



The God Question

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Abstract: The essay focuses on the apophatic tradition, Western metaphysics, and the unknown God. It presents Jaspers' thoughts on transcendence as an eye-opener. To take the issue of the unknown God, two philosophers are highlighted, David Hume and Simone Weil. For Hume the concept of the unknown God presents the problem of how might anything that is unknown have any moral influence on human beings? Simone Weil tries to combine the personal and the impersonal aspect of God, that is God is both known and unknown.

Keywords: Apophatic; Hume, David; Jaspers, Karl; life-view; Weil, Simone; *via negativa*; *via positiva*.

Introduction

David Nichols examines the possibilities that remain for existentialists to talk about God despite the failure, according to Nichols, of the God of Western metaphysics. Nichols begins by tracing the unknown God by looking into the Western tradition and its apophatic tradition. He begins with the ideas of Antiquity and ends by reflecting upon what Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger have to contribute to the case of the unknown God. Nichols concludes that Jaspers, Sartre, and Heidegger are equally dismissive of the God of metaphysics since "that entails belief in a highest being meant to explain all other beings." But unlike Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger preserve the idea of the unknown God although they spell it out differently. Jaspers and Heidegger, in Nichols' view, preserve the "mystery that lies beyond and yet surfaces through the ecstatic project of our worldly existence."

When it comes to life-views it is my conviction that there are no final answers; which life-view someone chooses is a question of taste or perspective even though a number of rational, emotional, and scholarly

arguments may substantiate our choice. Nichols does not really settle the dispute between the atheist and the theist. He embraces a conviction and argues in line with that, trying to make this respective life-view reasonable or consistent.

In the following I will focus on Karl Jaspers and his belief in a god-like transcendence. I agree with most of Nichols' interpretation of Jaspers. However, I would like to widen the problems in focus by giving attention to two other philosophers. Thus, I will bring the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) into the picture as he has something interesting to say about the unknown God. I will conclude by introducing the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) and her views on the impersonal and personal God.

The Apophatic Tradition

As an alternative to the God of Western metaphysics Nichols presents what he labels "the legacy of the unknown God," which is also known as the apophatic tradition. Nichols begins his presentation of this tradition with the Greek Heraclitus and writes that

Christianity continues the apophatic tradition, especially in Byzantine theology. Western Christendom leaned towards the God of metaphysics, according to Nichols.

For those scholars who are into mysticism, East and West, apophatic theology is well known. Here we find a theology of the unknown God. Let me just mention one classic text by an unknown author with its revealing title, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.¹ Apophatic theology is not only theology. It is also a philosophy and a way to indicate that concerning existence everything might not be known or talked about. Interestingly enough, this approach has flared up again with postmodernism.

For Nichols, Jaspers and Heidegger preserve the mystery that lies beyond our worldly existence, which Sartre does not. Nichols writes that the theist Kierkegaard and the atheist Nietzsche influenced Jaspers. Even though Kierkegaard and Nietzsche opposed each other in the God-question, they both shared the insight, according to Jones' interpretation of Jaspers, that at the root of "existentialism is a mystery of Being that runs deeper than conventional categories of theism, atheism, or for that matter agnosticism." Nichols continues that according to Jaspers "whenever human beings experience transcendence, they become cognizant of a wider context of fundamental reality." On Jaspers notion of grace Nichols says: "The grace that speaks for the unknown God comes to us in different gifts: the finite world that we inhabit as a shared horizon, the transcendence that alerts us to an infinite vastness, and the deliverance that lifts us from one structured existence to another."

Personally, I am very fond of Jaspers' thoughts about matters concerning transcendence. He is using this concept as a kind of an eye-opener: there might be something beyond the immediate reach. Depending on our attitude towards existence we may despair or see possibilities. Jaspers' debt to Kierkegaard is obvious. Jaspers is not a dogmatic thinker. Where he finds food for his thoughts, he uses it regardless of whether the under-lying life-view is in accord with his own or not.

The Unknown God

David Hume has in a dense form brilliantly presented fundamental pro-et-contra arguments concerning

classical theism in his work *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. The arguments are produced in a dialogue between three friends. Philo, the skeptic steeped in Pyrrhonism, Demea the mystic and finally Cleanthes, the anthropomorphist. Demea, in my reading, belongs to the apophatic tradition or as it is also called *via negativa*. Cleanthes belongs to the kataphatic tradition or as it is also called, *via positiva*. According to *via negativa* God is beyond grasp, utterly different in comparison with human beings. According to *via positiva*, God is graspable because he might be understood in his supposed similarity with human beings.

