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The God of the Existentialist Philosophers

Fate, Freedom, and the Mystery

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Abstract: The following essay traces the influence of apophatic mysticism among prominent existentialist philosophers. I compare three post-war texts: Jaspers' *Von der Wahrheit*, Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*. In the immediate aftermath of WWII, all three philosophers offer ways of thinking about historical transformation coupled with the responsibilities that human beings have for letting another historical beginning take root. Jaspers and Heidegger are comfortable with a considerable amount of God-talk about deliverance, salvation, withdrawal, healing, and the holy. Sartre promotes a humanistic approach to existentialism, which dismisses God on the basis of being a creator who determines our essence in advance. This illustrates Sartre's unwillingness to explore more sophisticated possibilities for thinking about the divine, especially the "unknown God" motif informing the philosophies of Jaspers and Heidegger. Moreover, the failure of Sartre's particular humanism stems from his inability to successfully place the human being within the world in such a way as to be its guest. While Sartre settles for a rather shallow appraisal of religious claims reminiscent of Enlightenment skepticism, Jaspers and Heidegger find a way to let the history of Being unfold through and from religious life.

Keywords: Existentialism; Heidegger, Martin; Jaspers, Karl; Sartre, Jean-Paul; mysticism; humanism; apophatic; atheism.

Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.

– St. Paul¹

Existentialist philosophers can agree, on some level, with Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead." At least they can consent to the doctrine that the God of metaphysics has proven itself to be a failure, an artifact of the human being's attempt to organize the world around a singular rational principle for the whole of beings. Despite this metaphysical failure, there are

still possibilities that remain for existentialists to talk about God. For the sake of comparison, most of our attention will focus on three texts that address the divine—postwar samples from Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger. Jaspers' *Tragedy is Not Enough*, from his 1947 *Von der Wahrheit*,² encourages one to place hope in a transcendence that has providential overtones. Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1945)³ stresses a humanistic response to the state of theological

¹ Alfred Marshall, ed., *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, Authorized Version*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House 1976, II Cor. 9:15.

² Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit*, Munich: R. Piper, 1947.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. [Henceforth cited as EH]

abandonment. Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* (1946)⁴ invites us to reconsider the divine in light of an "ontological difference" between Being and beings. Each of these texts attempts to open a future path for human existence out of the smoldering ash of a war that challenged our sense of purpose and historical direction. But Jaspers and Heidegger take their theological cues from the standpoint of the unknown God, where God necessarily remains hidden, a self-concealing source for all appearances. The superiority of their positions, when compared to Sartre, lies in the acknowledgement that our historical transformation depends on an ontological grace just as much as it depends on the exercise of human freedom.

The Legacy of the Unknown God

In some ways existentialist philosophers can be remarkably unified with respect to matters about God. Regardless of whether existentialists fall into "theistic" or "atheistic" camps, they share this much in common: a rejection of the God of Western metaphysics. Of course, this includes more than just the creator-God of omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient qualities. The rejection extends to any grand organizing principle for the meaning of beings in their totality, including an Archimedean point, image of perfection, object of ascent, meat-grinder of history, or rational Absolute. The existentialist renders any God of that sort as unbelievable, and for good reason. The Western intellectual tradition has ushered in a long succession of divine portraits, each one meant to correct the flaws of those that had gone before, until finally we have come to see in these portraits little more than the projection of our own need to organize the world. The problem seems to have originated, at least in some measure, from trying to size up Being on the basis of beings, as though what we meant by Being was somehow akin to "the highest being." The existentialist also bemoans the metaphysical tendency to treat the essences as fixed points, as though the "what" of whatever exists has changeless meaning, wholly independent of human experience. Nor does it do us any good to approach Being from the perspective of this same essentialism. What Being means must not be limited to another fixed point on the horizon; in fact, what is meant must not be

limited to another being at all.

