

The Problem of Being and The Question of God

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*Only from the truth of being
can the essence of the holy be thought.
Only from the essence of the holy
is the essence of divinity to be thought.
Only in the light of the essence of divinity
can it be thought or said
what the word 'God' is to signify.
--Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism"¹*

Aristotle defines metaphysics as the discipline that problematizes and inquires into 'being qua being;' it proceeds doing so by means of investigating the first principles and the highest causes of beings.² These first principles and highest causes of beings include, but are not limited to, substance and accident, actuality and potentiality, and form and matter.³ But, there is an ambiguity that lies at the heart of the Aristotelian project. On the one hand, metaphysics is understood as an investigation of the different modes of beings; this means that it is interested with beings as such. Whereas, on the other hand, it can be approached as the inquiry into the meaning of the verb to be—being.⁴ The ambiguity is further complicated when Aristotle speaks of a being that is "eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things."⁵ The Aristotelian concept of a "first or prime mover itself unmoved" points to the 'pure actuality' of God as the 'unmoved mover.'⁶ In short, the end of Aristotle's attempt to understand being can point to the interpretation of the 'prime mover' as God.

It is not surprising, therefore, why medieval thought

¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeil (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267.

² Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon and trans. W.D. Ross (New York: Random House, 1941), 1003a 15-30.

³ *Ibid.*, 1007a 4-18; 1017b 10-25; 1025a 14-29; and 1029a 26-33.

⁴ Martin Heidegger speaks of two inquiries as ontic, which is the inquiry into entities (Seiendes), and ontological, which is the inquiry into the being (Sein) of these beings. See Martin Heidegger, "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 206-221.

⁵ Aristotle, "Metaphysics," 1073a 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1073a 4-13.

interpreted a Christian God out of the Aristotelian corpus. That being (presumably the highest) on which everything else is grounded is almost automatically understood and interpreted as God. Within this spectrum of beings, God is placed at the summit and at the end of the hierarchy. The ‘five ways’ of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* do speak of the first mover, the prime efficient cause, the necessary existent, the supreme instantiation of perfection, and the cosmic designer; all these concepts point to God.⁷ From proving God’s existence, Thomas Aquinas is able to push forward Aristotle’s substance-accidence schema to create a distinction between metaphysical attributes of God (such as simplicity, immutability, and eternity). From these metaphysical attributes, Aquinas is able to graft distinctively Christian and religious attributes such as Creator, Redeemer, and Lord.⁸

Worth mentioning is another medieval thinker, Dionysius the Areopagite, who, in *De divinis Nominibus*, argues for the indescribability of the nature of God by employing self-negating locutions. He explains what this self-negating locutions mean in this way: “When one speaks of His un-Intelligence and his in-Sensibility, it is necessary to understand this negation in a transcendent way, not as a privation. Hence we attribute un-rationality to he who is more than reason, in-completion to he who is above all perfection and inside every finalism. We give the name of unapproachable and invisible Darkness to the inaccessible Light, because He transcends the light we see.”⁹ While not to be construed as mere God’s ‘not-being’ or absence, *via negativa* is rather a reference to the surplus (or excess) of God.¹⁰ Negations are not to be understood as privations as they are to be understood as transcendence.¹¹ This claim, which interprets all negations as

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (All Complete and Unabridged 3 parts + Supplement & Appendix +interactive links and annotations), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Kindle edition: e-artnow, 2013), I, q.2, art. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, q.3, 9, 10.

⁹ Dionysius the Areopagite, “De divinis Nominibus,” VII, 2, as quoted in Battista Mondin, *A History of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2010), 160-161.

¹⁰ The value of cataphatic or ‘negative’ theology in postmodern discussions on the problem of God is undeniable. But Jacques Derrida articulates the distinctions between deconstruction and *via negativa* in this way: “What I write is not ‘negative theology’ in the measure to which ‘negative theology’ seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond being.” Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 77.

