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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: metaphysics and onto-theology**Mark A. Wrathall*

I

Since Plato, philosophers in the West have proposed various conceptions of a supreme being that was the ground of the existence and intelligibility of all that is. In the works of St. Augustine (and perhaps before), this metaphysical god became identified with the Judeo-Christian creator God. In modernity, however, the philosopher's foundationalist conception of God has become increasingly implausible. The decline of the metaphysical God was perhaps first noted when Pascal declared that the God of the philosophers was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In any event, by the time that Nietzsche announced "the death of God," it was clear that something important had changed in the form of life prevailing in the West.

Whether Nietzsche's actual diagnosis of the change is right, most contemporary thinkers agree with him that the metaphysical understanding of God is no longer believable. But several of the most distinguished thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – for example, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Martin Heidegger, and Nietzsche himself – held that the loss of belief in a metaphysical god that is the ground of all existence and intelligibility, and even the loss of belief in a creator God who produced the heaven and the earth, is not itself a disaster. These thinkers argue that the absence of a foundational God opens up access to richer and more relevant ways for us to understand creation and for us to encounter the divine and the sacred. Thus, the death of the philosopher's God may have provided us with new and more authentic possibilities for understanding religion that were blocked by traditional metaphysical theology (or onto-theology).

A note is in order about the title of this volume, and the idea of metaphysics and "onto-theology." This volume grew out of a conference entitled "Religion after Onto-Theology," which was held at Sundance, Utah in July, 2001. The term "onto-theology," as it figured in that title, was popularized by Heidegger as a catch-phrase for the failings of the metaphysical tradition

in philosophy. A central problem of that conference, and consequently of this book, is understanding the consequences of the demise of the metaphysical tradition for thinking about religion.

In the twentieth century, philosophers in both the analytic and continental traditions became concerned to free philosophical inquiry from the dominance of “metaphysics.” The oddity of these parallel calls for the “overcoming of metaphysics” lies in the fact that the analytic and the continental camps saw one other as the main culprit in the continuation of metaphysical modes of inquiry. For the analytic, the error of the metaphysical tradition consisted in its striving for an “alleged knowledge of the essence of things which transcends the realm of empirically founded, inductive science.”¹ For Heidegger (and the continental philosophers influenced by him), on the other hand, the analytical “elimination” of metaphysics through logical analysis and deference to the empirical sciences could, in fact, only lead to a deeper entanglement in metaphysics. This is because the dominance of logical, scientific, and mathematical modes of thought is, according to Heidegger, the result of the prevailing metaphysical understanding of being, an “alleged knowledge of the essence of things” – one in which beings are best represented in logical and mathematical terms – which fails to ask about the foundation of this understanding of being. Indeed, Heidegger believed that a central trait of metaphysical thought is a preoccupation with beings and a failure to ask properly about their being: “As metaphysics, it is by its very essence excluded from the experience of Being; for it always represents beings (öν) only with an eye to that aspect of them that has already manifested itself as being (τὸ ὄν). But metaphysics never pays attention to what has concealed itself in this very ὄν insofar as it became unconcealed.”²

According to Heidegger, all metaphysical philosophy was essentially oblivious to being, because all metaphysics took the form of “onto-theology.” This means that metaphysics tried to understand the being of everything that is through a simultaneous determination of its essence or most universal trait (the “onto” in “onto-theology”), and a determination of the ground or source of the totality of beings in some highest or divine entity (the “theo” in “onto-theology”). This amounts, according to Heidegger, to a profound confusion, for it tries to understand the transcendental ground of all beings as a transcendent being.³ In “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,”⁴ Heidegger argues that the onto-theological structure of metaphysical inquiry has had deleterious effects on both philosophy and theology: it has prevented philosophy from thinking about being as something that is not itself a being, and it has misconstrued the nature of God, thereby obstructing our relationship with the divine.

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It is worth observing that the contributors to this volume are anything but unanimous in their assessment of the details of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, and one can find them disagreeing on issues such as: is it indeed the case that all philosophy is "always" metaphysical / onto-theological?,⁵ or, what precisely is the failing of onto-theological metaphysics?, or even, is onto-theology something that we should want to overcome?

