



Comments on David Nichols' *The God of the Existentialist Philosophers*

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Abstract: The paper offers a critical reflection on David Nichols' treatment of the God of Existentialists, and it takes as its starting point Jaspers' pronouncement that at the root of existentialism is a mystery of Being—the missing God—that runs deeper than our conventional categories of theism, atheism, or agnosticism. The discussion turns on Heidegger's worry whether transcendence is comprehensible without any specific reference to God? What might be meant by "transcendence" is the unfettered pursuit of the question of being and the quest for freedom and authenticity of *be-ing*. And argument is developed that this exclusion still leaves room for philosophical reflection upon the religious, a notion of divinity sans Transcendental Being wholly in the experience of beings "as beings," and "propositional faith." Nichols' claim is congruent with Existentialism's attempt to find a ground from within the human being as the contextual whole through which the world appears. This claim is contrasted against Sartre's radically contrary view on the nothingness of all being.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Heidegger, Martin; Nichols, David; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Being; God; transcendence; nothingness; religion; existentialism; faith.

In the response that follows I shall be focussing on Martin Heidegger and, in passing, also on Karl Jaspers. Heidegger is both inspiring and at the same time disturbing. After the "Death of God" (the Nietzschean and Hegelian tropes) what remains? Is there room for religious existentialism of any sort? David Nichols seems rather open to this possibility, even to the impossible God, via Jaspers and Heidegger, contra Sartre.

Here I offer two opposite observations: (1) Heidegger poses a radical and controversial challenge to philosophers by calling them to do without God in an unfettered pursuit of the question of being (through his "destruction of onto-theology" and his espousal of the metaphysic of non-being¹); and, (2)

this exclusion nonetheless leaves room for a form of philosophical reflection upon the religious, and the discourse concerning—not the God of philosophers as such, but—for a notion of divinity in the experience of beings as beings, i.e. in a phenomenological mode (exemplified most clearly in Heidegger's 1920/21 lectures on the phenomenology of religious life). This is congruent with Existentialism's attempt to find this ground from within the human being as the contextual whole through which a world appears.

Whether we pigeonhole Heidegger (less so Jaspers) on the side of theistic or atheistic existentialism, they share this much in common: a rejection of the God of Western metaphysics, the one we project anthropomorphically to meet our need to organize the world.

¹ I discuss this in my paper "Why is there Nothing rather than Something? An Essay in the Comparative Metaphysic

of Nonbeing," for the Max Charlesworth Festschrift in *Sophia*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, December 2012, pp. 509-30.

Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1946) invites us to reconsider the divine in light of an ontological difference between Being and beings. Both Jaspers and Heidegger take their theological cues from the standpoint of the unknown God (Jaspers coined this cipher) where God necessarily remains hidden, a self-concealing source for all appearances. For this an ecstatic quest for the concept of "God" in the description of human existence, and more generally our experience of presence and absence, is argued for. And this is a contrast to the approach that pivots our experience on tragedy, absurdity, meaningless, *Angst*; though we might add: the quest may begin here but need not end here. "The poet or mythmaker supplies us with the earliest responses to wonder by describing the essences as deities." Textual history of a few non-Western traditions might underscore that better.

The other day we saw that process occurring with the myth and unsettling cipher of *Tama* in early Japanese religious history, and I cited the 10th mandala of *Rig Veda* (see p. 20 above). Aristotle points to—only to reject—the same, Manichean mythologies. Likewise Plato, who is more sympathetic: hence Nichols' astute remark (p. 40 above):

We must still hold Plato and Aristotle responsible for the ways in which they send the western tradition down the path of the God of metaphysics. But they deserve credit all the same for retaining a sense of self-concealment that mirrors the primordial religious experience. They recognize that beings have a way of hiding, camouflaged by their everyday appearances, until such time as their mysteriousness once again renews itself for us.

