



## Humanity under Test Comments on the God of Sartre, Heidegger, and Jaspers

Chung-ying Cheng  
*University of Hawai'i at Manoa*  
ccheng@hawaii.edu

**Abstract:** The comments here are positive responses to David Nichols' essay on the notions of the divine in Jaspers, Sartre, and Heidegger. In recognizing the insights of Nichols' analysis and his exposition of these three existentialist philosophers with regard to their views on the divine, this critique also reflects upon and explores some tacit implications of their existential thoughts, and concludes with daring and innovative remarks from within a Chinese philosophical point of view, namely it raises the question whether these thoughts in fact show that humanity is under test, not just under stress.

**Keywords:** God; soteriological; apophatic; *Existenz*; *dao*; *tian*.

As soon as Friedrich Nietzsche declares, "God is dead," we immediately sensed an urgency of a crisis of being and value in the dialectical development of modern European philosophy. The Nietzschean declaration signifies an end of an epoch from which a new beginning has to be found and a new faith has to be generated for the ultimate support of human existence. Without reflecting on the sources and causes which leads to this sense of crisis, we may see that already before Nietzsche there have been such signs that suggest our understanding of God has to be reconfigured and re-justified so that our faith in him would make good sense. Immanuel Kant has shown that the religious has to be defined and understood within the limits of reason. In this sense, God together with the freedom of human soul are postulated for the need of morality, which is human matter. As to G.F.W. Hegel, the absolute spirit has been shown to follow a dialectics of self-conflict and self-resolution in order to bring reason and value to this world and thus to impart a meaning to the concept of God in the Christian religion. At this point we have to

ask the question why, even when God has been fully re-defined and re-identified, there is still a sense of desperation. In part this is related to the human history of wars in which hatred and racial injustice, violence and brutality, cruelty and maliciousness are brought against humanity and which could be even suspected to originate from fear and sickness from bottom of humanity, suggesting an utter defeat and withdrawal and eventual demise of God.

It is against this background we may pose the question: how do we face the fate and destiny of humanity in a world of no God or no ultimate value and no way-out. It appears that Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers could be said to represent three ways of approaching the problem of human rehabilitation for a faithful life or at least for the courage of facing insecurities and instabilities of living. With this understanding I see David P. Nichols' essay as highly significant and as a well-motivated attempt to address the question of humanistic meaning—if not a hidden theological meaning—into the human situation of

existence as found by modern man. Nichols makes two things clear already at the outset of his essay, (a) that the search for a way-out of humanity shows a metaphysical failure of preceding philosophy before existentialism. However, there is some difficulty in this perception. Metaphysically, both Kant and Hegel have presented us a picture of divinity quite understandable within our reason, but the failure of Kant and Hegel as seen retrospectively consists in that they have been detached from living actuality of man and the world, and hence did not recognize the falling state of humanity and its need for existential transformation and hope. The world is changed by wars but the humanity in the world needs to be seen as generating a new desire for recognition and new assertion. Of course, Nietzsche has already begun his search in the form of an epic of superman and will to power as basis for morality and new political order, but there is no serenity of assurance and no vision for unity in our thirst for more fundamental values. The metaphysical failure Nichols talks about is therefore merely technical. There is still a soteriological failure in which man's desire to find a settlement of heart and mind must be addressed.

(b) The second point made by Nichols is his comparison of Sartre with Heidegger and Jaspers, as he sees Sartre's search and advocacy for freedom as not sufficient and still in need to find a Being that takes the place of God and hence is a hidden and unknown source of creativity and truth, and in fact submits that this need is addressed by both Jaspers and Heidegger. This suggestion is no doubt an insight and I think that we have good reason to agree with Nichols. For Nietzsche, God is dead not because God's position has expired but rather God has not done his work in his position. This then leads to a fundamental difference between Heidegger and Jaspers.

In arguing how a hidden God could do a better work and in which way, Nichols points out that there is a tradition of the self-concealing God, and he shows from fragments of Heraclitus and Parmenides the idea of the origin of beings which may be said to give rise to gods and therefore may conceal the source of new gods to come. He even sees in Plato and Aristotle a concealed source of being that would give rise to the idea of essence. Likewise he also tries to bring to bear on the apophatic theology in the early Christianity of Paul where one might find the godhead in the father image of God, which would give rise to god the son by the moving spirit of the godhead.