The failure of the metaphysical pursuit of the highest being still leaves us with the difficult task of getting to the source for the showing of beings. Existentialism attempts to find this ground from within the human being as the contextual whole through which a world appears. Instead of simply reducing the being of the human being to one being among others, the existentialist privileges it as the wider locale where transcendence happens. For this reason the relationship that we have toward the world is not merely one of reception; rather, the world always comes to us as *our* world, its phenomena wedded to our own historical development. Moreover, what hides itself in the revelatory process is every bit as important as what shows itself in that process. The human being just is an ecstatic movement, a standing-out from itself as it stands within its world, so that it hides its ontological origin beneath the totality of the very experiences that open for it.

We find many advocates for the notion of a self-concealment of Being in Western history, although never so numerous as those in the ancient world. Heidegger attributes to Heraclitus a primordial experience of this self-concealment expressed in the principle that "nature (*physis*) loves to hide."¹⁵ Heraclitus explores many examples of negation among his fragments, but here he seems to get closer to its origin, insofar as he associates even the giving of appearances with a negative, parallel sheltering. Thus he offers us an early example of the apophatic approach to ontology: in order to get to the source, we must concentrate on the self-negating, self-concealing process that occurs within the showing of beings. He demonstrates the interpretive power of this *apophasis* or affirmation-through-negation for mythology when he says, "The One, the only wisdom, does and yet does not consent to be called Zeus."¹⁶ Parmenides shares something in common with Heraclitus here, despite their differences in regard to nothingness. In the proem to Parmenides' didactic poem, he pays a visit to the goddess who resides at the halls of night. Before he can reach her for her truths, he makes an ascent to the imposing gates

⁵ G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield eds., *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984, Fragment B123.

⁶ Quoted in Richard Geldard, *Remembering Heraclitus*, Herndon, VA: Lindisfarne Books 2000, p. 28.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. [Henceforth cited as LH]

held fast by *dikē* or cosmic order. The doors swing wide open, which enables Parmenides to pass from the realm of mere seeming to the realm of what is. The fact that the philosopher goes beyond the cosmic order to the halls of night to meet the goddess shows how much he resembles the initiate of a mystery cult, his journey an attempt to penetrate the inner recesses of the darkest mystery of all.

Plato and Aristotle have their own ways of communicating self-concealment, especially when the essences are at issue. For example, they agree that philosophy has its origin in the experience of wonder (*thaumaston*), which causes human beings to question the essences.⁷ The poet or mythmaker supplies us with the earliest responses to wonder by describing the essences as deities. But that is not to say that Plato and Aristotle are simply dismissing the gods of mythology as crude misapprehensions of what is; rather, these philosophers are highlighting something extraordinary about the appearances themselves. At the core of these experiences, explains Aristotle, before anthropomorphic and zoomorphic "mythological accretions" were added, human beings were quite right to identify something divine pervading the whole of nature (AM 1074b1-14). Wonder estranges and displaces us from our current mode of thinking;⁸ it makes us aware of our own ignorance, and thereby prompts a transition toward increased understanding. Aristotle provides a similar account of wonder in his explanations for tragic drama: the denouement of the play occurs with a turning point in the plot, whereby reversal, recognition, and suffering befall characters all at once—a rupture conducive to a wondrous or literally awesome (*thaumaston*) encounter

for the spectators.⁹ 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.

The Greek tragedies demonstrate the battleground for the appearances made possible by the human being's ecstatic position. Hölderlin's formula for grasping the hero's transgression is most helpful for our purposes—the rebellion against the gods for the sake of better serving the gods.¹⁰ The tragic hero opposes a reigning structure of meaning—the prevailing gods—through a creative effort that then opens another horizon for beings to show themselves. Aeschylus' Prometheus exemplifies this logic with his stubborn refusal to submit to Zeus. The one who steals fire from the gods waits in chains, knowing that Zeus must also one day succumb to the fate of being eclipsed by his successor. The same fidelity to the origin of creativity occurs in Sophocles' *Antigone*, its heroine speaking for the ground upon which the city stands. Absence has rarely had a better advocate than Antigone, keeper of the dead, who shows her disdain for all human and divine order, except for the laws belonging to Hades himself.¹¹ Eventually the whole robust tragic cycle, with its transition from old gods to new gods, gives way to another layer of concealment, the flight of the gods. In Euripides' *Bakkhai*, Dionysus, the god of tragedy, life and death, presence and absence, returns to his home with a curse of madness for the city that has forgotten him. If Heraclitus was right that nature loves to hide, it was perhaps only a matter of time before the god

⁷ Socrates claims in the *Theaetetus* that the experience of wonder is "an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher," and that "this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." Plato, *Theaetetus*, Plato, Complete Works, ed. John Cooper, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1997, 155d2-4.