¹¹ “It is false to pretend that He is this while not being that, that He is here without being there. Being the universal cause, he is everything; He contains in Himself synthetically and primordially all the principles and terms of all things, yet He remains transcendent with respect to

transcendence, is based on the thesis that all things are from God and, thus, preserve some traces of His perfection.¹²

The paper is an inquiry into the retrieval of the meaning of being and the question of God in the margins of philosophy. It asks the question: "How are we to think of God in a way that makes possible the retrieval of the meaning of being?" In raising the problematic, the paper is divided into two sections. The first section begins with the claim of Martin Heidegger that being cannot be distinctly thought by using an example. Probing this claim necessitates a clarification of the relationship and distinction between being and beings, being and God, and God and beings. Then, we investigate Jean-Luc Marion's accusation that Heidegger is guilty of idolatry because of being's anteriority to God. The first section of this paper ends by discussing Jacques Derrida's response on the (im)possibility of thinking being, especially when understood in terms of his proposal of speaking about God as an example, and this (considering Marion's accusation of idolatry) can be done "without reduction, naiveté, or blasphemy." The second section of the paper presents the suggested outline by providing our way of proceeding in answering the problematic. Although loosely described (and only in the hope of providing a roadmap to the reader), this is done by providing an outline of the different arguments and of the primary sources that can be used in probing the problem.

The Task of Philosophy and God

The task of philosophy, according to Martin Heidegger, begins with the search (or retrieval) of the meaning of being. Philosophy and the search for the meaning of being are so intertwined. Understanding the meaning of being, and eventually unfolding the task of philosophy, necessitates the unpacking of the distinction between beings (in their totality and interdependence) and being. This is the same as saying that understanding the task of philosophy includes understanding the ontological difference. Heidegger argues that, for quite some time, metaphysics was

any being, insofar as He pre-exists before.

¹² "God is not being in this or that way, but in an absolute and undefinable way, insofar as He contains synthetically and primordially within Himself the fullness of being." Dionysius the Areopagite, "De divinis Nominibus," V, 4, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 160.

preoccupied with beings. This preoccupation with beings is at the expense of the meaning of being. We are guilty, according to Heidegger, of the forgetfulness and abandonment of being, that which is responsible for opening all beings to their multiple and possible relationships.¹³ This is Heidegger's criticism against metaphysics and philosophy. The charge that philosophy is guilty of the forgetfulness of being also resembles Heidegger's God-forgottenness.¹⁴ This is the context of our inquiry into the question of God and its relationship to the Heideggerian project of the retrieval of the meaning of being. In the essay entitled "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics," Heidegger provides a direct answer to the question as to how God enters into philosophy. He writes: "The deity enters into philosophy through the perdurance of which we think at first as the approach to the active nature of the difference between being and beings."¹⁵ This means that God enters into philosophy. And that this entrance is only possible within the structure of the ontological difference.

Heidegger charges Metaphysics, from the time of Plato to Nietzsche, as guilty of onto-theo-logy.¹⁶ By 'onto-theo-logy,' he refers to the traces of blending of both ontology (the study of being) and theology (the study of God) that is facilitated by Aristotle's ambiguous definition of metaphysics merely as the study of 'beings qua beings.'¹⁷ In the onto-theo-logical understanding, metaphysics can only be understood as the study of either being as such or beings as a whole. When it is the study of being as such, it is called ontology. When it is the study of beings as a whole, then it refers to the ground of beings. Because the study of the ultimate ground of beings in Greek is called theion, then it becomes clear why the study of the being of beings is referred to as theology. It is this ambiguity that has caused the interweaving between ontology and theology. "The onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that difference which keeps being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded and what gives

¹³ Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Volume 1: *The Will to Power as Art*, trans. D.F. Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 194.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," in *The Piety of Thinking*, trans. J.G. Hart and J.C. Moraldo (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), 10.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

account, apart from and related to each other.”¹⁸ In Heidegger’s metaphysics, the ground is being, and what is grounded are beings. Not only does this structure show the distinction between being and beings, it also postulates a *causa sui* or self-grounding, which Heidegger identifies as the God of metaphysics. This is the same as arguing that the metaphysical God necessarily brings about the distinction between being and beings.¹⁹

Consequently, Heidegger does not only point to the distinction between beings and being, but, more importantly, he also points to the distinction between being and God.²⁰ The distinction between being and God is based on the understanding that being is the fundamental characteristic of God. If God is, then an understanding of the being of God also implies the thinking of the truth of being. It is, therefore, inevitable to think of the being of God separately and apart from the truth of being. To understand the being of God is to think the truth of being. God’s intelligibility can only be conditioned, set, and made possible by being. It is impossible to think of God apart and separately from the thinking of being. The implication of these statements is staggering: if God is, then God’s being is only possible when being precedes God. This constitutes the subjugation of God by being.

