and practice of Christian faith. In 1697 he publishes the *Explication des maxims des saints sur la vie intérieure*, in which he explains that the ‘inner life’ – and the *pur amour* as practiced in it – is in perfect harmony with the ‘maxims of the saints’, i.e. the principles as we find them with the Church Fathers and the other authorities in Christian doctrine.⁴ This publication appears in the midst of a huge public debate about the *pur amour*, the famous *Querelle du quiétisme*, that lasts until 1699. Then, with a condemnation of twenty-three sentences in the *Explication* by the Magisterium in Rome, Louis XIV definitely closes the debate – a decision that stopped the then huge élan of French *spiritualité*. Fénelon will nonetheless continue to explain and defend the *pur amour*, albeit by writings that will only reach an audience in an indirect way and, later, in posthumously published outtakes of his intellectual and religious heritage.⁵

The condemnation of Fénelon’s *pur amour* has all kinds of reasons that are not ‘doctrinal’ at all (intrigues at the Versailles Court, competition with his former protector and later opponent, Bossuet, et cetera), and yet, the verdict is not without interesting ‘doctrinal’ aspects. For what is *pur amour* about? And

³ See for instance: Michel Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir de François de Sales à Fénelon*, Paris: Seuil, 2000.

⁴ François de Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, ed., transl. & introd. Chad Helms, New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006, 207-297.

⁵ Peter J. Gorday, *François Fénelon: A Biography*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012.

why is it called *pure*? Is loving God not the condition the Christian lives in anyhow? God is love, so he reads in the Bible, and since his very being depends on God, he depends on his love, which implies that he shares in this love and that consequently, believing in Him, he loves God. But how can he take this love for God really seriously? How to guarantee that his love is love for God and not for himself? How to avoid that, by loving God, he is only concerned with himself; that his love is in fact nothing but self-love?

Here we meet the conceptual difference underlying the devotional practice of *pur amour*, namely the unbridgeable gap that separates the human and the divine. On the one hand, there is God, who is infinite and in that sense sovereign; on the other hand, there is the human being, marked by finitude and for that very reason subjected to God's sovereignty, a sovereignty on which he radically depends and which, therefore, he cannot but gratefully love. So how, then, can I *really* love the sovereign God? Must I love Him *because* I depend on Him, *because* He created me and promises to continue my being beyond my death? Must I love God *because* He will pay that love of mine with the reward of eternal beatitude?

In the context of these questions Fénelon comes up with his famous 'supposition'.⁶ Suppose, he says, that I know with absolute certainty that God has condemned me to the eternal pains of hell. This 'supposition' seems to be in contradiction with the eternal beatitude that God promises to every Christian. This is indeed the promise that God has made. However, we too easily forget, Fénelon replies, that this promise does not limit God's sovereignty. God is no less God when He decides not to keep His promise. So, when I take God's sovereignty seriously, I must approve of this possibility – which implies that this 'supposition' is valid and not unorthodox at all.

So, Fénelon continues, suppose that I am sure that God will deprive me from afterlife in heaven: does loving God then make any sense? Contrary to the common sense reaction to this question, Fénelon replies with an unambiguous 'yes'. What is more, he adds, it is precisely because I do not receive anything in return, that my love for God is pure. Only this kind of love has radically overcome the selfish love – *l'amour-propre* – that rules my natural life. Solely *pur amour* makes my love *supra-natural*. It is only then that I love God and nothing or no one else but God. Only then I take his divine sovereignty really seriously.

The implications of this kind of *pur amour* are rather extreme, certainly for the loving subject. For *pure* love implies the annihilation of the I that loves.

⁶ François de Fénelon, *Ceuvres* I, ed. Jacques Le Brun, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1983, 661-663.