In characterizing Jaspers, Nichols does well to bring

out the idea of transcendence of God as an existential being, not a rational mind which could ponder on the whole destiny of humankind. What Nichols means by transcendence is something going beyond what is immanent in the world and humanity and yet is open to possible experience by humanity. To experience such transcendence any human being is required to have an encompassing view of infinite possibilities and a passion to reach and experience a creative God in an ecstatic moment of realizing Existenz, viz., the human potential to be. This needs also a pre-rational freedom in the human spirit so that we can embrace God as the immediately presenting and yet we cannot claim any knowledge. This is where the mystery of the human experience of the divine lies. Nichols claims that despite their sharp metaphysical difference, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche share an "unknown God" which inspires our hope and faith like the Pauline hope for a true lord. In this sense, what is regarded as apophatic revelation turns out to most cataphatic. But Nichols notes that this experience and encounter with God as unknown and perhaps as unexpected is beyond theism, atheism, and agnosticism.

This is a profound point, for it reveals also a depth of human heart that feels, though not cognizes. Jaspers can be therefore said to have explored into a reality beyond reality that contains our own existence with its pains and delights. This is revealed in the experiences of a tragic hero who germinates a catharsis and emancipation that is the essence of transcendence for humanity. Yet we must say that we cannot take tragedy to provide universal deliverance. We have to appeal to religion of transcendence such as Christianity and Buddhism that must involve tragic loss and giving up. It is appropriate to use Jaspers' idea of "background of all backgrounds" to describe this self-concealing profundity of transcendence of being through tragic knowledge. Jaspers is positive, not negative, in his apophatic approach to the hidden God. He does not wish to see God as being described as nothingness that would not generate a positive God. God has to be infinite in a positive sense in order to deliver us as a finite being. Nichols also notes that for Jaspers we must cooperate with God in our struggle for delivery and achieving our good life. This is no doubt an existential approach to God, a self-concealing God which wants to be sought and which can be said to be confirmed in our encounter of an opening a new horizon of experience and new being of life to which humanity could contribute. We may indeed call this humanism a form of self-generative humanism.

Then, Nichols turns to Sartre for contrast, as he sees in Sartre no humanistic analysis of the divine nor the wish or haunch that we must seek a new God. Nichols deplors that Sartre did not find an unknown God nor does he wish to explore one. The question is why. Sartre has distinguished two kinds of being for the human person, the being in itself and the being for itself. The question is how we could come to become being for itself from the being in itself. If there were no absolute God who makes himself work to cause this transition, there would be no transition for us even though we need a base or source of transition from the absolute spirit or God. The problem for Sartre is this: God himself has to transform its being into itself into being for itself. There is no reason why God must transform from the state of nothingness to a state of being which transcends itself being nothingness. Like humans, God simply may not make that transition and thence there could be no unknown or hidden God to do this job. Therefore for Sartre there is no hope for humans in terms of their own transcendence, and there is no other way too.

When Nichols comes to Heidegger through Heidegger's *Letters on Humanism*, we see a more revealing development of the notion of the divine. The divine is conceived in the idea of the Being as source of beings: rather than its personality it is its dwelling that is suggested as we read in the metaphor of "Language is the house of Being." By suggesting the "house of Being" or the dwelling place of Being, we come to know where the divine dwells although we may not know who the divine is. The dwelling place may have one God or many gods dwelling, but in so far it is the dwelling place, like Olympia for the Greek gods, it is highly possible that there could be God or gods dwelling although we may not know who is the God or gods. Besides, there could be the possibility that among the gods one may succeed the other as the leading God who would govern the world well and inspire and save some if not all of us, again as the Greek mythology of gods suggests. Heidegger is also subtle in suggesting that since language is the house of Being, we may come to know God through feeling transmitted in language.

This of course suggests that Heidegger has already seen the possibility of self-revealing of the presence of the divine in the use of language. In fact, he may have already come to see how the Greek early philosophers such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Anaximander come to be inspired by their visions of Being as we glimpse through their remaining *Fragments* that are poetic in nature. By having experienced the sense of

the divine in the early philosophers, it is natural for Heidegger to find similar inspirations of the divine in poems of Friedrich Hölderlin, the German Romantic poet at the time of Friedrich Schelling and Hegel. Heidegger describes these encounters with Being as due to the ecstatic existence of man, namely due to the openness of human being to its source without being dominated or possessed by one's will to power. This means that as man is engrossed with his vulgar interests of material things, he would lose his insight to the source of Being. Nichols further suggests that the German phrase *es gibt* (there is) leads to Being seen as giving (*geben*) an openness in us which would lead to an encounter with God or gods. In fact, the giving could be the giving or granting life to man and this makes the divine much closer to a traditional God.