What does unite the essays in this volume is an interest in the state of religion in an age in which metaphysics has come into disrepute. And whatever their opinion of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, the contributors all tend to think about metaphysics along the lines projected by Heidegger, rather than along the lines of the analytic opposition to metaphysics. That is to say, the concern is not primarily with metaphysics as a speculative, non-empirical mode of inquiry, but with metaphysics as an obliviousness to the understanding of being that governs an age. In the Heideggerian tradition, the project of overcoming metaphysics cannot be accomplished through logical or conceptual analysis, but only through an openness to the way that an understanding of being comes to prevail. (See Jean-Luc Marion's analysis in the final chapter of this volume.)

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Reflection on religion after metaphysics, then, needs to be understood in terms of thought about the place of religion in an age where the understanding of being that legitimized certain traditional modes of conceptualizing the sacred and the divine is called into question. In thinking about the important changes in the forms of existence that once supported metaphysical theology, the natural starting point is Nietzsche's work, and his account of the history of nihilism and the death of God.

Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God, as Robert Pippin notes, "has come to represent and sum up not just the unbelievability of God in the late modern world, but the 'death' of a Judeo-Christian form of moral life, the end of metaphysics, or the unsuccessful attempt to end metaphysics, or even the end of philosophy itself" (see p. 7 below). Pippin argues, however, that the central focus of Nietzsche's claim is a certain "loss of desire," which has rendered us "pale atheists," unable even to long for the God that is absent. In the face of the widespread pale atheism that characterizes the modern age, the challenge for us after the death of God is, on this view, that of inspiring enough desire and longing to sustain life itself.

For Gianni Vattimo, on the other hand, the death of the onto-theological God needs to be understood in terms of the impossibility of believing in an

objective truth or a uniquely valid language or paradigm for understanding the world. Without this metaphysical belief in an objective and universal foundation – that is, with the end of metaphysics – Vattimo argues that there is now room for a “truce” between philosophy, religion, and science. This, in turn, leaves us free to respond to the core of the Judeo-Christian message.

Richard Rorty agrees with Vattimo in reading the end of onto-theology as the end of a certain metaphysical universalism in religion, thus taking religion out of the “epistemic arena” (p. 40). But in contrast to Vattimo, Rorty argues that religion remains a kind of “unjustifiable nostalgia,” without which, Rorty hopes, we can eventually learn to live.

Charles Taylor, rather than seeing in our history a uniform and inevitable progress of secularization, argues that the contemporary West is characterized by the progressive fracturing of a unified understanding of being into a multiplicity of “world structures.” The predominant world structures tend to “occult or blank out the transcendent” (p. 66), and thus marginalize religious practices and modes of discourse. Taylor argues that the marginalization of religious practices, however, is based on an “over-hasty naturalization” which, when recognized as such, should yield to a more open stance toward religious forms of life.

It should be apparent by now that there is considerable room for disagreement over the nature of the death of the philosopher’s God and the direction in which Western culture is moving. As the next set of essays demonstrates, there are also sharply contrasting views of what was wrong with the metaphysical account of God.

Some of the authors see the failure of onto-theology in the way it strips the divine of all personal attributes, thereby turning God into the God of the philosophers. If God is made the transcendental ground of the world and of all intelligibility, the divine no longer is able to have the kind of presence within the world necessary to give our lives worth. On this reading of the onto-theological tradition, the challenge facing a religion after onto-theology is that of reviving the possibility of having a direct relation to the divine. The next two chapters in the volume explore this vision of a non-onto-theological God as the basis for responses to contemporary pragmatic dismissals of religion, typified by Rorty’s chapter. Mark Wrathall reviews Heidegger’s diagnosis of the ills of contemporary technological society in terms of the reduction of all the things which once mattered to us or made demands on us to mere resources. Heidegger believes that the only hope for salvation from the dangers of technology is a life attuned to the four-fold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. A relation to the divine, on the