Pur amour coincides with the ‘holocaust’ of the subject, so Fénelon writes in one of his *Lettres spirituelles*:⁷

Be really a nothing, in all and everywhere; but do not add anything to this pure nothing. On this nothing you have no grip. It has nothing to lose. The real nothing offers resistance to nothing, there is no I that it takes care of. So, be nothing, and nothing more. Suffer in peace, abandon yourself; go, like Abraham, without knowing where. Receive from the hands of men the comfort that God will give you through them. You must receive it not from them, but through them from Him. Mix your abandonment with nothing, and do not mix that nothing with anything else either. Such wine must be drunk pure, unmixed; even one drop of water destroys its worth. One loses infinitely by willing to keep the slightest part of oneself. No restriction, I swear.

(...)

Love the hand of God that beats and destroys us. The creature is only made to be destroyed as the one who has made it for himself sees fit [*au bon plaisir*]. What a prosperous use of our substance! Our nothing glorifies the eternal Being and the entire God. May that which our *amour-propre* likes to preserve get lost. Let us be the holocaust which love’s fire reduces to ashes [Soyons l’holocauste que le feu de l’amour réduit en cendre].

(...)

The only thing to do is to suffer, to renounce, and to lose; do not hold on to anything; never at any time stop the hand that crucifies you. Nature detests this non-resistance; but God donates it (...).⁸

What is love – love for the Love we have been created by? Here, we have already the answer that Simone Weil will formulate two and a half centuries later as ‘decreation’.⁹ Love for the creator coincides with disappearing as the created – here, by Fénelon, expressed as being nothing. A few decades earlier in the seventeenth century, the spiritual author Pierre Cotton expressed it as follows: ‘The mystical life (...) is a holocaust; the Christian is a man of sacrifices in the full sense of the term’.¹⁰ Christian love is thoroughly sacrificial, even self-sacrificial. What I offer God must at the same time acknowledge that, since God needs nothing, there is nothing to offer Him. If life is a gift of God, we can only honour that gift by a counter-gift that expresses it has nothing to give, except the ‘nothing’ we have reduced ourselves to. ‘Holocaust’ is indeed the metaphor for the inner path of Christian love.

⁷ Of course, ‘holocaust’ does not refer to the Shoah, but to the all-burning sacrifice as mentioned in the Old Testament.

⁸ Fénelon, *Ceuvres de Fénelon Archevêque-duc de Cambrai*, rev. ed. Vol. V, Paris: Tenré et Boiste, 1822, 156-157 [author’s translation].

⁹ Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, introd. Gustave Thibon, Paris: Plon, 1947, 36-45.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours*. Vol. 1, Grenoble: Millon, 2006, 514.

2. ...thy Neighbour

However, is Christian love not love for our neighbour as well? We have to love God, sure, but are we not to love one another at the same time? The passage just cited refers to the neighbourly love practised between people – a love that has its origin in God and for which, consequently, we have to thank God in the first place:

Receive from the hands of men the comfort that God will give you through them.
You must receive it not from them, but through them from Him.

We all live in the love of God. We share that love. On this basis, we have to love one another and be grateful for the love we receive from others as well as for the love we can give them. But we must love one another *purely*: not because of the benefit we gain from it, not because of the love we receive from one another. All benefits and all love, we receive from God. It is *through* God that we give and receive one another's love. God functions as a purifier. He purifies us from the self-interest involved in our mutual love, he makes us love the other not for what we get from it, but for the sake of love as such, pure love, *pur amour*.

We have to love one another unselfishly, without any return to the self that inevitably is involved in that love. Is this possible? More precisely, is this possible within the context of neighbourly love? Is it not the ultimate obstruction for love between people, for love as the basis upon which a society can be built in which we live together? Pure love is unselfish love. Yet, precisely therefore, it requires an attentiveness with respect to the self, for this is what is to be destroyed for the sake of love's purity. I must be preoccupied with the self in me. Even when I am together with others, I have to be preoccupied with myself, with that self of mine that must be tamed and put away.

Of course, it is God who is between my fellows and me. It is his love that brings us together and only via Him are we able to love one another purely. But God at the same time obliges us to be occupied with the purification – and finally the annihilation – of our 'self'. Does this, however, not imply that in the first place, we have to be preoccupied with ourselves and not with our fellow men and with society around us? And, in the end, when our love has finally reached the state of pureness, is this love not exclusively for God, a love in which there is not only no longer any self, but no other, no society either?