Aristotle says, "It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize...." Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy, From Thales to Aristotle*, Third Edition, eds. Marc S. Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett 2005, 982b12-13. [Henceforth cited as AM].

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected Problems of Logic*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1984, p. 147.

⁹ Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *Aristotle XVII and XVIII*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, 1452a2-5.

¹⁰ Friedrich Hölderlin, "The Ground for Empedocles," in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau, New York: State University of New York Press 1988, pp. 53, 55.

Antigone describes her position this way in her defense before Kreon. Sophocles, *Sophocles' Antigone*, trans. Richard Emil Braun, New York: Oxford UP 1973, pp. 450-470, 519.

¹¹ George Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1984, pp. 76-7.

cloaked itself further in absence.

Christianity continues the apophatic tradition in its theological exploration of the Godhead. The earliest example may come from Paul's sermon at the Areopagus where, Stoics in attendance, he associates the gospel with the Athenians' altar to the unknown god.¹² He distances this unknown God from every temple and idol, all the while stressing his nearness: "for, 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said" (RSV Acts 17:28). This accords with Paul's admonition to believers to be in the world without being of the world—to posture themselves in eager expectation for the coming revelation, the *parousia*. It would take a few more centuries before Christianity could settle upon a definitive solution to the Trinitarian Godhead. In the decades following the first Council of Nicaea the Cappadocian fathers articulated a Trinitarian vision that not only maintained the equality of Father, Son, and Spirit, but also sought to keep intact the mysterious otherness of Paul's unknown God. They saw in the Father the unknowable origin of all being, from which the begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit are made possible. Although the fathers did borrow the language of the classical philosophers to depict the essence (*ousia*) and persons (*hypostaseis*) of God, they expressly rejected the Platonism whereby universal essences were supposed to exist independently of particulars.¹³ They certainly were not aiming with their account of God to describe some "thing" with a few qualities or manifestations, as these perspectives were among the heresies that they meant to circumvent.¹⁴ By the fifth century, the legacy of the unknown God found expression in "The Mystical Theology" attributed to Dionysus the Areopagite. This theologian summoned readers to plunge into the unintelligible but brilliant darkness of God, "so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings...."¹⁵ Such was the apophatic mindset

that continued to dominate Byzantine theology, while Western Christendom leaned toward the God of metaphysics, its own mysticism steadily marginalized, often dismissed as an inferior response to the rational system.

Karl Jaspers and the Background of All Backgrounds

Karl Jaspers was one of those existentialist philosophers who remained comfortable with a considerable amount of God-talk. This theological component of his philosophy reflects his commitment to transcendence as a necessary ingredient for existential and world-historical transformation. His view of transcendence also illustrates his opposition to the God of metaphysics by requiring us to forsake any singular rational meaning for Being. Jaspers likewise rejects the speculative assumption that we can assume a God's eye view of the whole of human history or rationality.¹⁶ Instead he associates the experience of transcendence with those unusual moments where human beings stand at the limits of their world totality, no longer conforming to its immanence. The opportunities for such limit-situations may range anywhere from religious experience to psychological disorder. But in each relevant case, the authentic person is someone who draws upon the infinite possibilities stored up within the Encompassing—the comprehensive whole surpassing any given horizon. This effort requires the would-be agent of authenticity to rise up with the passionate creativity that swells from a pre-rational freedom. Jaspers uses the term *Existenz* to describe this potential to be, which, in the moment of authenticity, culminates in heightened self-awareness and willfully resists the prevailing horizon of meaning. At these two poles of our finite existence, we experience God as the depth of an infinite sea—elusive, unknowable, yet every bit as real as the world immediately available to us.