Heideggerian account, is thus not just a matter of personal preference, but a necessary part of a life worth living in the technological age. Hubert Dreyfus explores the Kierkegaardian response to the nihilism of the present age. Unlike Heidegger, Kierkegaard accepts the futility of resisting the nihilism apparent in the levelling of all meaningful distinctions, because he sees it as the inevitable consequence of the onto-theological tradition. But rather than seeing this as destroying the possibility for an authentic relationship to the divine, Kierkegaard sees it as clearing the way for us to confront our despair at being unable to unify the seemingly contradictory factors in human existence. Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, has shown us the only way to get the factors together and thus escape from despair: namely, by “responding to the call” of a “defining commitment” (p. 96). In this way, Dreyfus argues, “Kierkegaard has succeeded in saving Christianity from onto-theology by replacing the creator God, who is metaphysically infinite and eternal, with the God-man who is finite and temporal” (p. 101).

Rather than seeing the failing of onto-theology in terms of its failure to admit the possibility of encountering God within the world, Peperzak and Caputo understand the limitations of onto-theology in terms of a reduction of God to a being about whom we could come to have a pretension of theoretical clarity. That is, onto-theology obstructed access to an authentic experience of the divine by making God a being who could be understood, whose nature could be categorized, and whose existence could be proved. The hope for religion after onto-theology is, for these authors, to recognize that God has a kind of majesty and incomprehensibility that we do not find in intra-worldly beings. God, Peperzak notes, is “the One who cannot be caught by any categorical or conceptual grasp” (p. 107). While agreeing that the onto-theological attempts at trying to get a conceptual grasp of God “have (at least partially) failed,” Peperzak sees the work of Levinas as a basis for a “retrieval of the onto-theo-logical project” (pp. 110, 112) of thinking God simultaneously as a person to whom we can relate and as that which makes all relations possible – in Heideggerian terms, that is, to think God simultaneously as a being and Being. Caputo argues that, after onto-theology, we can engage in a phenomenology of the experience of God, which, he argues, is a phenomenology of the experience of the impossible. The failing of onto-theology, Caputo suggests, was that it was unable to entertain the possibility of the impossible, and thus it “tended to keep a metaphysical lid on experience” (p. 129). The end of onto-theology thus holds out the promise of an authentic relationship to an incomprehensible God.

Of course, in a volume by philosophers on the topic of religion after onto-theology, the nature of post-metaphysical philosophy is at least as much in issue as the nature of post-metaphysical religion. And, not surprisingly, a recurring theme in many of the chapters is the question of the kind of philosophical inquiry appropriate to post-onto-theological religious experience. The last essays in this book address this problem directly. Leora Batnitzky reviews the work of Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas in terms of their efforts to articulate the relation between philosophy and revelation. If the revelation contained in the Bible “is not concerned with the onto-theological status of God” (p. 155), then the philosophical appropriation of the revelation cannot be understood as articulating the metaphysical essentialism implicit in the revelation. Instead, Batnitzky suggests that the task for us is to think through the possibilities for a philosophical but non-metaphysical account of ethics and politics – an account which must be grounded in the revelation if it is to “defend morality to humanity at large” (p. 155).

In the final chapter, Marion brings us back to the general question of the possibilities available for thought at the end of metaphysics – a central issue which, more or less self-consciously, motivates every other chapter in this volume. Marion explores the nature of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, and his enduring effort to think through the end of metaphysics. Heidegger, Marion argues, opens the horizon of, but hesitates before the possibility of, overcoming metaphysics in and through a thought of the donation – the giving of a clearing by “something other than being” (p. 183). It is this opening that, Marion argues, needs to be pursued if there is to be a “radical overcoming” of metaphysics.

NOTES

1. Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), p. 80.
2. Martin Heidegger, “Introduction to ‘What is Metaphysics?,’” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 288.
3. See “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being,” *Nietzsche*, vol. iv, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 210–11.
4. In *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (University of Chicago Press, 1969).
5. Heidegger, *Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. XLII (Frankfurt-on-Main: Klostermann, 1988), p. 88.