So if society is based on love – the premise that is implied in the Fénelonian thesis – and love's paradigm is the love *of/for* God (i.e. the *pur amour* that this requires from us), is society then not based upon what in fact disintegrates it? Between my neighbour and me, there is God, and finally it is not one another

we have to love, but God.¹¹ In the end, there is no ‘we’ to love God, there is rather a, so to say, randomly gathered set of individuals that love God, by going an inner path that tries to destroy each one’s ego.

The Fénelonian *pur amour* appears to be an excellent precept for a kind of asocial and apolitical Christianity. Though loving his fellow men, the Christian is finally oriented towards a solitary relationship entirely submerged within a God to whom he has sacrificed his very self. Here, all social and political activism seems to be neutralized or even made impossible.

3. Fénelon – Political

And yet, both Fénelon’s life and writings are far from asocial and apolitical. On the contrary, his writings contain some of the sharpest criticism on the absolutist regime of his time. Decades after his death, his reputation was such that the protagonists of the French Revolution played a while with the idea of honouring this Catholic priest as one of their inspiring geniuses by giving him an official tomb in the ‘Temple of the Revolution’, the Pantheon in Paris, besides the ones of Rousseau and Voltaire (the only ones who eventually made it there).¹²

Fénelon does not primarily owe this reputation to his most remarkable *Lettre à Louis XIV*, in which he criticizes vehemently the belligerent politics of the Sun King as well as the scandalous luxury of the Versailles Court and the French nobility in general, unconcerned as the entire political power was about the cruel poverty in which the masses found themselves. The *Lettre* was a private document,¹³ certainly not meant to be read by the king in person, but probably by his unofficial (but extremely influential) wife, Madame de Maintenon, in order to nourish the advice – sometimes also political – that she was used to provide to the king.¹⁴

¹¹ Hence Fénelon’s conclusion that ‘En effet, Dieu ne nous chargerait de la responsabilité d’autrui’ (Fénelon, *Ceuvres* I, 1041); see also: Fosca Mariani Zini, ‘Peut-on être indifférent à soi-même? Difficultés stoïciennes dans le pur amour de Fénelon’, in: Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Ed.), *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Pure Inquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, 259.

¹² Christoph Schmitt-Maass, Stefanie Stockhorst & Doohwan Ahn (Eds.), *Fénelon in the Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations, and Variations*, introd. Jacques Le Brun, Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2014, 14.

¹³ The document was first published by d’Alembert in the second half of the eighteenth century and then by Renouard in 1825; see: Antoine-Augustin Renouard, *Lettre de Fénelon à Louis XIV*, Paris: Paul Renouard, 1825, 5-8. For the most recent publication of the *Lettre*, see: Fénelon, *Ceuvres* I, 541-551; *Selected Writings*, 198-205.

¹⁴ This is at least a conclusion made by Jean Orcibal and approved by Jacques Le Brun: Fénelon, *Ceuvres* I, 1410-1411.

Fénelon undoubtedly owes his success in the enlightened circles of pre-revolutionary France to his novel *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1699).¹⁵ This novel, too, is addressed to someone in the centre of French political power, the *Duc de Bourgogne*, the Dauphin's son and, consequently, the possible heir to the French throne after Louis' death. At the time when he is writing the novel, Fénelon is his 'récepteur', responsible for his education. The novel's plot follows Telemachus, son of Ulysses, travelling around in search of his father. He is accompanied by Mentor, Fénelon's alter ego, who instructs him how to respond to all the difficulties they encounter, providing in the meantime an entire course on politics – instructing the possible future king about how to install and guarantee a state ruled by justice and virtue. No reader – and certainly not Louis XIV himself – could have missed the criticism the novel levelled at the current situation in France.

