

For and Against Milbank: A Critical Discussion of John Milbank's Construal of Ontological Peace

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I

British theologian John Milbank's career thus far is largely defined by his highly acclaimed book, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.¹ His monumental work, widely reviewed and discussed, invokes divergent receptions in the extreme. *Theology and Social Theory*, however, is consistently seen as undeniably important to twentieth-century theological discourse.² But how important is it to Anabaptists? Should we read Milbank, and if so, why? Some virtually equate Milbank's work with Anabaptism. Gregory Baum, for example, describes Milbank as "an Anabaptist or Mennonite Barth" and suggests that Milbank's church is "an Anabaptist, Mennonite ecclesial project, expressed today in the work of John Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas."³ As the title of this article indicates, I am not of one mind regarding the contribution of Milbank to Anabaptist thought.

I will engage here a major tenet of Milbank's argument: his assertion of ontological peace versus nihilistic ontological violence. I hope to show that while an emphasis on ontological peace is a rich resource for peace theology, Milbank's construal is problematic in several ways. I will describe Milbank's presentation of ontological violence and peace, and then show that his portrayal both fails to distinguish carefully between power and violence and posits a problematic acceptance of a "tragic dimension."

Milbank fears that if theology no longer seeks to position, qualify, or criticize other discourses, then inevitably these discourses will position theology. In contrast his project reasserts theology as a master discourse, and

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he provides a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between theology and social theory from Plato to Deleuze.⁴ Milbank's interdisciplinary scholarship aims to reveal theology's captivity to other ideologies.⁵ For Milbank theology comes to be seen as social theory, since the description of reality is no longer in the hands of the sociologist, political scientist, political economist, Hegelian, Marxist, or nihilist. Although theology may make claims that draw on these ideologies, these claims are always disciplined by theology. So, while theology may make metaphysical claims for instance, such claims are (usually) positioned by prior theological commitments.⁶

Having (re)positioned all other ideologies in relation to theology, Milbank begins to make his own theological moves. The key one is the explication of the metaphysics of a nonviolent creation in the hope of providing a counter ontology to the pervasive metaphysics of violence embedded both in Christian and non-Christian discourse.⁷ Instead of conceding that reality is at bottom conflictual (a war of everyone against everyone), Milbank, while refusing to ignore difference, asserts a peaceful reality that can be reclaimed within an alternative community.

In the beginning was violence, according to Nietzsche – violence that was celebrated by the pagan virtues.⁸ Nietzsche and neo-Nietzscheans perceive reality as anarchy that cannot be controlled except by subjecting it to “the will to power” in one way or another.⁹ Nietzsche's perception dictates that violence must be the master of us all and leads to the intolerable notion that “difference” is the only truth – a truth that in its unleashed and unrestrained power has led to twentieth-century concentration camps and to ethnic cleansing. Even when this kind of violence is not fully recognizable, it lurks near the surface, barely concealing the original primordial conflict that is often restrained by sacral order, but only just. Given this belief, Nietzsche was right to see Christianity as *the enemy*, since Christianity is unique in refusing ultimate reality to conflictual phenomena.¹⁰

Milbank is especially concerned by Nietzsche's presentation of the truth of difference, since this nihilistic ontology is being promoted by many postmoderns who see in Nietzsche the only true master of suspicion.¹¹ Against such formidable opponents Milbank seeks to assert an ontology of peace that

cannot enter into dialogue with the Nietzscheans. Rather, we must understand that an ontology of violence is a mythos, and as such

to counter it, one cannot resuscitate liberal humanism, but one can try to put forward an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an ‘ontology of peace’, which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.¹²

This then is Milbank’s answer to the nihilists: a counter-ontology which sees peaceful phenomena, not conflictual, as ultimate reality. Christianity is seemingly unique in the assertion of this counter-ontology, though Judaism may affirm a similar one. In any case, the ontology of peace is implied in narratives about divine creation and redemption – true peace comes not from violence, but *ex nihilo* from God.¹³ The distinction between ontological violence and peace is stark in Milbank’s view. The uniqueness of Christianity is seen most clearly here and legitimates Nietzsche’s focused attack on Christianity as a religion of the weak – not because it is weak but because it undercuts the story of the strong, the *übermensch*.

