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978-1-107-01028-4 - *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition*

Kevin W. Hector

Excerpt

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1 | Therapy for metaphysics

As its name suggests, this book proposes a novel strategy by which to avoid metaphysics. There is nothing new about trying to avoid metaphysics, of course – in the memorable words of Hegel, “metaphysics is a word from which more or less everyone runs away, as from someone who has the plague”¹ – but unlike recent proposals, the chapters which follow pursue a *therapeutic*, rather than *apophatic*, approach to doing so. One of the difficulties facing any attempt to overcome metaphysics, it seems, is that certain metaphysical presuppositions about what it means to be in touch with reality – and about reality itself – have become common sense. A crucial first step in overcoming metaphysics, then, is to render these presuppositions visible *as* presuppositions; on a therapeutic approach, this is accomplished by defending an alternative account of reality, of “being in touch,” and so on, thereby stripping such presuppositions of their apparent self-evidence. Not just any account will do, however, since one

¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. xvii, Glockner (ed.) (Stuttgart: Bad Canstatt, 1965), p. 400, cited as the epigraph to the first edition of Martin Heidegger’s “Nachwort zu: Was ist Metaphysik?” *Wegmarken*, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. ix (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), p. 304 n1. Naturally, metaphysics – even the variety of metaphysics at which this book takes aim – has also had its defenders; the best recent example of such a defense is offered by Radical Orthodoxy, for which see, for instance, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 1999); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 2006); and John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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who has long been in the grip of metaphysics may feel as if its loss leaves him or her out of touch with reality, as if condemned to a life among shadows. The therapeutic strategy, then, is to inoculate one against such feelings by explaining that which metaphysics purports to explain – what reality is like and what it means to be in touch with it – in terms of ordinary practices and experience, thereby deflating these notions and demonstrating that one need not appeal to metaphysics in order to do them justice. Before elaborating this strategy, however, we need to say more about the metaphysics at which it takes aim; to this we now turn.

The question of metaphysics

1

Modern thought has engaged in a recurrent rebellion against metaphysics: so, for instance, Kant's critical philosophy aims to make the world unsafe for Leibnizian metaphysics; Nietzsche insists that Kant is still beholden to the metaphysics at which his critique took aim; Heidegger claims that Nietzsche's "will to power" is the culmination, rather than overcoming, of metaphysics; Jean-Luc Marion argues that Heidegger's "ontological difference" keeps us bound within a metaphysics of Being/being; John Caputo maintains that Marion's "de-nominative" theology remains complicit in the metaphysics of presence; and so on. This recurrent rebellion against metaphysics indicates that although we moderns may want to avoid metaphysics, we have a hard time doing so. It would appear, in other words, that metaphysics is a kind of *temptation*: we want to resist it, but find it difficult to do so.

To see why this might be the case – and to begin gathering clues to a way forward – we must consider, first, the metaphysics against which theologians repeatedly rebel. It is important to address this matter explicitly, since the term "metaphysics" can be used to refer to several different things, and I am by no means suggesting that everything that goes by that name is to be rejected. So, for instance,

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the term is sometimes used to designate any set of claims about that which transcends nature, or any set of claims about what things are like. I am emphatically *not* interested in doing without metaphysics in *these* senses – or, more precisely, I am interested in doing without them just insofar as they are bound up with the variety of metaphysics I *am* interested in doing without. (In light of this remark, some readers may understand this book as defending a revisionist metaphysics, rather than as doing without metaphysics. I have no objection to this interpretation, so long as too much is not made of it.)

Turning, then, to the metaphysics at which this project takes aim, it will be helpful to begin with Martin Heidegger's account of the subject, not least because his account has had unparalleled influence on contemporary anti-metaphysics.² To be sure, Heidegger himself defines metaphysics in more than one way, though the main lines of his account are fairly consistent. At the most general level, he defines metaphysics as an attempt to understand beings "as such," that is, "what beings are *as* beings."³ To this definition, Heidegger then adds a crucial qualification: metaphysics identifies the being of beings as that in and upon which they are *grounded*, and identifies this ground, in turn, with human *ideas* about them.⁴ Simply put,

² It is worth noting that Heidegger's account of metaphysics parallels Karl Barth's account of natural theology in crucial respects, as well as Rudolf Bultmann's account of "objectification," such that a theology that does without metaphysics (in Heidegger's sense) is roughly equivalent to one that does without natural theology (in Barth's sense) and objectification (in Bultmann's).