To summarize Fénelon's ideas about politics, one can say – with Patrick Riley – that he pleads for a kind of 'republican monarchy', a political order that 'combines monarchical *rule* with republican *virtues*'.¹⁶ In the eyes of Fénelon, the king's power is not absolute, since he is not above the laws of the state.¹⁷ Together with his aristocracy and his people, he must cultivate such qualities as 'simplicity, labour, the virtues of agriculture, the absence of luxury and splendour, and the elevation of peace over war and aggrandizement'.¹⁸ So, the 'republican' dimension of Fénelonian politics is above all of an ethical nature, and compatible with the morality as expressed in the Gospel.¹⁹ The power is with the king and his aristocracy, but both must behave according to Christian and 'republican' virtues. They must set aside their personal interest and act in favour of the *res publica*, the common good. In a small dissertation that is given the title *Sur le pur amour* (On Pure Love), after having explained the 'supposition'

¹⁵ It was 'the most read literary work in eighteenth-century France (after the Bible), cherished and praised by Rousseau, it was first translated into English in the very year of its publication', thus Patrick Riley in his introduction to the English translation: François de Fénelon, *Telemachus, son of Ulysses*, ed. & transl. Patrick Riley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, xvi. See also: Henk Hillenaar, *Le secret de Télémaque*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, 5ff.

¹⁶ Fénelon, *Telemachus*, xvii.

¹⁷ In *Télémaque* we read: 'He [the king] can do anything to the people, but the laws can do anything to him. He has the absolute power in doing good, but his hands are tied from doing wrong. The care of the people, the most important of all trusts, is committed to him by the laws, on condition that he be the father of his subjects'. Fénelon, *Telemachus*, 60.

¹⁸ Fénelon, *Telemachus*, xvii.

¹⁹ See for instance Fénelon's *Examen de conscience sur les devoirs de la royauté*, in: François de Fénelon, *Œuvres* II, ed. Jacques Le Brun, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1997, 971-1009. For an extract in English, see: Herbert H. Rowen (Ed.), *From Absolutism to Revolution 1648-1848*, New York: Macmillan, 1963, 68-73.

mentioned above, Fénelon underlines his thesis by referring to antique society. There, he writes:

The idea of perfect disinterest ruled the politics of all ancient legislators. The laws and the fatherland must be preferred to oneself, for this is what justice wants; and one must prefer to oneself what is called beauty, good, just, perfect. (...) It is not a matter of being happy by adapting oneself to that order. On the contrary, out of love for that order, one must negate oneself, perish, and not keep any resource. This is the way in which, in Plato's *Criton*, Socrates prefers dying to running away, fearing to disobey the laws that held him in prison.²⁰

'Setting aside personal interest': this is what connects Fénelonian politics to the kind of mysticism he defends, the *pur amour*. In the *pur amour*, those who are in a position of power can find an excellent directive for their political engagement.

Already the first lines in Fénelon's *Letter to Louis XIV* point in this direction. The idea of *pur amour* guides the entire argument, and yet, as I will show, that is precisely why it reaches an impasse. The letter begins as follows:

The person, Sir, who takes the liberty of writing you this letter, has no interest in the world. He writes it neither from hurt nor from ambition, nor from any desire to become involved in the affairs of the state. He loves you without being known by you. He sees God in your person. With all your might, you cannot give him any reward that he desires, and there is no pain that he would not suffer willingly in order to make you understand the truths necessary for your salvation.²¹

The first thing that stands out is Fénelon's astonishing lack of subservience. Rather than with the king, here the 'absolute' is obviously with Fénelon. And this is definitely due to the position of *pur amour* that Fénelon pretends to occupy. Hence the 'freedom' he mentions in the first sentence. 'I speak to you in "liberty"', he addresses himself to the king. Why? Paraphrasing Fénelon's argument, one could say: 'Because I am free from all interest. I have no ambition, no desire whatsoever – except the desire to love God or, which amounts to the same thing, to love *purely*. And', so he adds, 'this is precisely the way I love *you*, my king. I expect no reward from you, whatever with all your might you can give me. It is not might or power that connects us, but love. You do not know me, which makes it impossible that you reward my love for you, but this is the very reason why I love you *purely*. It is the very reason as well why I see God in you – God whom I love purely. Even if you should know me and should not be pleased by my love for you, even if you should punish me severely

²⁰ François de Fénelon, *Œuvres* II, ed. Jacques Le Brun, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1993: 668 [author's translation].