In this description of Heidegger's thinking of the divine, the divine becomes a fundamental a reality that could be experienced by us. If we look into some insightful poetry we may be inspired by the poetry to entertain a vision of God or gods. This would of course give great encouragement and hope to humanity after the announcement that God is dead. Given the above description of three existentialist philosophers in regard to questions of knowing God and encountering Being, the idea of an unknown God is an intriguing one. It reflects a natural projection of our assumption of some kind of genealogy of God with the Greek mythological literature as a background. The idea is that if one reigning God is dead, could we look forward to receiving the successor God whom we do not know. But by calling it God although unknown it is minimally assumed that he is still our ruler and protector in some sense as he has inherited the position of ruling and providence from the preceding God who has demised. In this manner we may also imagine that the successor God may follow or at least has to observe some basic rules of ruling from the its predecessor, particularly with regard to the purpose and ends we have invested in conceiving a God.

I believe that is the reason and ground for Jaspers to be hopeful and even perhaps feel happy to celebrate a new age with a new God. Yet there is a sense of misgiving as well, as the new God is called unknown God. There is the implication and some suggestion of uncertainty as to what this unknown God may do or whether he has come to the position of ruling legitimately and whether there is a system or institution which may bring a new God to it is position of control and influence. Once we come to this question, there could be no answer

or no real answer as to whether the unknown God is friendly or unfriendly, has a moral character or not. Whether his assumption of power is legitimate or not, there may be nothing to be significantly said and there is even the possibility that there is no God and what is called God might be not knowable and might also not exist at all. Once we push ourselves to this limit of our understanding or evaluation of an unknown God, we can see how Sartre comes to his utter pessimistic existentialism of no exit and no hope which would lead to an awakening of humanism in the sense that it is up to the human person to decide what to do with regard to his life and his attitude in regard other men in the world. The granting of absolute freedom and the consequence awakening to responsibility for consequences which will be regarded as completely our own may contain some remote hope for humanity in the future. We as human beings could at least try and be responsible in shouldering what our knowledge and our action may bring about to us.

The question of an unknown God raises the question as to whether and how we come to know this unknown God assuming that he is existent. Heidegger tells us where it is to be found. There is the dwelling place of the divine in our poetic language. The question is that we may not have many poets now and we may wonder which poems reveal the presence of the divine. This means that if there is the divine truth, we may not recognize it as such. Besides, one may not be able to recognize the presence of the divine without possessing a natural power of recognizing the divine. This constitutes a major problem, since insights might not be knowable at all until one has developed a natural power of knowing and making distinctions. This might indeed require external guidance for restoring faith in a future as well as an awakening of oneself within one's existence to be able to recognize a future of hope. Nichols has shown us how three prominent European philosophers have argued their faith or loss of faith in a world of God or the divine. The real problem as to whether or not an individual can relate to the divine

lies within each person, as Hui Neng (638-713), the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan Buddhism in China, once remarked in *Platform Sutra*. Jaspers and Heidegger construe the concealment or unconcealment as a natural and objective matter of the world or the divine itself. But for Hui Neng, to see or not see is the true reason for concealment and unconcealment. This would hold for Daoist or Confucian philosophers as well, for whether we see the *dao* or recognize the *tian* all depends on how we have opened our eyes or refined and cultivated our natures and abilities. The *dao* is hidden in us and it is only when we become clear and unclogged, we will have a clear mind and reason to recognize the *dao* or the divine.

Our own power of seeing is the primary force for seeing and seeking the divine. In this sense, we may not even label Sartre as pessimistic, but instead as a philosopher who argues for freedom and responsibility of the individual. In this sense, the hope for humankind lies precisely with each and everyone's sense of responsibility for what one freely decides to do. This also shows that Jaspers has another message to give: the unknown God is not unknown after all. It is known in our heart-mind already and it is our nature or ability which would decide what do we know and how we know in the sense of reaching for a God. As for Heidegger, his appeal to whereabouts of God is poetic and alludes to Heidegger's Greek bias. For the divine is where we see the divine and it could be here and there, without confining to either language or some other form of media or medium or form of expression. For Daoists the divine is discovered in one's contemplation of the *dao* whereas for the Confucian philosopher, the divine is revealed in one's moral action toward others and therefore in the benevolence and rightness (justice) of one's attitude and action.

All in all, as a conclusion, we must see our own moral maturity as not only a defining element of our humanity, but as a measure of our ability to think about and see the divine.