³ Heidegger, "Was ist Metaphysik?" *Wegmarken*, p. 118; "Einleitung zu: 'Was ist Metaphysik?'" *Wegmarken*, p. 378. Two notes on translations: first, here as elsewhere I am following the convention of translating Heidegger's "Seiende" as plural, since the latter best captures Heidegger's sense. Second, apart from a couple of exceptions, translations throughout are mine.

⁴ Heidegger writes, accordingly, that in metaphysics "the being of beings is preconceived as the grounding ground. Therewith all metaphysics is in its ground and from the ground up, that which accounts for the ground" ("Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik," *Identität und Differenz, Gesamtausgabe* vol. XI [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006], p. 66).

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then, Heidegger claims (a) that metaphysics equates the being of beings – their fundamental reality – with our conceptions of them, and (b) that it thus fits beings into a prior conceptual framework. To get a grip on what Heidegger means by this claim – and on what grounds he asserts it – it will be helpful to look at examples of such metaphysics; for this reason, we will consider Heidegger’s treatment of two figures whose thought he regards as the very epitome of metaphysics: René Descartes and Friedrich Nietzsche. Not, to be sure, because Heidegger is a reliable guide to these figures, but because his treatment of them sheds invaluable light on Heidegger’s own thought.

2

We begin with Descartes, whose philosophy Heidegger describes as “the initiation of the fulfillment of Western metaphysics.”⁵ Like many historians of philosophy, Heidegger sees Descartes’s project as a response to problems posed by the Renaissance and Reformation, the net effect of which were to undermine appeals to tradition and revelation. We will say more about these problems in the next chapter, but for now their upshot is straightforward enough: neither historical precedent, nor the alleged claims of revelation, nor even the deliverances of sense-perception had proven sufficient ground by which to determine what to believe or how to act, since each of these had either been proven wrong (as when scientific investigation had disproven certain traditional beliefs) or, at the very least, as themselves in need of a ground (as when claims about revelation were at issue in debates among Protestants and Roman Catholics). For reasons we shall rehearse in the following chapter, the moral drawn from this story by Descartes and others was that reason alone would have to provide such grounds. Heidegger thus characterizes Descartes’s situation as one

⁵ Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe* vol. v (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), Zusatz 4, p. 99.

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in which certain intellectuals, at least, had been liberated from their bondage to churchly and supernatural authorities, but because these authorities had been the foundation upon which beliefs had previously been grounded, it followed that these intellectuals would now have to find a new ground for belief. Given that neither tradition, nor revelation, nor even sense-perception could provide such a ground, the only place left to turn was to the human knower him- or herself.⁶ On Heidegger's account, then, "the metaphysical task of Descartes became this: to create the metaphysical ground for the liberation of the human person to liberty as the self-determining that is certain of itself."⁷ The old foundations having crumbled, Descartes needed to lay a new, more secure foundation on the basis of liberated human reason.

It is against this background, Heidegger thinks, that one should understand Descartes's famous "*cogito ergo sum*," the upshot of which is that the "I" is necessarily co-positing in all thinking and, indeed, is the rule by which the latter must be measured. The crucial move here, on Heidegger's reading, is Descartes's identification of fundamental reality or "substance" with that which human persons clearly and distinctly perceive – that is, with that which they *represent* to themselves – so that the content of one's representations can be equated with an object's ownmost being.⁸ This is crucial, since

⁶ Thus Heidegger: "Liberation *from* the salvation-certainty provided by revelation," he claims, "must in itself be a liberation *to* a certainty in which the human person secures truth as that which is known in his or her knowing. That was possible only in that the self-liberated person him- or herself guarantees the certainty of the knowable. Such a thing could happen, however, only insofar as the human person decides by and for him- or herself what is knowable as well as what it means to know and to secure the known" (Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," Zusatz 9, p. 107).

⁷ Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," Zusatz 9, p. 107. On this point, cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. II.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), pp. 117–30.