²¹ Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 198. For the French text, see: Fénelon, *Œuvres* I, 543.

for the immodesty of my love for you, I from my side would continue to love you. And I would continue to do everything in order to bring you in line with God, to make you love God and your people as purely as I love God and, through him, my fellow men and your people’.

Fénelon, then, anticipates the negative reaction of his addressee. Talking about himself in the third person, he continues the passage quoted above:

If he speaks to you forcefully, do not be amazed; it is that the truth is free and strong. You are hardly accustomed to hearing it. People accustomed to being flattered easily mistake for spite, for bitterness, and for exaggeration that which is only the pure truth.²²

With these sentences, Fénelon starts to develop the list of criticisable points in the way Louis XIV rules his country. The Sun King should resist the flattery in which he has been grown up and in which, more than before, the royal court in Versailles continues to live. Instead of putting his own person in the state’s centre, he should follow the selflessness as present in the ideal of *pur amour* and concentrate himself on the well-being of his subjects: not on the nobility’s prosperity, but on that of the majority of the population, who are being exploited by the gentry.

In all this, the *pur amour* is central. It allows Fénelon to practise an astonishing freedom of speech, for it enables freedom in the locus from where he addresses the king. He loves the king *purely*, precisely because he is not bound to him by any interest. And this is how the king must love his people: not for his own interest, but for that of the people. The freedom Fénelon takes to criticize his king is precisely the freedom he wants his king to take: the king, too, must be free: free of himself, of his self-interest, of his *amour-propre*. This is, Fénelon adds, why the truth is also free. Just like God, the truth is sovereign; it has no need of anything in order to be what it is. So a king must be: sovereign for the very reason that he needs nothing. This is to say: that he does not give in to the slightest of his own needs or desires, that he does not give way to the temptation of taking advantage of his royal position and, thus, of giving in to *selfish love*. God – or, what amounts to the same thing, truth – is sovereign in the sense that He coincides with the perfection of his being, that He is not marked by lack or desire, that He is so much Himself that He does not need to be selfish at all. Society must be led by this God, by this truth. People must live together and build up a society ‘in truth’ – which for Fénelon means ‘in love’, in *pur amour* for God. But, so Fénelon observes, this truth has been neglected, and even denied by the king. It is up to Fénelon – and to his confesant and spiritual pupil Madame de Maintenon – to bring it to him.

²² Ibidem.

But not without the help of God! For God is indeed needed here, so Fénelon concludes in one of the most direct and hard attacks on Louis XIV in person. I quote it at length, also to illustrate the vigorous tone of Fénelon's critique:

...God will finally be able to remove the veil that covers your eyes and show you what you avoid to see. It has been a long time since He laid hands on you. But He is not quick to punishment, because He has compassion with a prince who has been obsessed by flatterers for his entire life, and because your enemies are also His. But He will know to separate his just cause from yours, which is not just, and to humiliate you in order to convert you, for you will only be Christian in the humiliation. You do not love God. You only fear Him with the fear of a slave. Your religion only consists of superstitions, of small superficial practices. You are like the Jews of whom God says: while their lips honour Me, their heart is far from Me. (...) You only love your glory and your comfort. You return everything to you as if you were the God of the earth and as if all the rest is but created in order to be sacrificed to you. On the contrary, God has created you for the sake of your people. Unfortunately, you do not understand these truths. How could you appreciate them? You do not know God at all. You do not love Him at all. You do not pray to Him at all with all your heart, and you do nothing to try to know Him.²³

King Louis must 'know' God, which is to say that he must recognize Him as the principle that de-possesses him of any kind of false, egocentric self, from the illusive glory in which his *amour-propre* holds him captive. He has again to learn the truth, which is not in selfish but in pure love: in the love that kills the ego in order to enable the love for the people. Fénelon writes these hard words in the hope that they are at least clear in the ears of Madame de Maintenon, so that they can one day, in a more diplomatic way, enter those of Louis XIV himself.

