

## **Online Appendix A, Supplement 10**

### **By-Products of God: Autonomy, Revolution, Nothingness, Finitude**

When I offer these classic atheist objections to God as tyrant, as limiter of our freedom, or these typical village-atheist jibes about its main prophets and messiahs, I don't want to be misunderstood as implying that God squashes our prior, natural autonomy, and that we should therefore rise up against him, overthrow him, restore our freedom. On the contrary, as suggested elsewhere in this work, I think that the whole idea of personal autonomy in the way it is usually conceived (as the "agency" of a conscious being who first knows and then decides and then acts according to his preconception of what his decided willed act is) is itself a by-product of the concepts of free will and the soul, both of which are themselves by-products of a theological need to absolve God of responsibility for human actions, either to justify the presence of evil in the world or, worse, to justify God's punishments for our misdeeds. We need free will (as opposed to freedom in some other sense) in order to deserve reward or punishment, and we need absolute free will in order to deserve eternal reward or eternal punishment. This is not the only way to play the cards, of course; there are well-wrought Islamic and Protestant theologies that deny free will in the absolute sense, preferring to elevate God's omnipotence beyond the demands for humanly conceivable justice. But I would argue that where the doctrine of free will did evolve, it did so as part of some such theological strategy. My view of free will here is close to Nietzsche's, as explained elsewhere, a line of thought developed further by Martin Heidegger in his later works. Heidegger sees the modern notions of personal autonomy and purposive willing to be the result of a long metaphysical development, beginning distantly with Plato's determining of Being as a function of "Ideas," (εἶδος *eidos*, conceived as a definitive and distinctive self-unveiling of identities), but finding its firmest foothold in the Christian quest for certainty of individual salvation and finally taking shape in the Cartesian notion of the subject as the ultimate determinant of Being. I would concur in seeing Christian theology as a fulfillment of the Platonic promise of a single non-ambiguous determination of Being, exacerbated not only by

the notion of uncertainty of individual salvation but more especially by the grounding of this quest in a theological notion of free will. To be noted in this connection is the difficulty students of Indian and Chinese philosophy have in finding any thinkers in those traditions so much as raising any question equivalent to those of free will and determinism; superficially similar doctrines in those cultural spheres reveal themselves, upon close study, to be focused on an entirely different set of concerns, working from quite different premises. For this reason, I think that the pitting of our individual autonomy against the tyranny of God is another misguided strategy, that inadvertently reinforces the very premises it hopes to challenge. The two apparent opponents are only two faces of the same monster. That there are important alternatives to both, that “freedom” can be understood as something other than absolute individual autonomy of the will, will become clear as we consider the case-studies in Part Two and online appendix B.

It has sometimes been suggested also, in defense of what a lot of good the idea of God has done, that the positing of this unseen, impalpable ruler and source of normativity has served as a lever by which to oppose the tyranny of lesser, earthly tyrants. That is, the transcendental source of the moral demand provides an Archimedean point outside of any given social system and its entrenched rules—the absolute authority of the emperor or government, the hierarchies of gender and caste, the deference due to socially recognized elders and authorities—from which they may be opposed and overturned. The individual has access to an authority higher than any social authority. So, on this view, in addition to providing the idea of sacred individual autonomy, which might reject any form of heteronomous social control, God provides a standpoint for fiery revolutionary prophets who can call for radical change and correction of existing social injustices. I am quite willing to grant this point. The concept of God can indeed be used to shake things up. But I am not so convinced that this is a good thing. There is a price to pay for this luxury. It is true that God will not tolerate human tyranny—because he wants the tyranny all to himself. As the New Testament has it, once again, “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord”—in other words, only mine, not yours, so we are to turn the other cheek and let the master executioner do his stuff. This is the Compensatory Theist position in a nutshell. Liberation from subjection to human authority is bought at the price of a much more thorough subjection, in two senses already touched on in the main body of this work: first, because the ruler to whom you are

subjected is now absolute, creates and owns you; and second, because this ruler is an omnipresent mind-reader, the subjugation is thoroughly internalized. This price is, in the opinion of some of us, just too high. And again, there are other alternatives for human freedom, even for social change, besides the controlled and deliberate rearrangement of social realities according to a program of ideals, as managed by some group of persons who know what they want and then go ahead and exert their wills and take actions in order to make that thing happen, operating with a belief that their program is to be executed in accordance with the command of an as yet uncoronated absolute tyrant to come, against whom no rebellion can or will ever be tolerated.