⁸ So Heidegger claims that, for Descartes, "the true is that which the human person clearly and distinctly sets before him- or herself and thus confronts as that which is brought-before-oneself (represented or 'set-before'), in order to secure that which is represented in such confrontation. The security of such setting-before is *certainty*" ("Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 389). The key here,

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the representing subject then encounters nothing other than that which it represents to itself, and it represents to itself nothing other than that which has been subjected to its own measure. As a result, “only what is secured in the manner just noted – through representation – is validated *as a being*,” and “the human person becomes to each being that upon which the manner and truth of its being is grounded.”⁹ (Heidegger here points, as evidence, to Descartes’s assertion that the substance of a corporeal object is that which can be subjected to the rule of mathematics, namely, the object’s extension, shape, position, and motion.)¹⁰ Descartes thereby responds to the problems mentioned above: human belief and action are secured, on this account, precisely because the representing subject encounters – and can encounter – nothing other than objects whose fundamental reality corresponds to the subject’s predetermined measure. The security of the representing subject is thus guaranteed in advance, since anything that does not fit neatly into its categories is consigned to “mere appearance” and so, finally, to non- (or second-class) being.

As Heidegger reads him, then, Descartes’s metaphysics is characterized by an account of being-as-such and of the representations to which such being must correspond. From one point of view, this account is novel, since the priority Descartes accords to the representing subject has few precedents. From another point of view, however, Descartes’s representationalism can be seen as the culmination of all prior metaphysical systems, in the sense of

obviously, is the notion of “representation,” in which one “brings that which is represented before oneself, of oneself, as something standing over against oneself, relates it to oneself and in this relationship forces it into the normative domain of the self” (“Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” p. 91).

⁹ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 150; “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” p. 88.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, 1953), especially pp. 95–7; cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. VII, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.) (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983), pp. 43 and 80.

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making explicit that which lay hidden at the heart of those systems. Looking back over Descartes's shoulder, in other words, one can now see those systems for what they are, namely, attempts to secure human knowing by identifying the being of beings with human ideas about them. Heidegger traces the beginning of metaphysics, in this sense, back to Plato.¹¹ Two steps are crucial to the emergence of such metaphysics, the first of which is the drawing of a distinction between the "thatness" and "whatness" of a being.¹² So the being of a stone, for instance, can be understood in terms of its existence – the very fact *that* there is a stone – or in terms of its essence – what makes it the thing it is, namely, its stone-ness or "idea." The second step is to identify whatness as that which is fundamentally real about a being, at which point "all essential determinations of essence as such, i.e. the character of beings, are brought within the compass of *kataphasis*, i.e. of *kategoria*, they are categories."¹³ Human knowledge is thereby secured here, too, since the fundamental reality of an object is thought to be identical with that in terms of which humans know it, namely, ideas or categories. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that "*meta-physics begins* with Plato's interpretation of being as *idea*," and that, ever since, "being is sought in the idea, in ideality and ideals."¹⁴ We can thus see the sense in which Descartes is supposed to represent the culmination of the history of metaphysics, since Descartes's

¹¹ So on one reading, for instance, Plato argues that one's perception of some object counts as knowledge only when it has been "tied down" by a reasoned account (*Meno*, 97e–98a; cf. *Theaetetus* 201d, and *The Republic* 476a–d), and it can be so tied only by something that does not change, namely, the ideal Forms of which the object partakes (cf. *Timaeus* 27d). For Plato, then, one's perception of a particular object-instance counts as knowledge only insofar as one recognizes it as an instance of an unchanging idea, and it is the latter which is taken to be that which an object truly or fundamentally is. (Translations taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, John M. Cooper [ed.] [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997].)

¹² Heidegger, "Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," pp. 363ff.

¹³ Heidegger, "Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," pp. 392–3.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 196.

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representationalism simply makes explicit that which was implicit in Platonic metaphysics – namely, the identification of the being of beings with human ideas about them.