4. The Pure Base of Politics

What, according to Fénelon, is wrong with Louis XIV's politics? Is it the absolutist character of his regime that represses even the tiniest form of democratic participation? Not exactly, for 'democracy' is of no concern to Fénelon. In no sense does he turn against monarchy *as such*. What is wrong with Louis XIV is that he does not 'know' God and does not recognize Him as the unique base of a just political order.

And what does it mean that God constitutes the base of a just political order? To answer this question, Fénelon does not refer to the early Christian idea of

²³ Fénelon, *Selected Writings*, 203; *Œuvres* I, 548-549.

agape and the ‘perfect communities’ based on this principle. When he (rarely) mentions *agape*, he reduces its meaning to the eucharistic practice, and simply omits the political dimension as described in the *Acts of the Apostles*.²⁴

If the basis of politics is love, which in the eyes of Fénelon is indeed the case, then it is not brotherly love, but love for God. Brotherly love is only the effect of the more basic love for God. Without that love for God, we would not be able to love one another in a proper and just way. Why not? Because then we should love the other for the love we expect from him in return or for other benefits that this implies. And in fact we normally do so. Such is our natural condition. However, this is precisely why that natural condition is a bad and wrong base for society. It grounds our living together in the selfish love – the *amour-propre* – of each of us.

Fénelon can understand that most people stick to selfish love or, despite their attempts, never get beyond it. Human nature is selfish, and only a few, elected by God himself, are supposed to go the ‘inner path’ that conquers all *amour-propre* and reach the state of *pur amour*. It is not ordinary people who constitute the target of Fénelon’s political critique. Targeted are those who have power over them, those who are responsible for society as a whole. When they relate to their subjects, even when they claim to do so out of love, they are guided by selfish love. And unlike the love of ordinary people, *their* selfish love has a direct and disastrous effect on the entire population, on society as such. This is why they must do everything to limit the selfishness of their natural condition. More than anyone else, they must ‘know’ God and be aware that it is God who constitutes the base of society.

So, if there is one person who has to ‘know’ God, it is the one pretending to be the substitute of the heavenly ruler on earth: the king. To call his power ‘absolute’ can only signify that, in his position as king (as father and guard of his kingdom), he is absolutely unselfish. Being king in a ‘just’ way implies loving his people in a *pure* way, i.e. in the way of *pur amour*.

If, for his people, he is like God, this does not mean that his personal will shall be their law – like Louis XIV himself explicitly suggests in his *Mémoires*.²⁵ What does God stand for? According to Fénelon, He stands for the principle of man’s essence as being his very ‘self-destruction’. Man only exists by the love of God, and he only finds this truth when emptying himself from any human self in order to make room for the real Self that he belongs to, which is God. This kind of *pure love* has its social implications. What enables human beings

²⁴ See the *Lettre spirituelle* with the title ‘Sur la fréquente communion’; Fénelon, *Œuvres de Fénelon Archevêque-duc de Cambrai*. Vol. III (1822), 92.

²⁵ ‘Quand on a l’État en vue, on travaille pour soi: le bien de l’un fait la gloire de l’autre’, quoted in: Albert Chérel, *Fénelon ou la religion du pur amour*, Paris: Denoël & Steele, 1934, 157.

to relate to one another in a *true* and *just* way requires the elimination of their selfish reflexes. Absence of selfishness: this is society's real base. It is in this sense that society is grounded in God, and that no society is possible without God's substitute, i.e. a king.