In Jaspers' estimation, the unknown God was important for existentialism at least as early as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. He reviews a host of telling similarities between the two, despite their apparent opposition regarding Christianity. Among these affinities, Jaspers notes that both philosophers expressed interest in the unknown God when they

¹² Herbert May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds, *The Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version*, New York: Oxford UP, 1973, Acts 17:18, 22-23. [Henceforth cited as RSV]

¹³ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, New York: St. Vladimir's Press 1995, pp. 105, 108.

¹⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, New York: St. Vladimir's Press 1976, pp. 48-9.

¹⁵ Dionysus the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, New York:

Paulist Press 1987, pp. 135-6, 138.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle, Marquette: Marquette University Press 1997, p. 48. [Henceforth cited as RE]

were young. He quotes the twenty-five-year-old Kierkegaard who writes, "In spite of the fact that I am very far from understanding myself, I have... revered the unknown God" (RE 35). And a twenty-year-old Nietzsche composes a poem entitled, "To the Unknown God," in which he writes,

I would know Thee, Unknown,
 Thou who grips deep in my soul,
 wandering through my life like a storm,
 Thou inconceivable, my kin!
 I would know Thee, even serve Thee. [RE 35]

The result of this devotion to a non-rational or at least extra-rational source of transcendence becomes, for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, a "worldless loneliness" that makes them exceptions in their time. Jaspers' account of this loneliness is strikingly reminiscent of that Pauline instruction to wait upon the appearance of the Lord without submitting to the current world order. Another example of the apophatic attitude in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche comes in the form of their proclivity for indirect communication—language that deliberately conceals and masks (RE 27). Jaspers notes that in their ambiguous modes of expression they summon us to the hiding that necessarily accompanies great ontological truths. The wisdom of this comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—one whom Jaspers characterizes as a theist, the other as an atheist—rests in 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.

In the final section of *Von der Warheit* Jaspers offers a hermeneutical analysis of tragedy meant to demonstrate the significance of transcendence for the development of human consciousness.¹⁷ Again he describes the ecstatic condition of human existence in terms of shared horizons with boundaries, and limit-situations that can prepare us for transcendence. The tragic drama imitates the recurring shipwreck of our existence against the limits of our temporary horizon, at the cost of every seemingly complete truth turning into failure (TNE 56). Still, the best tragedies never simply abandon us to destruction; they involve a catharsis where humans transcend their suffering on the way to a superior encounter with reality (TNE 80). For Jaspers the tragic effort to break asunder the bonds

of our current meaning structure, and thereby welcome transcendence, amounts to a yearning for deliverance (TNE 42). The time may come for a civilization when tragic knowledge no longer suffices as the ultimate expression of this saving power (TNE 37). This explains why world saviors like Jesus or the Buddha offer messages of universal salvation for humanity. Their messages establish faith in a transcendent reality and provide a way for humanity to work together toward the goal of deliverance. Whenever human beings experience transcendence, they become cognizant of a wider context of fundamental reality. World religions are better equipped to capitalize on this expansive openness as they break through the limits of the tragic cycle, exposing it for its own constraints. Tragedy was always open to the destruction of our most sacred truths; as Jaspers sees it, tragedy itself must suffer shipwreck so that we can arrive at a better understanding of ourselves and our world.

The justification that Jaspers gives for transcending tragic knowledge depends in no small measure on the unknown God of apophaticism. He clearly points to the divine in the self-concealing transcendence of the Encompassing when he describes God at one point as "the background of all backgrounds" (TNE 43). In addition, Jaspers insists that we not limit our conception of Being to mere nothingness, as though we knew its essence to be simply one of negation. If we equate our experiences of transcendence with nothingness, we adopt a philosophy that leads us into despair. In fact, he argues that such a perspective fails to be truly tragic insofar as it forsakes any hope in the prospect of deliverance. Jaspers encourages his contemporaries to create a new beginning for themselves in the wake of the war—to recognize an expansion of the possibilities of meaning in place of the suffocating stranglehold of totalitarianism. He makes reference to the hopefulness that Hamlet has when speaking of the unknown (TNE 69, quoted):

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The same optimism persists in Jaspers' rejection of any "pan-tragism" of ontology for which Being "has a crack running through it" (TNE 93-4). "We object to it," he says, "as to every metaphysics that would approach Being and Reality deductively and that would make descriptive statements about the nature of Being or God—we object to it because it seeks to make them both absolute and finite" (TNE 97). In Jaspers' view the

¹⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch, Boston: Archon Books, 1969. [Henceforth cited as TNE]

finite and the infinite are separated in the same manner as the immanent and the transcendent.