In these onto-theological discourses, the priority (and supremacy) of God is based (and grounded) on all the beings’ need for an efficient cause. God is constituted as the efficient cause on which all beings are grounded. For Heidegger, this is only possible when God understood as *causa sui* is absolute, foundational, and necessary.²¹ Although a being in the realm of beings, God can still be distinguished from both being and beings. Since God is the ground of beings, God can be separated and distinguished from beings. But, also as ground of beings, God cannot be and is not being. Heidegger, in a seminar held at the University of Zurich in 1952, explains:

Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of being. ... Of being, there is nothing to expect. I believe that being can never be thought as the ground and

¹⁸ Heidegger, “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰ See John Caputo, “Heidegger’s critique of scholasticism,” in *Heidegger and Aquinas: An essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 62-99.

²¹ Heidegger, “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” 60.

*essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience of God and his manifestedness, to the extent that the latter can indeed meet man, flashes in the dimension of being, which in no way signifies that being might be regarded as a possible predicate for God.*²²

The above quote argues that being can neither be conceived as God's ground nor essence. The fact that God flashes in the dimension of being creates the distinction between being and God; it seems that this separation between being and God can only be understood per differentiam. God can be distinguished from both being and beings. As different from both being and beings, God is more related to what God grounds. And what does God ground? The answer is beings. God is related to beings and not to being. This relation and condition between God and beings is reflective of the mode of belonging and referring that makes sense only to, between, and among beings. In this case, any divine attribute and predication can only reveal the relationship between the ground on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that which is in need of a ground. In other words, we are referring to the relationship between God and beings.

However, when Heidegger speaks of thinking, it is always the thinking of being. After Parmenides, being and thinking are used interchangeably because one is only able to think of being.²³ The concern of thinking is always already and solely only that of being; thinking excludes beings.²⁴ This being can only be different from beings; this distinction between beings and being is also what Heidegger refers to as "difference as difference."²⁵ So that whatever the anteriority of God is to beings, God can only remain within the order and hierarchy of beings. But even if God is a being within the order and hierarchy of beings, He remains distinct and different from all other beings. The difference between God, who is also a being, and all other beings is constitutive of their relations with each other; God is the possibility for all other beings and every relation that flows from it. Despite remaining within the realm

²² Martin Heidegger, "Seminare," in *Gesamtausgabe 15*, Klostermann Vittorio GmbH, 2005, 436-437 as quoted in Xiaoqiang Han, "Is Being a "Screen" of God," in *Res Cogitans* 2008 no. 5, vol. 1: 12.

²³ "... For the same thing is for thinking and for being." Parmenides according to Clement, *Miscellanies*, 6.23, as quoted in *A Presocratic Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, ed. Patricia Curd and trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 46.

²⁴ Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity," in *Identity and Difference*, 27.

²⁵ Heidegger, "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics," 70.

of beings, God is necessary for all other beings to be and to be related. But because God remains within in the order of beings, God cannot be the concern of thinking. Because being is the only concern of thinking, then beings are outside the realm of thinking for Heidegger. It is not for thinking to be concerned with the ontic realm; thinking is essentially preoccupied with the ontological. For Heidegger, the reference to God as the source and grounding of all beings further obscures and confuses the meaning of being. In this sense, the concept of God blurs and obscures the possibility of the thinking of being.

Despite the argument that thinking is concerned only with being, it can be argued that the difference between being and beings (the ontic and the ontological, and existents and existence, or difference as difference) remains an important element of thought. If difference makes possible the distinction between being and all other beings (including God), and every relation that flow from it, then difference cannot be the ground for being and all other beings. This means that difference is, as Derrida explains, “a distinction in the usual sense of the word between being and existent.”²⁶ For this reason, beings cannot at all be related to being. Being and beings are simply constitutively different. This difference, therefore, is neither simply about distinguishing being from beings nor beings from being. It is also neither about calculating the relations nor the distance between being and beings. It is a matter of difference.