Hence Fénelon's monarchism, despite the republican virtues that he puts forward both for those who have power and those who live under it. The powerful basis of society can be nothing else but God or – what amounts to the same thing – the king. Only, the king must 'know' God, which is to say that, in his quality of sovereign, he can only be 'selfish' in the way that God is 'selfish', which means: not marked by needs and desires – as a 'self' that, within the earthly world of needs and desires which is his kingdom, acts out of mere selflessness.

In a way, the Fénelonian king shares a basic characteristic of the Hobbesian 'sovereign'. Of course, Fénelon would never agree with Hobbes that the sovereign of a state (a 'commonwealth', in Hobbes' term) has a mortal base, since for Fénelon, state and sociability in general are based in the immortal God. And yet, there is a common feature. For, despite the violence of the Leviathan being the origin of his power,²⁶ the Hobbesian sovereign is supposed to be free from any personal violence, if only because he is free from interest in the society he rules. Located by 'social contract' in a position radically outside society and the mutual interests reigning there, the sovereign himself is free from any interest and therefore able to install an order of law that counts equally for everyone. It is his unselfishness that legitimizes him as sovereign. And on the part of his subjects, a similar unselfishness is required: that they put aside their own personal interests is the condition *sine qua non* to obey the law and to be proper subjects (i.e. to be justly subjected to the sovereign's law). A 'commonwealth' is only possible when each of its subjects has renounced his natural rights and transferred them to the sovereign, and when the latter acts not on the base of his own natural 'Rights' (his personal interests), but only on the base of the rights that he has received from them and transformed into 'Laws'. On that base only, the sovereign is able to create a just order of law.²⁷

²⁶ According to Hobbes, the power ruling society is based on a 'social contract' by which every participant has freely rendered his natural 'rights' (which are absolutely free and therefore the reason why they cause a 'war of everyone against everyone') for a 'law' attributed to the sovereign. So the sovereign delivers society from its natural violence (symbolized in the biblical figure of the Leviathan), transforming this violence into the power of the order of law.

²⁷ See the famous formulation of the Hobbesian 'social contract' in the seventeenth chapter of the *Leviathan*: '...as if every man should say to every man, *I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing myself, to this Man, or to this Assemble of men* [i.e. the sovereign], *on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner.* This done, the Multitude so united in one Person, is called COMMON-WEALTH, in Latin CIVITAS. This is the

That unselfishness and its opposite play a basic role in the foundations of society is an idea that can be found in Rousseau as well, despite his huge criticism on Hobbes. According to Rousseau, too, selfishness, considered socially, is a most profound vice. It is at the very base of society, be it that society is not the base of the human as such. Man is not basically – in the words of Rousseau, ‘naturally’ – social. In the state of Nature, there are no societies, not, however, because – as Hobbes teaches – these are made impossible by the war of everyone against everyone. The state of Nature is the opposite of that of war, Rousseau explains, since there, in his needs and desires, man is directly provided for by Nature herself. There, living with others is really free and really peaceful at the same time because no one needs the other. This is why, in the state of Nature, selfish relations to others and selfishness as such are simply absent. Only when society comes into being, *amour-propre* emerges. And the social contract is there to repress that *amour-propre* and change it into a real social love, a love for the community.

All three authors, Rousseau, Hobbes and Fénelon, have the idea in common that at the base of society, unselfishness is indispensable and that even the base as such is unselfish. For Rousseau it is Nature, for Hobbes the Sovereign, and for Fénelon God. Each of them has a different conception of the way man should relate to this base. For Rousseau, he should take that unselfish state of nature into account as being impossible to re-establish *and*, at the same time, as the regulative idea upon which society’s social contract is built. For Hobbes, the selfishness that dominates society should be repressed by the unselfish sovereign to whom the subjects should relate in absolute obedience. Fénelon locates just politics in the selfless way the king and all men of power relate to society’s ground, which for him is God.