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CHAPTER 2

*Love and death in Nietzsche**Robert Pippin*

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
 A name for something that never could be named.
 There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
 Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
 In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(Wallace Stevens, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction:
 It Must be Abstract," *The Collected Poems*
 [New York: Vintage, 1990], p. 381)

Section 125 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* is justifiably famous; it is perhaps the most famous passage in all of Nietzsche.¹ In it, Nietzsche introduces a character, *der tolle Mensch*, the crazy man, who proclaims that God is dead, that we all collectively have killed him, and that all must bear the burden of guilt (for centuries) for this horrible murder. Like other famous images in philosophy, like Plato's cave or Descartes's evil genius or Kant's island of truth surrounded by seas of illusion, the passage has taken on a life of its own quite independent of its place and function in what may be Nietzsche's most beautiful and best-thought-out book. It has come to represent and sum up not just the unbelievability of God in the late modern world, but the "death" of a Judeo-Christian form of moral life, the end of metaphysics, or the unsuccessful attempt to end metaphysics, or even the end of philosophy itself.

Yet the passage is also quite mysterious and suggests a number of interpretive problems. The very idea of a *death* or *end* to a form of life (rather than a refutation or enlightenment) is worth considerable attention in itself, but the literary details of this little drama are even more striking.² The announcement is made by a crazy man who carries a lantern in the daylight, seeks a God who he clearly knows does not exist, and after proclaiming that the time for such an announcement is not right and that he will not be understood, promptly begins his prophetic activity anew and with more

intensity, breaking into churches and screaming his message. (He is clearly crazy, but in what sense is he crazy?³)

The announcement itself suggests a kind of insanity. On the face of it, the announcement that “God is dead” is, even metaphorically, opaque. If there had been a *god*, we could not have killed him. If we could have killed him, he could not have been a god. If “God” existed only as a constructed object of belief, a kind of collective “illusion” in Freud’s famous claim, then exposing this illusion might be unsettling and make for much anxiety; and afterwards, it might be impossible to return to the same illusion, but the content of such unease could not be about a “death,” or, especially, *guilt* at having “caused” it, even if one reads the claim metaphorically. (One interpretation might be “*we* destroyed the old illusion that there was a god.” If that were the literal meaning, the only guilt relevant would have to be guilt at having allowed ourselves to be so deceived, and could not be guilt at ending the delusion.) Indeed, Nietzsche himself provides, in his own voice, not the voice of a persona, a much simpler gloss on the claim and one far different in tone. He explains in section 343 that “The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead’” should simply be taken to mean “that the belief in the Christian God has become unworthy of belief.”⁴

So, the oddness of the language in section 125 itself, and Nietzsche’s own very different gloss (especially since the theme of the later passage in Book 5 is “cheerfulness,” not guilt), directs our attention to the contrasting uncheerful, indeed morbid, tone of the first passage, the famous *locus classicus* often cited as Nietzsche’s own “belief” that “God is dead.” (Cheerfulness [*Heiterkeit*] is the important issue here because the most important interpretive question at stake is the possibility of a “joyous science” [*fröhliche Wissenschaft*] and so not nihilism and guilt.) But it would seem that Nietzsche is trying most of all to draw attention to, rather than express or identify with, the “melancholic” tone, both of the announcement and perhaps of the coming culture of melancholy – the tone appropriate to the belief that a kind of death has occurred, that we were responsible, and that this death results only in some unbearable, frightening absence. So one extraordinary feature of the history of the reception of the passage is that what seems clearly to be a kind of symptom of a modern pathology, for which Nietzsche *wants* a diagnosis, is often taken as *the diagnosis* of the modern “orientation” or mood itself! Indeed, I have tried to show elsewhere that Nietzsche is here anticipating Freud’s famous distinction between mourning and melancholy in reaction to a loss or trauma, suggesting that the madman’s madness is this kind of melancholic obsession with what has been lost, complete with its narcissistic assumption of grandiose

responsibility, lurid details of murder and blood and guilt, and repetitive compulsion.⁵