While difference opens up the possibility of distinguishing beings and being, and rediscovering the meaning of being, it does so little to advance the question of God. The inclusion of God within the structure of the ontological difference needs further explanation. At the moment God is understood as the originating causal agent or *causa sui* of beings, any attempt to understand or even comprehend God is already impossible. This is why Heidegger claims that the *causa sui*, while it is “the right name for the god of philosophy,” is, unfortunately, a god that humanity can never relate to by either prayer or sacrifice.²⁷ On thinking being then, even as the condition of possibility for all other beings (God

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 138.

²⁷ Heidegger, “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” 71-72.

included), we cannot conclude the anteriority of being to beings (God included). Having established the distinction between being and beings, we can go back to the earlier assertion that being and God are different in the similar way that God and beings are different. In short, God cannot be a substitute for being, nor can we ground God in being. In a similar vein, God cannot be reduced to beings as God is the ground of all beings.

If there is one thing that the ontological difference provides, according to Jean-Luc Marion's criticism of Heidegger, then it is the possibility of affirming and recognizing God within the condition of being. This means that within the ontological difference it is possible to affirm God. However, the possibility of affirming God can only be done within the horizon of being. In criticizing Heidegger, Marion points to 'the screen of being' before God, who is constrained and imprisoned (not by onto-theology) by the very condition of being.²⁸ Because the ontological difference is indispensable to thought, it is impossible to think outside of the distinction between being and beings. This is what thinking understood as difference means. Because one cannot think outside of the ontological difference, the issues raised by being cannot simply be ignored nor neutralized. To ignore and neutralize the concerns of being is at the same time to jeopardize the issue of God.²⁹ The horizon of being is the condition for the thinking of being "as a negative propaedeutic of the unthinkable thought of God."³⁰ This implies that conceptualizing God also necessitates the thinking of being. In the same way, the thinking of being incorporates also the conceptualization of God. God can only be thought, even understood, within the very horizon of being. Marion explains the necessity of the horizon of being in this way: "In the beginning and in principle, there advents neither God, not a god, nor the logos, but the advent itself—being, with an anteriority all the less shared in that it decides all the rest, since according to and starting from it there literally remains only beings, and nothing."³¹ This condition and horizon is what makes Heidegger idolatrous; every thought about God must necessarily

²⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 37-49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

pass through the 'screen of being.' When Marion speaks of idolatry, it is always in the context of a 'restricted theology' that reduces the divine or God to an image or concept of something visible. By necessitating God to pass through the 'screen' or horizon of being, God is made visible. But, only the invisibility of God, according to Marion, can protect God from any imaginations of idolatry. To better understand the dynamics of idolatry, Marion creates a dichotomy between the idol (which subjects God to the measure of the human gaze) and the icon (that preserves the invisibility of the invisible).³²

The idolatrous nature of thinking about God within the horizon of being necessitates the need to liberate God from the structure of the ontological difference and, consequently, from the reduction of God to mere being and/or beings. It seems, that for Marion, God can possibly be thought apart from the ontological difference. The determination of being, which Marion refers to as idolatrous, can be transcended. God can be freed from the conditions imposed and set by being. Instead of overcoming metaphysics then, Heidegger remains caught up within the problem of being. In this case, any attempt to understand God can only be understood in relation to being. God is made vulnerable by, even a victim of, the conditionality of being. By doing so, God becomes being's prisoner.³³ To take being as the measure of God, and to think of God in terms of being, constitutes an idolatry because this God is a mere projection of being. And, as a projection of being, the infinite and incomprehensible depth of God is made visible and, thereby, eliminated.

To overcome the idolatry, Marion suggests the abandonment of the anteriority of God to being. This means to think of God separately from being. This also implies the decentering of being. Based on what was argued for so far, decentering being refers to the possibility of thinking God apart from the conditionality set by being. In this sense, de-centering being means "to think God without any condition, not even that of being." De-centering being also means "to think God without pretending to inscribe or describe him as a being."³⁴ For Marion, God can only be freed and

³² Ibid., 14 and 18.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid., 71.

de-centered from the anteriority of being if God is understood in the logic of love. In fact, according to Marion, to de-center being, God is better thought and understood as love. God is love.³⁵ For Marion, love alone does not reduce someone to its own terms. Love alone is self-giving and it, alone, does not impose any conditions. The Heideggerian relation between being and God is necessarily reversed. Instead of understanding being as prior to God, God is made prior to being. Marion explains that God:

*Gives being to beings only because he precedes not only these beings, but also the gift that he delivers to them—to be. In this way, the precedence of being over beings itself refers to the precedence of the gift over being, hence finally of the one who delivers the gift over being.*³⁶

For Marion, God is the giver that made possible beings. In this sense, even being is given by God to beings. Because being is a gift to beings, then it follows that the giver takes precedence over both beings and being. In this logic, God is better understood apart from the conditionality of beings and being. When God is understood without being, then God is properly understood as love. So far, we are done discussing two views on how to understand the relationship between being and God. Heidegger speaks of the anteriority of being to God, whereas Marion refers to a God without being. Although seemingly related because God is, the relation between God and being cannot, however, be foundational. For to think of it in a foundational way is to reduce God as “a quasi-scientific explanation to the origin of the universe as a totality of being.”³⁷

Although Marion and Jacques Derrida agrees that God and being are distinct and different, they both disagree on the understanding how God and being are related with each other. While Marion argues for God’s superiority over both beings and beings to avoid idolatry, Derrida does not confront the question directly. But what is clear is how the thinking of being does allow us to think of God without idolatry. The thinking of being and of God is both possible, for Derrida, without reducing them to

³⁵ 1 John 4:8 (NRSV)

³⁶ Marion, *God without Being*, 75.

³⁷ Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 29.

mere concepts or objects. Derrida provides a hint of this idea in a footnote from his essay "Violence and Metaphysics." He explains:

The Thought of being is what permits us to say, without naïveté, reduction, or blasphemy, "God, for example." That is, to think God as what he is without making him an object. This is what Levinas, here in agreement with all the most classical infinitist metaphysics, would judge to be impossible, absurd, or purely verbal: how to think what one says when one proposes the expression, God—or the infinite—for example? But the notion of exemplariness would, undoubtedly, offer more than one piece of resistance to this objection.³⁸

The quote explains the possibility of thinking being and God, which is contrary to Marion and more sympathetic to Heidegger. In fact, Derrida refers to the possibility of thinking God without naïveté, reduction, and blasphemy. A possibility of thinking about God without reducing Him into something visible, that is—an idol. Since God and being are neither synonymous nor interchangeable, the thinking of God remains the example par excellence of a mode of thinking that is oblivious to difference. Because God is a being in the realm of beings, the only means of understanding God is by means of this ontic conditionality. It is impossible to understand God outside of beings. God, as a being among other beings, is only understood in ways that are intelligible to the order, hierarchy, and horizon of beings. But, even within the realm of beings, the thinking of God remains as an example of a mode of thinking being. As such, our understanding of God, as the supreme being, can only be analogical and schematic to our understanding of being. The analogical and schematic relationship between God and all other beings characterize the ontic realm on the one hand. On the other hand, the thinking of being is only a pre-conceptual thought that is made possible and opened by the possibility of thinking about God as an example. This means that God remains who God is--the example par excellence of the possibility of thinking being.

While Heidegger argues that the ontological difference can neither be named nor represented as such, Derrida puts into question the absolute originariness of this difference between being and beings. For if this difference can neither be named nor be represented as such, then that difference can neither be

³⁸ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 318.

feasible, be possible, nor even be thinkable. In the essay “Ousia and Grammē,” Derrida explains that “the determinations which name difference always come from the metaphysical order. This holds not only for the determination of difference as the difference between presence and the present (Anwesen/Anwesend), but also for the determination of difference as the difference between being and beings.”³⁹ The thinking of difference is only intelligible within the structure of the ontological difference between being and beings. This means that difference makes sense only within the metaphysical structure that it seeks to overcome. Because the distinction between being and beings are all derived from difference, these concepts are forgetful of difference itself.⁴⁰ Derrida thinks that it is not possible to understand difference when it is merely understood as the distinction between being and beings. The ontological difference can be reduced to an appropriation and a determination made concrete by a metaphysical system. For him, in order to understand difference, it is necessary to eliminate this appropriated metaphysical structure. How is this possible? In “Ousia and Grammē,” Derrida speaks of a difference that is older than being; this is the difference even more un-thought and more originary than the distinction between being and beings.⁴¹ This difference that is more un-thought and more originary than the distinction between being and beings is what Derrida calls as the arche-trace or, more familiarly, *différance*.⁴²

Because Heidegger claims that difference cannot be thought or even named as such, then, Derrida thinks, it cannot be reduced to the ontico-ontological difference. Difference cannot simply be reduced to the generalization and the determination of the ontico-ontological difference. In the words of Derrida:

It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit, in the sense that *sollicitare*, in the old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety. Therefore, it is the determination of being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*. Such a question could not emerge and be understood unless the difference

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Ousia and Grammē: Note on a Note from Being and Time,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 66-67.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 23.