Yet, Fénelon is the only one who really goes into the selflessness required here. He does so not so much in his political, as well as in his spiritual writings. In order to train themselves in ‘loving’ their subjects, men of power can use the long and numerous reflections on the *pur amour* – so Fénelon implicitly suggests on almost every page of his *Lettres spirituelles* for instance, if only because these are for the most part addressed to people belonging to the centre of France’s political power, the Versailles Court. Madame de Maintenon is but one example – though an important one, since Fénelon wrote many letters to her and, by doing so, tried to influence directly the very heart of political France, Louis XIV.

generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) of that *Mortall God*, to which wee owe under the *immortal God*, our peace and defence’. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 (rev. ed.), 120 (Hobbes’s italics, capitals and orthography).

There, in the *Lettres spirituelles*, the reflection on selflessness is much more elaborate and problematized than in Hobbes or Rousseau, where it is hardly touched upon. What is more, in Fénelon's reflection the paradox of the intention to be selfless comes to the surface. And, as we will explain, the paradox sheds light on the paradoxical base of the modern political subject in general – a subject that in Fénelon's time is about to emerge.

What is this paradox? That the very attempt to get rid of the self, installs this very self. Remember the elementary line of Fénelon's argument: 'No, it is not me who wants to be the base of my being; I no longer want to live on the base of that mortal self of mine. I want to live on God's base, and love is the way to achieve this goal: pure love, love purified from the self and its interests, even purified from the benefits God promises me. Suppose I know that I will be condemned to the eternal pains of hell, even then, and precisely then, I will love God, for then and only then, my love is really pure, truly unselfish'.

Is it? Is that self of mine no longer operational here? Has it been overcome? Not at all. For my so-called unselfish love, contrary to what it pretends, does not depend on God, but only on myself. I, and no one else, give ground to my love for God. Even if God condemns me to hell, even if heaven is a mere chimaera, even if God does not exist at all, my love for God remains, for it depends only on me.

Contrary to his own intentions to make God the source from where man relates to Him, Fénelon turns out to be himself that source, which can only keep his original intention by endlessly trying to destroy the source that he is himself. Despite his own objective, he turns out to be a modern, Cartesian subject: the point from where he relates to the world is no longer God, but Fénelon himself. He allows for the doubt whether God will keep his promise of heavenly beatitude and makes that doubt his very method. And where does he find the certainty overcoming this doubt? In the doubt itself, in the uncertainty of God's promise. In this methodically maintained uncertainty, he finds the only certainty that remains: the absolute freedom of his will to love God.

Modern politics is no longer grounded in God, but in the human. The citizen himself is supposed to be the base of his society. Hobbes is one of the first to think this through. In a different way, Rousseau does something similar a few decades later. But even if man himself is the base of his society, a kind of unselfishness is required. This, too, is clear to both Hobbes and Rousseau. Social coherence cannot be based on self-interest. Fénelon is interesting here in the sense that he radically opts for unselfishness as the very base of society. Yet, thinking through that unselfishness by reflecting upon the inner path that the mystics go, he bounces against a persisting self. He more precisely bounces against the Cartesian ego that turns out to be the base even of the *pur amour*.

In this perspective, one can find in Fénelon all elements to criticize the naive idea of selflessness as understood by Hobbes and Rousseau. To sacrifice the individual (natural) self in order to ground the social 'self' is not only far from easy, it is tricky as well, because it nonetheless installs a strong (Cartesian) self. Hence the absolutist character that persists in Hobbes and even in Rousseau.

And yet, notwithstanding its tricky character, the kind of unselfishness that is at play here is indispensable in politics. More than in Hobbes and Rousseau, it shows its power in Fénelon. What else gives him the strength to stand up against the absolutist power of Louis XIV? Of course, it is the strength of his own self that is at the base of his critical stance – a self clearly taking the position of a Cartesian ego. And yet, this criticizing ego owes its power and its authority from a radical unselfishness. It is this unselfishness that is responsible for Fénelon's political courage.

A huge field of research appears here, an inquiry into the problematic entanglement of self and selflessness in the way in which we are modern subjects, both in the way we go the inner path in search of our real self (referring in this to the mystical tradition) and in the way we try to live together on the base of mutual respect, precisely, for each other's self.