

THE BIRTH, DEATH, AND AFTERLIFE OF THE GOD OF THE PHILOSOPHERS



Illustration: Trym Rødder

By Melvin Chen

The God of the philosophers, ostensibly the object of my discussion, is nothing other than God as an abstract, universal concept (mediated), often reducible to the attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, as opposed to God as a being who may be directly intuited (immediate), in such anthropomorphic guises as Zeus seducing Leda in the form of a swan in the Greek mythos, or the monstrous Demiurge being wrapped in a cloud by his mother Sophia and isolated from the Pleromatic realm in the Gnostic mythos. The God of the mythographers, governed by the literary trope of prosopopoeia, is assigned human characteristics, bearing out Xenophanes' observation that if horses or oxen could depict their Gods, they would depict them in the image of horses or oxen. However, as this is a philosophical essay, we will consider only the God of the philosophers, leaving the anthropomorphic God of the mythographers for the anthropologist to dissect.

The God of the philosophers first came into being through the maieutic labours of Xenophanes of Colophon, a universal and abstract entity as opposed to the anthropomorphic deities of Greek antiquity. Drawing on the photologic metaphor of the all-seeing eye of Zeus, Xenophanes held the essence of this God to be "an essence that is nothing other than an omnipresent and pure seeing" (Picht 1980:72). Xenophanes' concept of an omniscient God, troping on the all-seeing eye of Zeus, confirms Derrida's claim that "the entire history of our philosophy is a photology", making metaphysics a heliocentrism based on the metaphor of light and darkness and the "naiveté of the glance" (Derrida 1978:85). The God of the philosophers then periodically resurfaced in various guises: the Platonic Form of the Good, the Aristotelian Nous (which Aristotle called the "divine element in our composite nature" in his *Nicomachean Ethics*), the Kantian Transcendental Ideal, and the Hegelian Absolute Spirit.

Metaphysics as Ontotheology

Ontotheology, properly understood, is the speculative interpretation of being, and for Hegel (in Heidegger's redaction of his German Idealist predecessor), philosophy is ontotheology, since it has no other object than God (Thomson 2005). Metaphysics, properly understood, has four major branches: ontology (the study of the nature of being), cosmology (the study of the nature of the universe), psychology (the study of the nature of the mind), and theology (the study of the nature of God). The metaphysical agenda, with the birth of the God of the philosophers, came to be determined as ontotheology, to the

detriment of its sister fields, psychology and cosmology. Thinking about the identity of God fosters what Adorno has termed "identitarian philosophy", wherein the logic of consistency (to which the philosopher is formally obliged) and the logic of synthesis in dialectics make identity "positive and desirable" (Adorno 1973:148). The will to identity is itself further lodged in the nature of thought, since "we cannot think without identifying", and all definition is identification (Adorno 1973:149.). The God of the philosophers existed within an ontotheology functioning as an identitarian philosophy, a veritable metaphysics of presence bound by the transcendental categories of goal (*bonum*), unity (*unum*), and truth (*verum*). That this God was a metaphysical God is borne out by the central question occupying philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Leibniz and Hegel: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (Kosky 1996:235). God was posited as the ultimate ground of being, which Heidegger was later to term the forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings. With being rendered as the highest universal, the medieval doctrine of divine simplicity, championed by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, established the identity of God: God as Being is identical with His nature (e.g. omnipotence, omniscience). God being infinitely simple, He is not distinct from His nature, whence the impetus for identitarian philosophy. God not being distinct from His nature further entails that His attributes, considered singly, are not distinct from each other, whence Vico's explication that "in God, to know and to do is the same thing" (Habermas 1973:243). Being (appearance or *physis*) leads to truth, since truth must first be before it can become truth, and for Hegel true being is simply another name for God. In Descartes' *Fourth Meditation*, God is posited as the ultimate ground of truth for the Cartesian cogito: it is impossible that God should deceive, since he is perfect and has no need for dissimulation, the *modus operandi* of the weak. The basic forms of any proposition, otherwise known to philosophers as the Aristotelian categories, are drawn from the being of an entity (e.g. substance, quantity, place). Logicians sought to explain God as a *causa sui* with the highest degree of independence: necessarily, for any x and y, if x is God, and $x \neq y$, x in no way really depends on y for its existence or for any attribute essential to being God (Leftow 1990:586)

The confirmation of God as the ground of being and truth in a God-ordained universe led Kant to pen his effusive conclusion to his *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the heart with ever new and increasing admiration and respect ... the starry heavens above us, and the

moral law within us". Adorno refers to this as the Kantian motif of "Muss ein ewiger Vater wohnen - [there] must live an eternal father" (Adorno 1973:385). Identitarian thinking, privileging identity, unity, and presence, led to conflation via analogy: men admired God in the order of his cosmos (Ordered God ≈ Ordered Cosmos), and saw in the structure of human reason an echo of God's nature (Human Reason ≈ Divine Reason), the Leibnizian God, after all, being a rational God who created this world as

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the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz even attempted to surmount the Cartesian mind-body dualism by positing monads as simple units constituting the universe, and the soul-like substance constituting the true unity. In Leibnizian monadology, harmony in God's creation is the supreme unity of elegance and variety, with each soul-like substance mirroring all the rest, each monad mirroring the universe, each substance mirroring the essence of God from its own perspective (Jolley 1995). For the Enlightenment philosophers like Leibniz and Kant, thinking about God leads to a photologic identitarian philosophy, premised on the Derridean naiveté of the glance, be it Kant gazing at the starry heavens or the mirror trope in Leibnizian monadology.