⁴¹ Derrida, “Ousia and Grammē,” 67.

⁴² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 23.

between being and beings were somehow to be broached. First consequence: *différance* is not. It is not present being, however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority.

*In the above quote, *différance* puts into question the domination of beings and the determination of being. This is only possible if the ontological difference is overcome. The overcoming of the ontological difference necessitates the speaking of that which is beyond presence, control/management, and authority.⁴³*

Consequently, *différance* and arche-trace cannot be a name nor a concept. They are attempts to capture difference without essentializing and reducing it into a name or a concept. This refusal to conceptualize difference explains why it is referred to as a ground that is not a ground. It clarifies why difference is the play that makes things present but is, at the same time, not present.

*There is no essence of *différance*; it (is) that which not only could never be appropriated in the as such of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the as such in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence. That there is not a proper essence of at this point, implies that there is neither a being nor truth of the play of writing such as it engages *différance*.⁴⁴*

Différance, as Derrida puts it, does not have any essence, as it does not have any presence. In short, it does not have being. Although there is neither essence nor presence to refer to, we can speak or write about *différance* because of the discernible play and movement of deferring and differing. This means that what comes to presence is always deferred; it is always delayed both here and now and it is continuously stretching out to the past and to the future. But not only is *différance* deferred, it is also differed. By 'differed,' we are referring to the use of difference to point to and even argue for the same. This is the play that constitutes the same and the not-same. It is the play of differences within the monopoly of the same.

Différance can only be referred to because of the play of the trace that is under erasure. This trace manifests itself in its very

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, 21-22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

erasure as a trace. Derrida explains:

*As rigorously as possible we must permit to appear/disappear the trace of what exceeds the truth of being. The trace (of that) which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon.... Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the a writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in différance.... Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure. And not only the erasure which must always be able to overtake it (without which it would not be a trace but an indestructible and monumental substance), but also the erasure which constitutes it from the outset as a trace, which situates it as the change of site, and makes it disappear in its appearance, makes it emerge from itself in its production. The erasure of the early trace (die frühe Spur) of difference is therefore the “same” as its tracing in the text of metaphysics. This latter must have maintained the mark of what it has lost, reserved, put aside. The paradox of such a structure, in the language of metaphysics, is an inversion of metaphysical concepts, which produces the following effect: the present becomes the sign of the sign, the trace of the trace.... It is a trace, and a trace of the erasure of the trace.*⁴⁵

The quote above explains the structure of the trace, the constancy of erasure, and the movement of différance. As it is, the trace makes possible that which can never be presented, shown, and manifested. But as the very possibility of this impossible presence, it cancels itself in the very process of its presencing. The movement described so far is only possible within the differential and deferential play of différance.

In the words of Robert Grasché, “the arche-trace must be thought of as a quasi-originary structure of referral—the trace of a trace (without the anteriority of a present referent)—whereas différance represents the thought of a difference that ceaselessly differs from and defers (itself).”⁴⁶ The arche-trace and différance are, in fact, intimated by Heidegger in “The Anaximander Fragment,” where he claims that the difference that is forgotten (the ontico-ontological difference) is only a trace.⁴⁷ Following

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23-24.

⁴⁶ Robert Grasché, “God, for Example,” in *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 158.

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The Anaximander Fragments,” *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of*

Heidegger then, Derrida's arche-trace and *différance* are derived from the claim that difference is a trace before all determinations.