Jaspers organizes much of his approach to human existence around the need to preserve the mystery of Being from attempts to rationally order it. But that might cause us to question whether Jaspers can truly know what he claims to know about that Reality. For example, how does he know that the proponent of pantragedism has wrongly attributed the Nothing to Being itself? Could it not be Jaspers who wrongfully assumes the purity of the infinite? He says that transcendence dooms everything to failure in tragedy, but we have reason to suspect that our finitude, along with the self-concealment that happens in transcendence, has its source in a deeper Not, a "death of God" just as much as a life of God (TNE 78). We might also question whether Jaspers has been too cavalier about associating Being with God. But at least in this case we can give him credit for his ability to uncover examples of grace operative in our experiences—examples which do, after all, constitute the primary empirical evidence available to us for such a divinity. 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. On occasion Jaspers goes so far with this grace as to observe "flashing signals" in our sky—glimpses of storms not quite released, indicators for what could belong to the next horizon (RE 22, 43).¹⁸ None of this historical transformation can happen, however, without a whole lot of mutual effort on our part. So he draws on the religious legacy of human beings struggling together and loving one another, their communication resulting in openness and expansion of meaning. This exempts him from the label of humanism in the traditional sense of an affirmation of humanity marshaled against divinity. Instead, Jaspers' brand of humanism affirms human existence in cooperation with what the unknown God has to offer.

Sartre and the God of Inconsistent Belief

The possibilities for the unknown God, albeit prominent in Jaspers' writings, are entirely vacant from Sartre's analysis of the divine. The silence is all the more

astonishing when we consider how indebted Sartre was to an ecstatic view of human existence. He recognizes, indeed emphasizes, the role of self-concealment in the ecstatic process of being human, yet never gives a fair hearing to the apophatic approach to God. Sartre works out the self-concealment in terms of "two ekstases"—the pre-reflective and reflective poles of identity formation.¹⁹ He describes the pre-reflective cogito, or being-in-itself, as the existence that we have been thrown into and that we continue to be. He couples this with the idea that the human being also exists in order to be its own witness, a being-for-itself realized by way of a reflective cogito (BE 74). The bifurcation between being-in-itself and being-for-itself results in the problem of "not being what one is": as we posit who we are, we engage in a surpassing that simultaneously negates who we are; we dwell in the absence, and not only the presence, of ourselves. The whole fissure would not be possible, argues Sartre, were it not for the way that nothingness haunts Being. He seems to be in agreement with Jaspers here insofar as both reject the notion of an absolute nothing, a fissure that would run as deep as Being itself. Sartre claims that Being has not the tiniest crack, but that non-being resides only on its surface, coiled around it, lingering as its shadowy derivative (BE 16).

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) had already included scattered remarks about the impossibility of God. Each one of these criticisms targets the traditional God of metaphysics, without so much as acknowledging any other descriptive options. For instance, Sartre rejects ontological and cosmological proofs for the existence of God on the basis that they are attempts to ground contingent beings on the firm foundation of a non-contingent being (BE 81-2). Instead, he says, the surpassing of being-in-itself through being-for-itself is a movement that originates from a contingent basis, and yet loses itself in its attempts to ground itself as consciousness. Yet the self-concealment that Sartre traces in the surpassing is precisely where he could welcome apophatic alternatives to the conventional God of the philosophers. He argues that God cannot possibly exist because "a being which would be its own foundation could not suffer the slightest discrepancy between what it is and what it conceives" (BE 80). In other words, Sartre expects God to have to suffer the same fate as the rest of us—the fate of "not being what

¹⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1971, p. 26.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library 1956, p. 44. [Henceforth cited as BE]

one is"—as he surpasses himself by means of his self-comprehension. The theist falls into a contradiction at this point according to Sartre: the God who was supposed to be the basis for his own existence cannot at the same time manage to remain self-identical (*BE* 90). These criticisms of theism demonstrate just how much Sartre had ensconced himself in that historical dialectic about God that expects to organize beings in cooperation with the greatest being. His numerous references to God as "a being" are particularly damning; as an existentialist committed to atheism, he owes us an argument for why his conception of Being, ever cloaked in that absence that accompanies our fall to reflective consciousness, differs so much from the unknown God.