Any peace or pacification that is sought outside of Christianity’s ontological peace is “founded” as legitimate order or necessary outcome. This founding is fundamentally different from the Christian narrative which merely re-proclaims or re-enacts a peace that is already there.¹⁴ Milbank positions Christianity against the postmodern view of reality as conflict. Nevertheless, he wants to affirm that part of the postmodern insight which reduces

substance to transition, but questions the transcendental reading of transition as conflict The postmodern realization that discourses of truth are so many incommensurable language games does not ineluctably impose upon us the conclusion that the ultimate, overarching game is the play of fate, force and chance.¹⁵

Milbank is heavily influenced by Augustine. For Fergus Kerr, Milbank’s project is a retrieval and reworking of Augustine’s theological reading of history in *De Civitate Dei*.¹⁶ This reading helps us to “imagine a state of total peace” which “allows us to unthink the necessity of violence, and exposes the manner in which the assumption of an inhibition of an always prior violence helps to

preserve violence in motion,” and serves to show “there is a way to act in a violent world which assumes the ontological priority of non-violence.”¹⁷

For Milbank, as for Augustine, peace and non-violence are ontologically prior to, and more basic than, the anarchy and strife, which on most views of the world, including gnostic forms of Christianity, are primordial and foundational, so that the religious strategies (if any), like political ones, can do no more than hold it in check.¹⁸

In Milbank’s view ontological peace is more important than an emphasis on virtue. In fact, virtue presupposes justice, and real justice involves real peace. This relationship of virtue and justice necessitates that peace be prior to, and thus more important than, virtue. Milbank makes this argument as part of a larger discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. He does not reject MacIntyre’s work, but wants to go beyond it. For MacIntyre, arguments against nihilism and a philosophy of difference (arguments that Milbank also makes) are made in the name of virtue, dialectics, and the notion of tradition in general. This is inadequate for Milbank, for whom the most important watershed for ethics is not before and after virtue, but war and peace.¹⁹

Milbank is careful to avoid the impression that an ontology of peace is ‘unrealistic.’ He readily admits that the state of peaceableness has not been reached. Peace is not to be slowly constructed; rather it is already given but not yet realized.²⁰

In Christ peace has not, indeed, been totally achieved (a building remains to be built) yet it is proleptically given, because only the perfect saving of one man from the absolute destruction of death, this refusal of the loss of any difference, can initially spell out to us perfect peace.²¹

To focus on Christ alone, however, is not sufficient, since this would produce an ahistorical, abstract figure. Rather, the emphasis must be on Christ as part of the experience of the church, according to Milbank. In Rowan Williams’ opinion, “The insistence on thinking Christ in inseparable relation with the Church is . . . one of the most constructive elements” of Milbank’s book.²² Milbank sees the Gospels as being relatively unconcerned with Jesus as an individual but as presenting Jesus as exemplifying perfect humanity and

sonship, and through this exemplification making a later repetition of that sonship possible within the church.²³ The church, then, is the narrative community which enables us not only to understand ontological peace but to live in peace.

Here Milbank leans especially on Augustine, whose contrast between ontological antagonism and ontological peace is grounded in the contrasting historical narratives of two cities. Within the narrative of the church, we learn to practice peace as a skill and to acquire its idiom – all of which goes far beyond an abstract attachment to non-violence. In order for this possibility to exist, the church and not Christ alone must be at the center of the Christian metanarrative of Augustine’s City of God.²⁴ The practice of the historical church must also be emphasized. If peace is real, then it must appear in the practice of the church as Christian social praxis that seeks to negotiate and embrace difference.²⁵

If we are to say “salvation is a fact,” “salvation has appeared on the historical stage,” then we have to enunciate, not just an ecclesiology, but also an ecclesiology which recounts and resumes the church’s *actual, concrete* intervention in the human social order, where the rules of “non-interference” have not really applied. (Italics in original)²⁶

Milbank’s positing ontological non-violence is important. It offers a real alternative to the despair of nihilism and gives a basis for hope. The grounding of this peace in a historical, contingent community of the church which embodies peace, resists the temptation to discuss peace in the general or the abstract, a move that has limited potential and is ultimately a concession to liberal thought, which is anathema for Milbank.