Différance points to a series and a generalization of traits and differences to which it yields despite its anteriority; it cannot simply be reducible to the ontico-ontological difference. As it is discussed above, these traits constitute a series of erasure that is grounded in difference. It can also be said that what is generalized is the structure of delay and deferral. In fact, this structure (constituted by difference) makes possible all differences, including the ontico-ontological difference. Going back to Heidegger, if all thinking is a thinking of being, then thinking of *différance* is a going beyond and an overcoming of thinking and, with it, the possibility of thinking being. When thinking is not limited to the realm of beings and of being, then it can only be a going beyond and an overcoming of the ontico-ontological difference.

But, what becomes of God beyond the ontico-ontological difference? Heidegger explains in "The Anaximander Fragment" that being and beings cannot reveal themselves "as distinguished. Rather, even the early trace of the distinction is obliterated when presencing appears as something present and finds itself in the position of being the highest being present."⁴⁸ The quote argues that God, as the highest being present does obliterate, destroy, and, even, annihilate any of the traces of difference. This means that God's presence and presencing neutralizes, cancels, and negates all differences by reducing the trace to a derivative of God-self. In God, everything (including the trace and difference, for that matter) are re-appropriated and retrieved in the context of the *parousia*. This means that the other is also made anterior to God. Everything is, thus, understood only in reference to God. As non-trace, absolute origin, and ground, God is made the origin and source of all traces. But, this is only secondary in comparison to the plenitude of presence that God enjoys and enjoins. As Derrida explains in *Of Grammatology*:

The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos... [such is the gesture] required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being

Western Philosophy, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 50-51.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

*as presence, as parousia, as life without difference: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics. Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence. In that sense, the name of God, at least as it is pronounced within classical rationalism, is the name of indifference itself.*⁴⁹

But this understanding of God can only be subject to the “classical difficulties of language” that is encountered by philosophy when it conceptualizes an absolute other that is infinitely present to God-self.⁵⁰ This leads us back to the question raised in this paper: How are we to think of God in a way that makes possible the retrieval of the meaning of being? Or how is it possible for us to even think of God, and how is this thinking about God allows us to retrieve something about the meaning of being?

Openings and Dimensions

In trying to answer the problem, I am going to use five primary texts as openings to Jacques Derrida's engagement of the question of God and the problem being. By ‘openings’, I refer to structures as well as guides to help in my discussion of the argument. While the discussions are not to be limited only to the essays that I am discussing below, it is asserted that the different texts can be used in arriving at an answer to the problematic above. The goal is to bring about a retrieval of the meaning of being by means of understanding Derrida's “God, for example.” While the ideas of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion are eventually used as provocations, there is no attempt whatsoever to specialize on their thoughts beyond those commented and provided by Jacques Derrida. In what follows, I am going to explain the Derridean texts that I am using in the hope of articulating my premises and of arriving at an answer. I discuss the text below without jeopardizing the development of the argument.

I argue that the understanding of philosophy always already incorporates the study of that which is other to philosophy—

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 71.

⁵⁰ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 115-116.

theology. In this 'theological trap,' language and negation are always already presupposed especially in the discussion of the other. The relationship between language and negation makes possible the understanding of God as nonphenomenal. The nonphenomenality of God is hinged on the claim that God is the effect of a series of traces under erasure. To raise this point, I am using the very long essay entitled "Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas." By presenting Derrida's engagement with Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas, I am able to demonstrate how Levinas's understanding of the ultimate relation with the absolutely other can be contextualized between the discourses of the philosophers and of the prophets. In this sense, Hebraism and Hellenism are implicit ways in which Levinas discusses the question of the other. For Derrida, the possibility of thinking the other is capable of disturbing, even challenging, the very discourse of philosophy. The consequence of this disturbance (or shaking) is the awakening of the Greek logos to its beginning as well as to its end. This beginning and this end is what Derrida refers to, in agreement with Levinas, as the other.

The consequence is the dialectics between Judaic as well as Greek thinking. On the one hand, Judaic thinking needs "to reawaken the Greek in the autistic syntax of ... [its] own dream."⁵¹ The consequence of this reawakening is the jeopardy directed towards the intended immediacy of its relation to the other. This is non-conceptual, non-objective, and thus non-phenomenal. But the awakening and the jeopardy are both important because, on the other hand, for Derrida, "[i]n having proffered the epekeina tes ousias, in having recognized from its second word (for example, in the Sophist) that alterity had to circulate at the origin of meaning, in welcoming alterity in general into the heart of the logos, the Greek thought of being forever has protected itself against every absolutely surprising convocation."⁵² I use Levinas's philosophy (as it is understood and presented by Derrida) to articulate his conceptions of the other, to engage it in dialogue with Husserl and Heidegger, and even to wage them into war with each other. It is in relation to these exchanges between very different modes of relating that the question of God and the meaning of being are

⁵¹ Ibid., 152.