That which is implicit in metaphysics is not yet entirely explicit, however. The final step remains to be taken by Nietzsche, whose philosophy Heidegger describes as “the fulfillment” or “completion” of Western metaphysics.¹⁵ The key development is this: whereas Plato and Descartes still see ideas and representations as corresponding to the way things really are – and identify “the way things are” with extra-phenomenal essences – Nietzsche insists that our ideas are measured only by standards of our own positing. Heidegger claims that this insistence marks the birth of a new consciousness, one that “unconditionally and in every respect has become conscious of itself as that knowledge which consists in knowingly willing the Will to Power as the being of beings.”¹⁶ To be sure, Heidegger thinks there is nothing novel about identifying the being of beings with something that humans have posited; what is new, rather, is Nietzsche’s explicit awareness that this is the case, and his consequent refusal of appeals to that which transcends such positing. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that Nietzsche’s philosophy marks the consummation of metaphysics, since here, for the first time, it becomes explicit that human persons answer only to humanly posited values. We could thus understand the fulfillment of metaphysics as proceeding through three steps: (a) Plato identifies the being of beings with ideas, but thinks of these ideas as objectively real – as part of the furniture of the universe, as it were – and so thinks of human knowledge as dependent upon something external to it; (b) Descartes identifies the being of beings with that which fits within the representing subject’s predetermined categories, thereby eliminating the assumption that the ideas to which beings conform are

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 171; cf. *Nietzsche*, vol. I, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. VI.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), p. 431.

¹⁶ Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Wort: ‘Gott ist Tot,’” *Holzwege*, p. 257.

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themselves external to human subjects; Descartes thinks his procedure is warranted, however, by the fact that these categories correspond to the fundamental reality of objects, and so still thinks of human knowing as dependent upon something external to it; (c) by contrast, Nietzsche asserts that the decision to understand objects in, say, mathematical terms is just that, a decision, and that the resultant knowledge counts as such just because we have decided so to count it; more generally, then, Nietzsche contends that the ideas and values in terms of which we understand the world are irreducibly *our* ideas and values, and that we must have the courage to take responsibility for them. The consummation of metaphysics, therefore, is the insistence that there is nothing outside of human positings to which those positings must – or can – answer. The quest for a secure ground is thereby fulfilled: “In that the Will to Power achieves its ultimate, unconditional security,” Heidegger argues, “it is the sole criterion of all securing and thus of what is right ... What it wills is correct and in order, because the Will to Will is the only order that remains.”¹⁷

Simply stated, then, Heidegger understands metaphysics as the attempt to secure human knowledge by identifying the fundamental reality of objects – their being as such – with our ideas about them. The bottom line, according to Heidegger, is that “metaphysics is anthropomorphism – the forming and beholding of the world according to the image of the human person.”¹⁸ In order to set this understanding of metaphysics apart from other referents of that term, we can label it *essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics*, since what sets the latter apart is precisely an understanding of the being of beings – their essence – as that which must correspond to the ideas of a human knower.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Überwindung der Metaphysik,” *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. VII (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), p. 86.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 111.

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We can spell this out further by considering some of the critiques to which such metaphysics has been thought liable, beginning with those leveled by Heidegger himself. Four critiques are especially pertinent to the present argument, but before turning to them we must consider, if only briefly, Heidegger's own fundamental concern with metaphysics. His worry, simply stated, is that metaphysics precludes being itself from coming into view, since metaphysics pictures Being as grounded in beings rather than vice versa. That is to say, insofar as metaphysics grounds thatness in whatness, it grounds the being of beings within beings themselves, thereby taking Being (as opposed to Nothing) for granted. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that "metaphysics makes it seem as if the question concerning Being has been asked and answered. Yet metaphysics nowhere answers the question about the truth of Being, because it never asks this question. It does not ask it, because metaphysics thinks Being only in that it represents beings as beings."¹⁹ Heidegger's treatment of metaphysics is thus motivated by his concern with the question of Being, yet the latter is of little interest to the present proposal; those interested in a theological treatment of this question can turn instead to the brilliant work of Paul Tillich. We will focus, rather, on Heidegger's analysis itself, not the project in whose service it was set.

Heidegger's central concern is related, however, to a criticism relevant to our project, namely, that metaphysics does violence to objects by forcing them into predetermined categories. Heidegger claims, that is, that in metaphysics, "human persons give beings their measure, in that they determine from and by themselves what should be allowed to circulate as being," in consequence of which "the metaphysically stamped manner of human representation finds everywhere only the metaphysically constructed world."²⁰

¹⁹ Heidegger, "Einleitung zu: 'Was ist Metaphysik?'" p. 370.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 151; "Überwindung der Metaphysik," p. 71.