II

As impressive as Milbank’s project is, it is not impervious to criticism. How is violence to be understood? What is the relation between violence and difference? Can those who are weak accept or experience ontological peace in the same way available to the strong? Can the forgiveness practiced in the church ‘show’ peace? Finally, does Milbank’s allowance for a ‘tragic dimension’ concede too much to ‘reality’?²⁷

While generally supportive of Milbank's position, Nicholas Lash considers whether Milbank ought to distinguish power more carefully from violence. He points out that Milbank follows Nietzsche in defining power as violence and domination. Lash would prefer Milbank to reject the view that all power as such is tainted²⁸:

Rather than eschew all talk of 'power', rather than deny that it is virtuous to be peaceable, the theological task is better seen as taking good words up and purifying them of misuse by setting them in the context of a Christian understanding of God's love.²⁹

Debra Dean Murphy concurs with Lash, but from a feminist perspective. She agrees with Milbank's characterization of nihilistic postmodernism, but finds that

his collapsing of the terms "power" and "violence" risky and problematic – not so much for his critique of nihilism but for the limits it places on his own theological enterprise with its emphasis on "analogically related difference."³⁰

The lack of a clear distinction between power and violence leaves Milbank vulnerable exactly where he needs to be most precise. He predicates ontological peace on the notion that Christianity, embodied specifically in the church, can out-narrate nihilistic violence by subsuming difference without doing violence to it. Just how this must happen, if the exertion of power is essentially the same as violence, is unclear and therefore at the heart of the critiques levelled by both Lash and Murphy. Lash asks the question this way: "Is it quite certain that the strategy for laying violence to one side rather than dialectically engaging with its supposed necessity has the same configuration for the weak as for the strong?"³¹ If total peace is to be real, it must somehow be accessible not only to those who are already in positions of power but also to those whose history is not yet healed or even heard within the church.³²

The feminist critique of Milbank illustrates this point. How might a woman tell the story of peace and promise?³³ Murphy suggests that

to collapse the meanings of 'violence' and 'power' is itself an inherently sexist move which betrays Milbank's debt to Enlightenment/capitalist/male-identified modes of structuring power

that he is seeking to negate. Love is power, peace is power, forgiveness is power, for these things do not require passivity and idleness To allow ‘power’ to be co-opted by Enlightenment ideology . . . is already to fall captive to that very ‘ontology of violence’ that has been exposed as mere mythos, sheer contingency.³⁴

Further, many women who live under the real threat of physical violence need some kind of power to be delivered or to deliver themselves from it.³⁵ To speak of the necessity of power to escape or counter violence does not lead inexorably to more violence that replaces the original violence. The danger is of simply replacing one violence with another, a danger underscoring the crucial necessity of distinguishing between power and violence.

A close reading of *Theology and Social Theory* partly supports Lash and Murphy in their critique but also reveals a misreading of Milbank. It is true that his distinction between power and violence lacks precision and, perhaps more seriously, a concrete display of power without violence is also missing. But to accuse Milbank of not knowing the difference between the two is not accurate. To cite only one example, he discusses the notion that power is an idea, or a fiction, albeit one in which we can become inextricably caught. If this is so, he asks, “Can there not be an alternative invention of a social and linguistic process that is not the dominance of power (*that is to say, of power in the sense of violence*)? (italics added)³⁶ However, since Milbank is not precise and seems to use power as a synonym for will-to-power, he is open to Lash and Murphy’s critique. What is needed is a clearer sense of how power without violence might be construed.³⁷

Milbank’s assertion of ontological peace also suffers from imprecision regarding the practice of forgiveness. In his view, peace and the treatment of difference must find their locus in the church’s emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Christian theology imagines temporal process as the possibility of a historical process into God, and as something recuperable within memory whose ultimate point is the allowing of forgiveness and reconciliation.³⁸

To make his argument, Milbank again draws heavily on Augustine, who claims that without mutual forgiveness and social peace, no-one will be able to see God. The pagans were unjust because they did not give a priority to peace and forgiveness.³⁹ Forgiveness of sins is the way in which we can begin to unthink the necessity of violence.

Given the persistence of the sin of others, (as well as our own sinfulness, which we cannot all at once overcome, but remains alien to our better desires) there is only one way to respond to them which would not itself be sinful and domineering, and that is to anticipate heaven, and act as if their sin was not there, by offering reconciliation.⁴⁰

While Milbank's point is well taken, his description of forgiveness invokes a sense of being incomplete. To "act as if their sin was not there" is to act as if the victim is not there.⁴¹ Even recognizing that there is no such entity as a 'pure' victim, one cannot ignore the fact that acting as if sin was not there is an entirely different thing for some than for others. Rather, "it is only by acknowledging that their sin is there, but dealing with it through a judgement of grace, that we can genuinely achieve reconciliation."⁴² L. Gregory Jones is one theologian who has attempted to describe such a concrete display of forgiveness. While he draws much from Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, he also suggests that the real task is not just to 'unthink' violence but to live differently.⁴³ Milbank is virtually silent here – missing from his book is a concrete display of forgiveness and reconciliation that makes God's peace present.⁴⁴