⁵² Ibid., 153.

raised. The question of God is then contextualized in the mutual challenge between philosophy and its articulation of the other and the attempt to face God in a nonconceptual manner as a trace under erasure.

I push forward the notion of trace discussed previously. I argue that it is possible to think of God in a nonconceptual and nonphenomenal manner as a trace that is always already under erasure. I am using the ‘examples’ of the apocalyptic tone, of the coming that never comes, and of the ‘HE WAR’ to demonstrate the impossibility of this trace and also to push forward the relationship between God and being. I am using two Derridean essays to push forward and to present this nonconceptual and nonphenomenal understanding of God. I discuss this nonconceptual and nonphenomenal structure by also discussing the concept of violence, apocalypse, catastrophe, and disaster already initiated. The first is the essay “On an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy,” where Derrida presents a Kantian attack on Johann Scholler’s neo-Platonic mysticism that creates a distinction and dichotomy between the true philosophers and the mystagogues. The essay interestingly discusses Kant’s proposed truce, which hints at the inadmissible transcendental structure that organizes the correspondence between the two discourses in conflict and that necessitates the continuous referral to each other in their opposition. However, due to the direction already taken, instead of Derrida’s discussion of Kant, I am going to focus on Derrida’s transposition of Heideggerian thinking in the Judeo-Christian context articulated in the understanding of sendings (or envois). This is, of course, still in the context of Kant’s understanding of correspondence and within the structure of continuous referral and, eventually, delay, which we are discussing using the ‘apocalyptic tone.’

The second essay is the “Two Words for Joyce” where, from the perspective of the Old Testament, Derrida shows how one can locate texts that actually address Being and translation, and, at the same time, disarticulate (or even erase) the attunement of things. We pay attention to the tonalities of the diaspora (dispersal, violence, catastrophe) as it was discussed by Joyce; these tonalities are understood in terms of the possibility and the impossibility of transfer. This phenomenon is analogous to the

trachfert in Derrida's *The Post Card* and which, in another essay, is more closely approximated in the Jewish understanding and experience of the "Shibboleth."⁵³

I argue that it is possible to speak of God and being in an analogical manner. To clarify this claim, I am discussing the Platonic distinction between the Good and khora. It is in this distinction between the Platonic Good and khora that the (un) analogical structure of khora becomes evident. It is this (un) analogical structure that I use to review the relationship between being and the other, and which was pushed as the catastrophic traces of God. While the essays "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" and "Khora" presents Derrida's confrontation with accusations of negative theology, I am using these texts to argue for the (un) analogical relationship between the retrieval of the meaning of being and the question of God. In these aforementioned texts, Derrida elucidates what happens between the Greek experience of otherness using the Platonic thought of the khora and the *via negativa* of Christianity. This emphasizes the Platonic experiences of the other only to go back where we started—the discussion on Levinasian other and Heideggerian being. The third section of the essay presents how Heidegger (and Levinas) could manifest, in an exemplary way, what Derrida claims as the "most questioning legacy, both the audacious and most liberated repetition of the traditions."⁵⁴ In this discussion on Heidegger's (and also of Levinas') thought that Derrida articulates the guidelines that can be used to regulate the exchange between the Greek experience and negative theology, as well as to philosophical and to theological discourse.

As is, the last part of the second section constitute Jacques Derrida's attempt to articulate the guidelines for exchange between the different discourses about being and the other. But this is not a simple equivocation of the idea of being and the other with that of God. Instead, it relates God, being, and the other to the structures of references in which all are engendered. While the question (how the question of God plays itself out in the retrieval of the meaning of being) needs to be answered, what is

⁵³ See Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 122.

certain is that, for Derrida, the question of God and the network of structures of referral imply the possibility of thinking God beyond the Heideggerian understanding of being and (perhaps) beyond the Levinasian discourse on the other.

EPIGRAPH

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