The three friends present their arguments in favor of their own position and in criticizing each other's position. Demea is accused of being a mystic and in his belief that the nature of God is completely beyond our comprehension. Hume writes with respect to Demea's concept of God: "He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension, and is more the object of worship in the temple than of disputation in the schools."² God is a mystery and his perfectness is covered in a cloud. It would be impertinent for the human being to try to grasp and thereby minimize such a supreme being, according to Demea. It is blasphemy to make God into someone who is similar with human beings. God is utterly different and because of this difference impossible to grasp. Hume writes: "His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect but incomprehensible. And this volume of nature contains a great and inexplicable riddle, more than any intelligible discourse or reasoning" (*DCN* 29). One conclusion to be drawn is that God is not to be proven. The God of Cleanthes, on the other hand, is to be proven by arguments from design. Jaspers is famous for many reasons, among them the sentence that "a proven God is no God." I take Jaspers to mean that if you turn God into an object possible to define and prove empirically, then it is no longer God. Demea thinks in a similar vein. But while Jaspers' aims at preserving ontology, Demea aims at preserving the sovereignty of God.

The point I would like to make is, that although there may be a number of good reasons to understand why we have an apophatic tradition and why Jaspers, Sartre, and Heidegger in different senses approve of it,

¹ It is an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the latter half of the fourteenth century.

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hafner Publishing Company, New York and London 1969, p 17. [Henceforth cited as *DCN*]

problems with this position have been highlighted by Hume. For example, what is the point in believing in what is unknown? How can what is unknown have any moral influence, if that is what we are asking for? Is not the concept of the unknown another aspect of the problem of evil? Instead of trying to pinpoint what we might know or not know concerning God, the whole business is dismissed into unknowability. While the God of Western metaphysics stresses the rationality of God, the apophatic tradition stresses the unknowability of God. The two God-concepts follow two different ideals; which one to choose is like choosing a life-view, that is, a question of taste or perspective as I have already stated.

Impersonal and Personal

Simone Weil pictures God as being both personal and impersonal. There are things to be known about God as well as things that we will not know. We may compare this, in my view, with how we know about others. There are things I know about my friend, but aspects that I possibly never will be able to know, grasp or understand.

Weil aims at describing the situation of man, his relation to God, and how the human being may realize the presence of God in a contradictory – and absurd – world. She makes a point of the "absence of God," by which she means that God has nothing to do with the natural world. This is her way of presenting God as irresponsible for the evil as well as the suffering of this world.³

David Nichols mentions Dionysus the Areopagite as part of the tradition of the legacy of the unknown God. Dionysus, as he writes, "summoned his readers to plunge into the unintelligible but brilliant darkness of God." There are two major ideas of man's way of getting to know God, as we already have seen, the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*. The first maintains the inability of man to obtain to factual knowledge of God;

he may know him only by saying what he is not. The position of Demea as we read earlier. The other one contends that God is a being much greater than man; we may therefore know him by way of analogies. This is the position of Cleanthes.

Weil tries to combine these two doctrines. She talks about a distance between man and God, and of the hidden God, which is also spoken of as the impersonal aspect of God. However, she also talks of God as a beggar, and as secretly present in the world as well as of the possibility that man may become similar to God by imitating his actions. This is sometimes spoken of as the personal aspect of God. I appreciate Weil's combination of the impersonal and the personal aspect of God. She does not want to walk just one road; she finds something for her palate in both *via negativa* and in *via positiva*. God is both known and unknown.

Conclusion

I have great respect for Jaspers' ambition not to turn God or transcendence into an object to study as it would, according to him, be to miss the character of God or transcendence. Nevertheless, I find it hard to digest that we, if there is a God, would not be able to know anything about what would be the origin of ourselves. Jaspers talks about grace as flashing signals, but they are only so for those already believing so.

Even if we do not believe in the God of Western metaphysics, as Nichols claims that theistic existentialists do not, there might still be good reasons for holding on to the belief that it is reasonable to put your trust into something that is known, at least to some extent. Belief in an unknown God in the end might be equivalent to regarding existence as absurd.

³ Catharina Stenqvist, *Simone Weil – om livets tragik och dess skönhet* [Simone Weil – The Tragic of Life and its Beauty], Stockholm: Proprius, 1984.