This insight is there also in Paul's sermon at the Areopagus where, Stoics in attendance, he associates the gospel with the Athenians' altar to the unknown god.² Think of the "Unknown God" in Dionysius of Aeropagite, and apophatically hidden in the sermons of the early Church fathers, right to the Trinitarian vision and Byzantinian theology.

What I take as a highlight from the section on Jaspers is the insight 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" (see page 40 above), and that the tragic effort to break asunder the bonds of our current meaning structure, and

thereby welcome transcendence, amounts to a yearning for deliverance (ABA 42). The time may come for a civilization when tragic knowledge no longer suffices as the ultimate expression of deliverance (ABA 37). This explains why world saviors like Jesus or the Buddha offer messages of universal salvation for humanity.

How specific is Heidegger about the divine? Nichols has a response drawing on Heidegger's apophatic-hermeneutical approach and in the notion of "clearing": *Es gibt* (it gives, giving). Nichols asserts that Heidegger claims that only from the grace of this opening of a world for us can we have an exceptional meeting with "God or the gods." I wish to look elsewhere in Heidegger. In early 1919, Martin Heidegger wrote to Engelbert Krebs, a Catholic priest and family friend, distancing himself from the Catholic faith of his youth. He no longer wished to be thought of as a Catholic philosopher but simply as a philosopher, free to pursue his philosophical research unfettered by "extra-philosophical allegiances." And so he did. Still, the influence of Luther in the genesis of *Being and Time* (1919-23) has already been well documented, especially in Otto Pöggler's biographical sketch. So he sets about destructing theism in the metaphysical mode—the piety of Greek philosophy and of Hellenized Christianity—analyzed as onto-theology.

Here I like to cite from Russell Matheson: "Theism in its 'metaphysical' mode is, on this analysis, distinctive for being at once a religious and a philosophical stance: it gives theological form to a particular interpretation of being, and philosophical form to a particular interpretation of God."³ In fact, Heidegger eventually came to define the dominant tradition of Western metaphysics in terms of its coordination of the question of being and the question of God. For this reason, Heidegger takes the word "God," when it is used in the Western metaphysical tradition, to stand not merely for one being among others but as shorthand for a particular interpretation of being: in its various articulations the concept speaks not only of a particular being but of the nature of being as such. God, conceived as the highest being, represents the paradigm and measure of all beings; God, conceived as the first cause, represents the ground of all being, that which accounts for the totality of what is.⁴ Of course Heidegger is

² Herbert May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, New York: Oxford UP, 1973, Acts 17:18, pp. 22-3. [Henceforth cited as ABA]

³ Matheson Russell, "Phenomenology and Theology: Situating Heidegger's Philosophy of Religion," in *Sophia*, Vol. 50, Issue 4, December 2011, pp. 641-55, here p. 644.

⁴ See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,

critical of the Western logocentric obsession with being as the ever-given presence – at the expense rather of the *complementum possibilitatis* of non-being qua Nothingness, as the condition for the possibility of being; hence the impossible.

That highest object of thought is only a dream, an illusion – not necessarily because there is no God, but because the desire to contemplate the absolute, to achieve absolute knowledge, is a chimera and an idol. More than an idol, it is what Heidegger describes, with echoes of Marx, as a "lulling narcotic."⁵

That is to say, the positing of God as the Archimedean point over against the apparent, the historical, the changing, is seen by Heidegger quite simply as a pseudo-solution and a dead end to the question of the meaning of being. Nor is it ontologically illuminating to trace that which exists back to a first cause:

If we are to understand the problem of Being, our first philosophical step consists in not *μῦθόν τινα δηγεῖσθαι*, in not 'telling a story' – that is to say, in not defining entities as entities by tracing them back in their origin to some other entities, as if Being had the character of some possible entity.⁶

God, in short, is nothing more than a Sunday School answer to the most vexing and profound question the Western philosophical tradition has even had the temerity to pose: Why is there something rather than Nothing (but never its converse). Nonetheless, because of its association with such a venerable tradition of philosophical inquiry, not to mention the half-truths that it unwittingly bears within it, it is an answer that cannot be set to one side without first subjecting it to a careful de(con)struction, in the historical narratives we have come to inherit since the Greek-Judaeo-Christian triangulation of the question of being. Heidegger's destruction of the history of ontology – as opposed to the simple narration of that history – thus ultimately rests on the supposition that the thinking of being must be freed from the concept of God if it is to be authentic, i.e. if it is

to look existence in the face without taking flight.