Similar attacks on the God of metaphysics persist in Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*, which he first delivered at the Club Maintenant of Paris in October 1945. The humanism that Sartre prescribes in the immediate aftermath of the war involves an affirmation of human existence in response to our theological abandonment (*EH* 27). He traces the consequences of this abandonment, or the realization that God does not exist, at two levels. First, he rejects the teleological conception of a divine craftsman who determines the essence of humanity in advance of its existence. Unlike manufactured objects such as a book or paper knife, the existence of the human being actually precedes its essence. Here Sartre attempts to explain our ecstatic situation in terms of a self-projecting subjectivity whereby the human being remains "nothing other than his own project" and "nothing but a series of enterprises" (*EH* 37-8). Since we cannot authentically take refuge in a divine craftsman, we find ourselves left to the awesome and inescapable responsibility of deciding for ourselves who we will be, albeit without any model for doing so. Sartre next extends the consequences of abandonment to a second level, the elimination of all principles inscribed in an intelligible heaven (*EH* 28). Whenever humanism draws upon a predetermined essence of humanity, a universal scheme of progress, or a utopian vision, these heavenly archetypes cause it to fall back into the theist's trap of attributing to the human being what properly belongs to the paper knife—an essence formed in advance of its existence. Not surprisingly, Sartre also thinks that among the two kinds of existentialists, whom he categorizes as Christians and atheists, the latter are more consistent about their freedom (*EH* 20).

Despite Sartre's attempts to distill his own existential humanism of principles inscribed in an intelligible

heaven, he overlooks his commitment to one of the most stubbornly persistent forms of metaphysics—the Absolute Subject. This failure is evident, for example, in his reworking of Kant's categorical imperative. Sartre clearly rejects the possibility of establishing universally binding rules of morality, notwithstanding the fact of Kant's transparency about these rules being self-made (*EH* 49). But this rejection of binding principles does not stop Sartre from reestablishing universality at a deeper level of subjectivity, one in which I must still commit myself to an image of humanity—an image according to which I would be willing to have the rest of humanity regulated (*EH* 26-7, 45). He claims that the human being commits himself to a portrait of humanity by way of his very actions, much like an artist must commit to his painting; yet no single portrait can ever suffice to capture humanity once and for all (*EH* 37). Where Kant stresses respect for autonomy, Sartre again takes us deeper into a self-projected humanity: by willing my own freedom, I necessarily will the freedom of all others. Where Kant describes a "kingdom of ends" comprised of moral agents who create the moral laws that they are also subject to obey, Sartre recognizes a "universal human condition" in which every free person, regardless of class or culture, shares in the human reality of having a project with its own "universal value" (*EH* 42-3). Sartre even goes so far as to label the perpetual construction of humanity—being a project, forming one's essence—as "the absolute" (*EH* 43-4). What Sartre never quite grasps about all of this self-affirmation is that he has merely replaced the divine craftsman and his heavenly principles with a heavenly human subject. Regardless of how ecstatic, impermanent, or self-creating this process of subjectivity may be, it remains for Sartre an organizing principle for beings based on the greatest being.