Freud famously contrasts the genuine work of mourning, in which the loss of a loved one, or a disappointed expectation or rejection, is finally acknowledged (something that also presupposes that the genuine separateness of the person or the independence of the world is also acknowledged), so that one's libido can be redirected then to other such objects; and the absence of such work for the melancholic, whose world is so narcissistic that he believes that *he* could not have been left, even while, also out of such narcissism, he also believes that he must have been somehow responsible for the loss. Both reactions deny the separateness and independence of the other and so deny the other's death, preserving in unovercomeable grief (which Freud points out must be as constantly and repetitively exhibited and staged as the madman's) a kind of morbid living presence of the other and the continuing importance of the subject. It is this pathology, perhaps the typical pathology of a "modernist" culture of melancholia (Dostoevsky, Musil, Kafka, Beckett), likewise inspired by a type of narcissism, that Nietzsche precisely wants to avoid with his *gaya scienza*. (Nietzsche's name for such an illness is as often "romanticism" as melancholy. He links both in some of his remarks on Brahms and Wagner, saying of the former that "his is the melancholy of incapacity; he does *not* create out of an abundance; he *languishes* for abundance"⁶ and that it is when Brahms "mourns" for himself that he is "modern." This distinction between desire as a lack – and the death of God as a new lack – and desire as abundance, excess – and so the death of God as freeing such generosity – will emerge frequently in what follows.)

The most significant feature of the passage, for our purposes in this volume, concerns what Nietzsche appears to think the appropriate response to this announcement should be. In setting the context for the announcement, especially the audience to whom it is made, Nietzsche goes out of his way to suggest that what we normally regard as "atheism" is far too simplistic a description of what it would be truly to "incorporate" this truth. The opening passage describes, as the madman's audience, a group of people who "did not believe in God" and, when they hear the madman proclaim that he seeks God, jeer sarcastically and joke, "Has he got lost?" "Did he lose his way like a child?" "Is he hiding?" "Is he afraid of us?" "Has he gone on a voyage?" But if the madman is mad, these jeering atheists are clearly portrayed, as they are elsewhere in Nietzsche, as thoughtless, smug, self-satisfied boors. In other passages, Nietzsche's Homeric epithet for such atheists is "*pale* atheists," suggesting this lack of vitality or even sickness.

(Thus we need to understand why, if the death of God signals a general end to the possibility of transcendence, religion, morally significant truth, and so forth, the successor culture would *not* simply have to be a culture of such pale [joking, ironic] atheists.)⁷ If Nietzsche wants to suggest that the madman is pathologically wrong to treat the absence of God as a loss, wrong to take on the burden of a self-lacerating guilt, he seems just as dissatisfied with these village atheist types who are too easily satisfied with a secular materialism and so do not understand the aspirations and ideals Nietzsche elsewhere treats as “a condition of life.”

So my question will be, why does Nietzsche treat these self-satisfied atheists this way? What are they missing? What does Nietzsche want us to understand by his rejecting both the notion of a now absent God and the stance of what appears to be straightforward, Enlightenment atheism? In his own terms, this means understanding why a life guided by the “old values” is just as impossible as a life guided by “no values,” or why a “transvaluation,” an “*Umwertung*,” of all values is what is now necessary and what it would be like.

This question already reflects Nietzsche’s earlier way of posing it in *The Birth of Tragedy*: the unbelievability of monotheism in no way necessarily ushers in the age of a-theism, the anti-religion of “last men.” (In *The Birth of Tragedy* a modern “polytheism” still seemed possible to Nietzsche.) That dogmatic anti-dogma (atheism) is hard to understand as a way of life, he often suggests, as in this evocative passage from *The Gay Science*:

We are, in a word – and it should be our word of honor – good Europeans, the heirs of Europe, the rich, well-endowed, but also over-rich, obligated heirs of centuries of European spirit: as such also those who have grown up and away from Christianity, and just because we have awakened from it, because our forebears were Christians from an unreflective sense of the righteousness of Christianity, who willingly for their faith sacrificed blood, position and fatherland for it. We – do the same. But for what? For our lack of faith? For a kind of disbelief? No, you know better than that, my friends. The hidden *yes* in you is stronger than all the no’s and perhaps from which you and your age are sick; and if you have to sail the seas, you wanderer, something also compels you to do so – a faith!⁸

Nietzsche’s most comprehensive term for the historical and psychological situation that in the present age requires this “transvaluation of values” after “the death of God” is “nihilism.” But here again the surface meaning of these claims about what necessitates a transvaluation has suggested many different sorts of provocations and so raises questions about how Nietzsche wants us to understand at the most general level the conditions possible now (without “God,” in all senses of the term) for the success of that activity