Heidegger then sets about constructing what might be described as a philosophy of religion, namely in his work as a phenomenologist of primitive Christian faith. This is a mode of philosophical reflection carried out within the methodological abstention that suspends any judgments concerning the existence of God. And yet, by means of this theological *epoché*, Heidegger is able to embark on a project of phenomenological interpretation that seeks to shed light on the character of Christian faith, albeit not on religious experience in general.

According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's adage "God is dead" brings to philosophical awareness a profound event that has occurred and is occurring in the history of the West; and his interpretation of this famous word of Nietzsche becomes, from the mid-1930s, a persistent reference point for his discussions of the contemporary age as well as his discussions of the task of thinking. It points the way to the properly philosophical mode of being and thinking.⁷ Yet, for all this – and in contradistinction to Nietzsche – Heidegger steadfastly refuses to tell us whether or not to believe in God. Qua philosopher, Heidegger steadfastly abstains from pronouncing on the question of God; and this means abstaining from any kind of doxastic stance, whether it be positive (God exists), negative (God does not exist) or undecided (I do not know whether God exists). Heidegger's philosophy, therefore, cannot be properly described as theistic, atheistic, or for that matter agnostic (as Jaspers poignantly pointed out); it suspends all doxastic attitudes. Its atheism is methodological. This theological epoché might even be central enough to Heidegger's view of philosophy for us to regard it as the decisive component of his philosophical method. In any case, the main point here is to appreciate that for Heidegger, from at least as early as 1921, such an abstention is understood to be a condition for the possibility of philosophical inquiry or thinking in his strict sense of the term.

The question arises: Is transcendence – that is characteristic of being-in-the-world – comprehensible without reference to God? Could it even be that the most profound questioning of Heidegger's own thinking is sustained by a disavowed relation to the *deus absconditus*, a divine interlocutor for whom the

trans. Albert Hofstadter, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1982, pp. 29, 81, 148.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2001, p. 124. [Henceforth cited as *PIA*]

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row 1962, p. 26.

⁷ See Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1977, pp. 53-112.

"impossible possibility" of death was only ever a weak substitution? And might not remain a radical philosophical potentiality within the standpoint of what philosophers of religion today call "propositional faith" as distinct from belief despite Heidegger's relegation of faith or was it abstract belief as the mortal enemy of philosophical thought.

But faith and transcendence on which it is pivoted does not escape the chaos and snares of contingency: how could it if its non-finiteness is not affirmed? It causes disruption, dislocation and disfiguring; the Buddhist Chandrakirti ninth CE confessed to this.

The early lectures on St Paul, and on St Augustine especially, show that in the early 1920s Heidegger had not yet lost sight of the philosophical potency of the standpoint of faith. By the time of writing *Being and Time*, however, his judgment had hardened and the matter had been settled. While he clearly maintained his regard for theology and even entertained hopes for its revival as a discipline, he had reached the decisive verdict: genuine philosophy cannot take root in the soil of faith. And yet he was opposed to its polar opposite in humanism or the humanist project of the kind that the French existentialists, especially Sartre, took to. So what is the direction contemporary philosophy must follow?