Instead of seeking refuge from the God of metaphysics in the Cartesian subject, Sartre should have sought ways to usher human existence further under the shadow of its world. His alternative to the teleological world-production of the divine craftsmen is the freely chosen world-production of the human project. As a result the human subject remains largely at the helm of the sending of the history of the world and its phenomena. Of course Sartre does acknowledge the "thrownness" of our historical situation, so that we are by necessity the recipients of what others have contributed to this ongoing project. But this is a far cry from the providential qualities of Jaspers' Encompassing or what Heidegger calls the "world that worlds" for

our being-in-the-world.²⁰ The humanism that Sartre promotes ultimately fails to take responsibility for our place in the world: it turns a deaf ear to what the world can say to us from itself. He shows how truly myopic his subjectivism has become when he describes objects like the book or paper knife as having meaning because of the purpose assigned to them—for if not from God, then by default, from us. In truth neither objects nor subjects have their meaning solely from the purposes consciously determined for them. Sartre at least needs an account of phenomena—book and paper knife, rock and stream—more penetrating than what he can reach through the bare constructivism of the repainted canvas. These phenomena are just as much the result of an ontological grace where beings reveal themselves to us and yet at the same time conceal themselves from us as they are products resulting from the artisan's projection.

Martin Heidegger and the God of the Holy

Only a year had passed since Sartre presented his *Existentialism is a Humanism* when his colleague Jean Beaufret received a letter from the Black Forest of Germany. It had come from the hand of a philosopher who had recently lost his teaching privileges and suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of his dubious associations with the now fallen regime. This early version of what would later be published as the *Letter on Humanism* was Heidegger's response to a list of questions about humanism recently sent to him from Beaufret.²¹ Much of the letter attacks Sartre for unwittingly committing himself to metaphysical presuppositions through his account of human existence in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Heidegger chastises him for effectively secularizing a medieval conception of God—that God is his own being—in order to reconstitute that God in the domain of human subjectivity (LH 249). Heidegger also rejects Sartre's effort to reverse the order of essence and existence, saying that this tactic remains indebted to the potentiality and actuality of Aristotelian metaphysics (LH 250). In place of Sartre's misguided approach to "humanity" Heidegger stresses how Being is responsible for sending the human being into its ecstatic existence

(LH 257). This allows him to introduce a postwar message far more subdued than what he had favored several years past in the polemical themes of tragic heroism. The letter invites the reader to prepare for the possibility of a primordial encounter with Being in the way that it reveals itself to us through beings. It also facilitates one of Heidegger's best opportunities to talk about divinity, which he chooses to pursue in the context of "the holy." He does so through descriptions of dwelling in the world that might otherwise seem peculiar to religious life.

"Language is the house of Being," says Heidegger (LH 239). This is crucial for his portrayal of our ecstatic existence because language plays the role of sustaining what Being gives us. Language can also help us to bridge the ontological difference, the divide between beings and their source—at least in the sense of bringing that source nearer to our experience. In order to realize the close proximity we have to our ontological source—to "dwell" through language—we must assume an attitude of guardianship for our home. This requires a thinking that lets beings be, by preserving, caring for, or shepherding beings in regard to their essences rather than dominating them with the instrumental purposes of metaphysics. In truly apophatic fashion, Heidegger calls for less philosophy and more thinking, less speaking and more listening—in short, a heightened awareness of what eludes language altogether, the indescribable gift of being-here (LH 243, 276). The creative genius of the poet arises from this attentiveness, whereas the linguistic activities of the grammarian or logician already come too late. When the creators and guardians, poets and thinkers finally locate the words for what they have been listening to, they open the opportunity for what Hölderlin calls the homecoming. Heidegger interprets this to mean the arrival of another historical epoch whereby humans get a fresh view of beings as they are being disclosed, and thereby experience another way of belonging to the world that has been handed down to them. In the meantime, Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, not to be mistaken for a declaration of atheism, recognizes the homelessness that has overtaken Western history (LH 257).

The *Letter on Humanism* furnishes us with one of the finest apophatic examples of how to talk about God without talking about God. Heidegger tiptoes around the traditional minefield of metaphysical God-talk in order to inch us closer to the possibility of a genuine encounter with divinity. He dissociates himself from both theism and atheism so he can avoid any metaphysical baggage attached to those positions.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row 1971, p. 44.

²¹ Jean Beaufret, *Dialogue with Heidegger*, trans. Mark Sinclair, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, pp. vii-viii.