The Nietzschean Death of God and Heidegger's Critique of Metaphysics as Ontotheology

The death of this God of the philosophers may be precisely dated as post-Enlightenment and proto-existentialist, occurring as it does in aphorism 125 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: "Where has God gone?" he shouted. "I'll tell you. We have killed him - you and I!". While the source of Nietzsche's polemic appears to have been the Christian God, evinced in his "requiem aeternam deo" (Latin for 'Grant God eternal rest'), a sacrilegious appropriation of a line from the service for the dead, with Christianity representing, in his eyes, a victory of the weak over the strong. I will argue that it was rather the God of the philosophers, and the metaphysicians in particular, whose death Nietzsche unwittingly heralded. Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as ontotheology in his 1957 address posited that our forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings led directly to the metaphysical crisis occasioned by Nietzsche's pronouncement: philosophers had philosophized their God as the first cause of beings, with Marion memorably terming the metaphysical God a concept of "the being par excellence" (Marion 1994:579).

Through this forgetfulness, philosophers sought to explain Being itself in terms of beings. With the death of metaphysics entailing the death of the metaphysical God of the philosophers, theists were faced with the new challenge of thinking about God "in a non-ontotheological way, without reference to being or beings" (Min 2006:101). God as a trope for the ground or foundation of being founders once the ontological difference is recognized. Rethinking God in a Post-Metaphysical World – Anaphases and Levinasian Ethics

In an existentialist world, the infinite cannot be affirmed in a finite language, as cataphatic (affirmative) theology attempts to do, but can only be gestured at through a negation of the finite, as in the apophases of negative theology. Some knowledge of Greek may help us grasping the cataphatic-anaphatic dichotomy: "ana-" is a Greek prefix meaning "against", whereas "cata-" means "down" or "through", and the "-phatic" suffix derives from the Greek "phatos" meaning "spoken". Thus, whereas cataphasis expresses the nature of God through speech (affirmation), anaphasis rejects cataphatic affirmation through speech (negation). The "ineffability of the tetragrammaton", a Joycean phrase alluding to the vowel-suppressed YHWH through which the Israelites kept the name of Yahweh a secret from their enemies, problematizes the act of naming an unnameable God. Vis-à-vis Min's critique that negative theology still "affirms some hyperessential reality" (Min 2006:103), thereby remaining "a metaphysics of presence in a more refined form" (Min 2006:103), one might offer that this is a violent misreading of the nature of a gesture: a gesture only shows, and it can never tell.

The Levinasian God is "transcendent to the point of absence" and exists as a Good beyond Being (Levinas 1982:115). The Levinasian emphasis on absence is ostensibly in response to Derrida's deconstruction of the history of metaphysics as "the determination of Being as presence", with God rendered as one "invariable presence" among others (Derrida 1978:279). Indeed, Levinasian ethics offers a way out of ontotheology, by apophatically acknowledging that God resists thematization. Whereas ontotheology functions within the realm of *le dit* (or "the said"), thematizing something to make it a part of the totality of one's being (identitarian), post-metaphysical Levinasian ethics - and by extension the Levinasian God - functions within the realm of *le dire* (or "the saying"), characterized by radical alterity (discontinuous). The synthetic unity of the "I think" of the *res cogitans* is interrupted by a content exceeding adequation (namely: the concept of God). This God is an infinity to which we can only bear wit-

ness through our responsibility towards the hungry (e.g.: the widow, the orphan, the beggar) and our *me voici* (or "Here I am"). In the address to God, the subject (nominative) is elided in favour of the accusative, reminding us that such a God cannot be reduced to a concept or theme. To adapt Buber's terms in the Levinasian ethical relation, we address God as the eternal You in every You, whereas hitherto the metaphysicians and their God have stood in an I-It relation. For Levinas, the ethical situation precedes the metaphysical subject, and a philosophy which has discarded the baggage of ontotheology may remain open to the question of God, since such a God is ethical (the one to whom the Levinasian "Here I am" is addressed) as opposed to metaphysical (the ultimate ground of being). In Kierkegaard's *Sermon of the Jutland Priest*, the ethical relation is one of indebtedness, since "against God we are always in the wrong". Negative theology points towards a reinvigorated significance of God in a post-metaphysical world, since it carries "negativity in the heart of each thesis", leading one to suspend "every thesis, all belief, all doxa" (Derrida 1995:67).

Concluding Remarks

The birth of the God of the philosophers, heralded by Xenophanes and drawing on the metaphor of the all-seeing eye of Zeus, determined philosophy as ontotheology, with metaphysicians positing God as the ultimate ground of being, ignorant of the ontological difference between Being and beings which would later serve as the cornerstone for

the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics. The death of this God, predicted by the proto-existentialist Nietzsche and realized by his existentialist compatriot Heidegger, ushered in the post-metaphysical age. However, with post-metaphysical secular capitalism marked by an abject failure of culture to replace religion, as Eagleton has noted in his *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, thinkers like Levinas offer a route to rethinking God in ethical as opposed to metaphysical terms. Furthermore, the ontotheological impulse to determine being as presence and God as the ultimate ground of being within a metaphysics of presence may be countered by anaphatic theology, which simply gestures at the infinite through a negation of the finite. If language remains bound by the horizon of finitude within which to speak about God in definite terms is to misrepresent him, Nietzsche is once more prescient in his observation that we have not gotten rid of God because we still believe in grammar. Through Levinasian ethics, anaphatic theology, and the post-metaphysical overtures of such thinkers as Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo, the God of the philosophers has – if one is allowed a Christian turn of phrase – risen again.

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