Mark C. Taylor has an interesting suggestion, which I believe supplements Nichols' lessons he offers us from Heidegger:

Perfect nothingness ... shadows ... neither light nor the absence of light ... origin of that which has no origin. The unnamable bears many names: origin of that which has no origin, groundless ground, abyss, freedom, imagination, creativity. For Nietzsche, the plenitude of this void is the nonplace of the birth of tragedy... [for Derrida *la différance* worked into the non-metaphysical deconstructive theology of absence].⁸

The power of imagination reveals the concealment – the as-yet-unearthed – at the heart of subjectivity. It is precisely in the moments of radical temporality when the subject encounters deep within its own absence that nothingness haunts subjectivity; the *deus absconditus* of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and possibly Don Scotus, becomes *subjectus absconditus*; only in the next inspired moment does self-reflexivity arise, and the "something" presented to consciousness is given representation or expression. "Every good human being is progressively becoming God" – the

radical sense of the temporality of subjectivity that is the driving force towards its self-reflexivity opens the floodgates of light towards transcendence.

After God – art; after art – life; Three-in-one – One-in-three.... God is not the ground of being that forms the foundation of all beings but the figure constructed to hide the originary abyss from which everything emerges and to which all returns. While this abyss is no thing, it is not nothing – neither being nor nonbeing [Taylor's exact replication of *Rig Veda*], it is the anticipatory wake of the unfigurable that disfigures every figure as if from within. Far from simply destructive, disfiguring [I read *Κρονος/kronos*] is the condition of the possibility of creative emergence. Even when expected, emergence is surprising – without surprise, there is no novelty; without novelty, there is no creativity; without creativity, there is no life. [AG 345]

Within the historical perspective, the radical atheistic solution is but a small drop in the ocean, a slice within the history of human evolution (not in biological terms but in terms of the development of consciousness and the political). As Charles Taylor has shown in his monumental work,⁹ modernity (including early stages of post-modernity) and secularism – the Age of the Secular – has a great deal to do with this; the pressure of the scientific age, the suspicious marginalization of the sacred because of the excesses of the church and Christendom, forced the post-enlightened sensibilities (in the plural) to take cover under anything but the sacred heretofore. It is a particularly Western response in the coming age of technology, the culture of techno science as Heidegger also asked. Taylor, by the way, thinks that a society would be deemed secular *qua* *secularity* or not, "in virtue of the conditions of experience and search for the spiritual" (ASA 20); and as Nichols point out rightly in my view, "whether existentialists fall into 'theistic' or 'atheistic' [or 'agnostic'] camps, they share this much in common: a rejection of the God of Western metaphysics" (see page 37 above).

Neither God nor religion is the specific preserve of the West. Whole Western academic disciplines are committed to the idea that the phenomenon called "religion" has been constitutive of the cultural and philosophic frame of the West, notwithstanding the different moments through which a certain metaphysical continuity has been manifest: the Greek (*onto-*), the

⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2007, p. 121. [Henceforth cited as AG]

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. Henceforth cited as ASA]

medieval-scholastic (*theo-*), and the modern humanist (*logos* or logic) – hence the ontotheological project.

Many cultures have struggled with the same questions and hit upon the sense of the tragic, radical tragedy if you like: we noted Mahabharata, the Indian Epics earlier; one might cite the Buddha, profoundly overcome by the pervasiveness of meaningless suffering. Confucius, the Taoists, going back further in the Indian tradition, the Rig Veda bards trying to figure out if the gods had cursed humanity to bear pain and depravation for all eternity. But why and how is it that, almost none eschewed or skipped the transcendental access or possibility even if theism, i.e. the belief in the grace and benevolence of a personal God was not available or not

accepted (e.g. by the Buddha or Nagarjuna, Confucius, the Hindu Mimamsa and Samkhya, two prominent atheistic schools within Hinduism)? So these are my questions. Theism is not a universal projection not need it be the kingpin, and hence for that reason alone, need not be the bugbear either of religious existentialism. I think Jaspers comes close to this global sensibility; his insights here, not far from Heidegger's (who we might call an atheistic inclined towards the divine in beings) and Rudolf Otto in his quaint way, are closer in kind if not in intent to that we might discern from a broader historical archaeology of human existential experiences, the tragic, and the aesthetic.