Finally, Milbank's project must also explain the role of 'tragic necessity' in ontological peace. For example, he suggests that Augustine admits the need for coercion – a need offset by the possibility that the recipient can later come to understand and retrospectively consent. Such action may not be peaceable but can be redeemed.⁴⁵ In an article responding to comments on *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank writes, "Circumstances can force us to sacrifice some good we feel essential to our integrity, or even some person who must be forever missed."⁴⁶

This admission of a tragic dimension allows Milbank to make a somewhat surprising move – the rejection of pacifism. In the same article referred to above, he asserts that "in no sense does *Theology and Social Theory*

recommend ‘pacifism’, and the formal specification of truth as peaceful relation cannot be applied as a criterion authorizing non-resistance.’⁴⁷ This is consistent with a piece he published in 1989, where he engages Stanley Hauerwas’s endorsement of pacifism:

One might ask in relation to a situation like that in South Africa, whether it is not the case that the church there is simply robbed of certain possibilities of realizing certain practices that should define its nature Here exercising peaceableness may be precisely not exercising other Christian virtues such as justice, or even comfort and support of others One can, however, hold out for a tragic refusal of the pacifist position without denying that it is likely that any implication in violence is likely to prove futile in the long run.⁴⁸

While other implications of this move are somewhat unclear (would Milbank follow Augustine in just war theory?), obviously an ontology of peace that includes a tragic dimension is, in the end, a peace that is more tragic than peaceable.

To recommend pacifism (against Milbank) is not to deny tragedy in this world. However, it may be that we are called to absorb a certain amount of tragedy, or perhaps to learn what it may mean to forgive in such a way as to forego the temptation of tragic measures. It may also be that the tragic dimension is better understood as the suffering required to pursue peace. This is a very different kind of tragedy from that of justifying coercive measures or sacrifice of the good.

Perhaps we must see peace as something other than an ontology. However, as noted above, Milbank hesitates to focus on the specifics of Jesus and the Gospels. He sees Jesus as the exemplification of perfect humanity and sonship, as the central origination of the church. The focus for peace becomes the church, which continues to practice, in new ways with variations, the life of the Kingdom. The actual practice of Christ remains much less central than the story of the Church.⁴⁹ Hauerwas has suggested that Milbank’s Christology remains underdeveloped, and hopes that when Milbank does turn to these matters he will not be unsympathetic to the portrayal of Jesus offered in the writings of John Yoder.⁵⁰ If that is the case, Milbank’s assertion of ontology as

a basis for peace, however qualified by theological commitments, needs to be positioned by an understanding of Jesus, his exercise of power, and his life of peace.⁵¹

Notes

¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

² To cite just one example, Richard Roberts has described *Theology and Social Theory* as “perhaps the most brilliant, ambitious – and yet questionable – work to have emerged in English theology since the Second World War” in “Transcendental Sociology? A Critique of John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 527. *Theology and Social Theory* also has the distinction of having two entire volumes of journals given over to its discussion. See *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 305-52, and *Modern Theology* 8 (October 1992).

³ Gregory Baum, “For and Against John Milbank,” in *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 52, 54.

⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1-6, back cover.

⁵ *Theology and Social Theory* “restores the guts to a Christianity often eviscerated by unhappy marriages with predatory ideologies”: Aidan Nichols, “Non Tali Auxilio,” *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 332.

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 189, 190.

⁸ Nicholas Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 354, 355. Milbank’s treatment of Augustine’s version of Roman virtue claims that this virtue is only possible within a circle of violence. Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15 (Fall 1987): 208.

⁹ Fergus Kerr, “Simplicity Itself: Milbank’s Thesis,” *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 309.

¹⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 261, 262.

¹¹ Milbank lumps major postmodern thinkers – Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida – into a basically monolithic group, suggesting that they are “elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy.” *Theology and Social Theory*, 278.

¹² *Ibid.*, 279.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262. This is explained further by Nicholas Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 355.

¹⁴ Milbank, “An Essay Against Secular Order,” 211.

¹⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279, 296.