Meanwhile he maintains that his own position about God was never one of disinterestedness. His explanations for Being do in fact open avenues for talking about God, as when he describes the event of a clearing where "there is" (*es gibt*) being (LH 254-5). He highlights the dependency of the phrase *es gibt* upon the verb *geben* (to give). The theological allusion to grace is difficult to miss at this point: "The 'gives' names the essence of being that is giving, granting its truth. The self-giving into the open, along with the open region itself, is being itself" (LH 255). Only from the giving of this opening of a world for us, reasons Heidegger, can we have an exceptional meeting with "God or the gods." Again, thinking prepares the ground for this possibility because it favors the nearness of Being among beings, which in turn allows for an atmosphere of holiness.

Everything about this strategy for dealing with God rests on accepting the presence and absence at work through our ecstatic projection. For Heidegger the self-concealment of Being occurs not only in its shadow, but as a direct result of the corrosive nothing at its middle. Where the grace most presences the holiness or nearness of Being becomes increasingly apparent and the presence of the god blooms from within. Where the absence reigns the god withdraws, darkness descends over our ability to see clearly, and domination gets its foothold. Heidegger speaks therapeutically, if not cathartically, about what can happen for us in the region of the presence of the holy. He identifies a semantic link between the holy (*heilig*) and healing (*heilen*), and mourns the absence of their presence as the sole malignancy of our era (LH 267). Perhaps what Heidegger does not say about the terms is more interesting, at least for theological purposes—that the stem *heil* carries the meaning of salvation in the therapeutic sense of well-being. Given his tendency to integrate holiness with the "fittingness" of beings, so that the nearness of Being radiates through the whole enjoining structure, his descriptions are not far from a body of God motif. The letter to Beaufret resembles a doctor's prescription long overdue for a patient who has been gasping for breath in the marginal zone of death and life. In spite of the devastation of the war, with all the symptoms connected to its metaphysical underpinnings, Heidegger holds out hope for a "day of the holy" to dawn in the subsequent clearing.

Heidegger's apophatic approach to God potentially lends itself to important hermeneutical applications. For example, it has the potential to transform our understanding of the sacred and the profane as

categories of religious experience. He illustrates this when he borrows from Aristotle the story of Heraclitus welcoming his students at the hearth. "Here too the gods come to presence," Heraclitus tells his visitors (LH 269-71). For Heidegger this shows how thinking clears a path for beings to reemerge as extraordinary within an otherwise familiar, everyday environment. But the assertion that "language is the house of Being" suggests that Heidegger has far more to offer with respect to the sacred and the profane. He summons us to a mindfulness about our place within language—a language that not only envelopes us, but also speaks to us with sacred power. This sounds strikingly liturgical or dramaturgical, allowing us to be at home with our world in much the same way as formerly allowed by ancient ritual performance. Heidegger had mostly neglected the ritual dimension of drama when he attempted, during the years of WWII, to capture the heroism of Greek tragedy. Now he finds the recipe for this theatrical mode of interpretation at the confluence of language and letting beings be.

When Jaspers, Sartre, and Heidegger speak about God after the war they are making decisions about the viability of that concept for any future historical projects. In each of their writings they address divinity as it relates to the ongoing ecstatic existence of the human being. All three philosophers are equally dismissive of the God of metaphysics since that entails belief in a highest being meant to explain all other beings. But they differ in that Sartre alone refuses to press the analysis further, to search in a post-metaphysical clearing for the presence (and absence) of the unknown God. This shows his failure to get underneath the Western intellectual tradition in such a way as to uncover and recover the mystery of Being for its emergent grace in religious experience or elsewhere. The heavy subjectivism of Sartre's philosophy distracts him from the need to explore an ontological grace operative in the showing of the world. Of course Jaspers and Heidegger differ somewhat in their descriptions of God, including disagreements about the conceptual relations among God, Being, and Nothing. Moreover, Jaspers embraces a more synergistic approach to our world-historical situation with God, whereas Heidegger waits for another revelation and makes preparations accordingly. Nevertheless they do share a theological bond common to many existentialists insofar as they remain completely disinterested in God as a mere being that may or may not exist. They choose instead to preserve the mystery that lies beyond and yet surfaces through the ecstatic project of our worldly existence.