¹⁶ Fergus Kerr, “Rescuing Girard’s Argument?” *Modern Theology* 8 (October, 1992): 387. Kerr’s larger discussion here concerns the relation of Milbank’s work to that of René Girard. Milbank acknowledges Girard’s crucial role in the retrieval of the Augustinian ontology of peace and his move to Christological considerations that is a critical departure from virtue ethics. (*Ibid.*, 394.) However, Milbank also wants to distance himself from Girard. Milbank’s reservation about

Girard's inclination to deal with Jesus rather than the church, says Rowan Williams, thus fails to say enough about the 'idiom' of the peace adumbrated by the preaching and death of Jesus. Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 321. To Milbank, "Girard represents the temptation (to be resisted) of conceding to science the right to explain in order to receive back from science "a demonstration of Christocentricity." Milbank, "Stories of Sacrifice," *Modern Theology* 12 (January 1996): 51. Milbank sees Girard's stance as positive scientism, whereby the superior character of the Biblical narrative is axiomatically "proved." Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 207. Girard has recently said that "Until now the order of discovery for me has been mimetic desire, archaic religion and culture, and finally the Christian text. It should be possible, especially for the Christian scholar, to reverse this order and analyze myth and culture from the standpoint of the Gospels. . . . The sequence leading up to Things Hidden, which is true, in part, to my own creative experience, gives the erroneous view of a theoretical movement from mimesis to myth, whereas in fact, a more fundamental understanding goes in the opposite direction." René Girard, "The Anthropology of the Cross: A Conversation with René Girard," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 264, 266.

¹⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 411.

¹⁸ Fergus Kerr, "Simplicity Itself: Milbank's Thesis," 307.

¹⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 363. See chapter 11 for the long treatment of MacIntyre's virtue ethics.

²⁰ John Milbank, "Enclaves, or Where is the Church?" *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 342.

²¹ Milbank, "Enclaves," 348.

²² Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 321.

²³ Milbank, "The End of Dialogue," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 179.

²⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 390-398. Milbank poignantly poses the question another way: "Can we take again Augustine's step beyond the Manichees, can we conceive an alternative that is a real social practice, a transmission of desire that is (despite the overlaps of power) still faintly traceable as a pure persuasion without violence?" (321)

²⁵ Graham Ward, "John Milbank's Divina Commedia," *New Blackfriars* 73 (June 1992): 314.

²⁶ Milbank, "An Essay Against Secular Order," 207.

²⁷ See Ward, "John Milbank's Divina Commedia," 317, 318 for a series of questions such as these, clustered around the question of violence.

²⁸ Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" 354-58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 362. Rowan Williams suggests that Milbank's use of the term 'violence' is "loaded and vague." Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 322.

³⁰ Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank," *Modern Theology* 10 (April 1994): 135.

³¹ Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" 357.

³² Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," 323.

³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁴ Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference," 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 320.

³⁷ For one example of how the exercise of power without attendant violence might be construed, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). See especially the chapter entitled “The Power of the Lamb.”

³⁸ Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (April 1991): 226.

³⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 409.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 411. Milbank is again referring to Augustine.

⁴¹ Lash, “Not Exactly Politics or Power?” 358.

⁴² L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 146.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Jones’ book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, is an extended treatment calling the church to learn the craft of forgiveness. Jones has also received criticism for not being specific enough about how embodied forgiveness would actually look.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 195.

⁴⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 418.

⁴⁶ Milbank, “Enclaves, or Where is the Church?” 349. “The heavenly city meant for Augustine a substantial peace, but this peace could also be imperfectly present in the fallen world, in the sequences of time, and time redeemed through memory”: Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 229.

⁴⁷ Milbank, “Enclaves,” 349.

⁴⁸ Milbank, “‘Between purgation and illumination’: a critique of the theology of right,” *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

⁴⁹ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Word Made Speculative? John Milbank’s Christological Poetics,” Unpublished review essay, 1998. Bauerschmidt asks whether the ‘Word made strange’ does not eclipse the Word made flesh. He also wonders whether Milbank presents a case of the “philosophical tail wagging the theological dog.” To put it another way, “Milbank presents us with a postmodern philosophy tricked out in theological language” (20).

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings*, 198.

⁵¹ I want to acknowledge the input of my colleagues, Paul Krahn and Steve Ratzlaff, for their helpful comments. Our ongoing discussions on René Girard have been very fruitful. Thanks also to Harry Huebner for his input.