There is another unsuspected by-product of God, which nowadays comes to be pitted against him, deserving of mention in this context: the concept of nothingness, in the radical sense of absolute non-existence, the eternal dead inert void. This is another notion that we are hard-pressed to find approximated in any non-monotheistic culture. As in the previous cases, it is mistakenly taken as an antonym of God, when in fact it is a correlative concept that stands or falls with the idea of God. I would argue that it is to pit the idea of creation ex nihilo against the Aristotelian notion of eternally existent matter that this radical conception of nothingness was needed—for if something existed which was not created by God, some aspect of our being for which he was not entirely responsible, our indebtedness to God would be accordingly limited. In order that we may be infinitely indebted to God for our very being, through and through, the creation ex nihilo, unthinkable to the ancients, is necessary. For there to have been creation ex nihilo, there had to have been a nihil, one which on its own power would be incapable of doing anything at all. Without God's intervention, the void is blank, lifeless, infertile. This is to be remembered when God is invoked precisely as a bulwark against nothingness; modern man's terror of death, of life ending in an infinite, unthinkable void that is radically distinct from any recognizable form of being, is a by-product of the idea of God, a deliberate specter raised in order to maintain the sense of God's infinite kindness in finagling us into existence. In the absence of this assumption, we are just as likely to find precisely a sense of the inescapability of being, a sense of existence without any exit; existence is not some special effect added by effort and will to the uncontrived, uninterfered-with default conditions; it is rather something it would take a lot of effort and will to avoid. Not to have anything exist would be much trickier than

having things exist; it is impossible, normally, to fall out of existence, even if one tries. This intuition was axiomatic to the Dharmic religions of ancient India, but has been astutely rediscovered in modern times by Bergson, who endeavored to show that the idea of nothingness is incoherent and impossible, revealing itself on analysis to really be just the replacement of one idea of being with another, and shows up too in the early Levinas, who evokes the horror of this discovery with a strong account of the consciousness of the insomniac.<sup>1</sup>

We will add one more item to this list of things that pass as a self-evident aspects of the human condition but are really merely a very specifically determined interpretation, indeed aftermaths of monotheist habituations: the commonplace idea that we human beings are finite.

So says secularism; so says empiricism--and so said Judaism, Christianity, Islam. But why? In fact, our finitude is itself a result of treating ourselves as a “thing” in Bataille’s sense, itself a part of the tool-users reduction of the world to mutually exclusive items organized according to mutual means-ends relationships, itself a consequence of making purposivity the ultimate horizon of all existence. It is not in any way a primitive datum of experience, or a direct transcription of phenomenological reality, or a necessary postulate, or a logically required inference.

The early Heidegger also wanted to avoid reducing experienced reality to the categories of thinghood, and suggested a new way of talking about finitude, indeed stressing finitude, which he thought might avoid the pitfalls of regarding it as the finitude of what we’ve been calling “a thing.” We may regard this as a slightly misleading way of making the same point we are making here, i.e., of proposing a form of both finitude and infinitude which are not mutually exclusive. For the denied infinity is itself the “thingified” infinity, the non-Ekstatic infinity. The real infinity, which coincides exactly with finitude, is simply the non-mutual-exclusivity of moments of time, the freedom from the limited, pointillistic, thingified “now”: it is the idea that there simply are no isolate “presents” not fully suffused with pasts and futures. No possible experience ever is limited only to any thinglike period of time, with the kinds of boundaries that a definite thing would have. Time just doesn’t work that way. No one exists for a definite limited time, because time is not limitable as definite. The kind of finitude that pertains to Dasein (i.e., human

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<sup>1</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution* and *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*.

existence as experienced “from the inside”) must be regarded as simply a way of talking about a perfect coinciding of finitude and infinity: infinity here exists in the specific form of possibility, of projection, of future as the present’s beyondness to itself through its own appropriation of a thrown past. The moments of time within Dasein are understood not as isolated point-instants, but as constitutively moretoitive, and what makes Dasein Dasein is the specific existential form taken by the moretoitivity of moments in this case: thrown-facticity-projecting-future-toward-death-through-appropriation-of-past. But the type of wholeness formed by this appropriation should not be understood as itself forming a new “thing”—a non-moretoitive kind of facticity. The emphatic finitude manifested in being-toward-death is itself ek-static, an aspect of the non-enclosure of temporality, the only form in which finitude can come to coincide with its intrinsic infinity, for the whole point is that we must be both finite and infinite at once, and to pinpoint what this amounts to. Neither death nor the life limited by its always-future relation to death can be conceived as a simple finite datum enclosed upon itself, a bordered finite whole inertly exclusive of an external infinity. Rather, the relation of this totality of Dasein must be understood in terms of what lies “outside” it, as intrinsically inseparable from its being as being-in-the-world, and it is for this reason that the inquiry into Dasein necessarily calls forth the more general inquiry into Sein, Being as such, which must be thought of as moretoitive in a way that is not necessarily constricted to any particular form of Dasein’s moretoitivity. Just as Dasein is not a finite thing which excludes the Sein which surpasses it, Sein is not a thingified infinity which excludes Dasein; Dasein is rather the specific form of disclosure of Sein, and precisely due to the moretoitivity of both, they cannot be thought separately. In other words, what finitude looks like when divested of thinghood is Dasein, and what infinity looks like when it is divested of the erroneous thinglike finitude that has been attributed to it is what we call possibility, thrown-facticity-projecting-future-through-appropriation-of-past, ekstasis, time generally. Which is precisely Dasein disclosing Sein in a particular way, Sein as both the intrinsic negation and the intrinsic disclosure of Dasein. That means, Tiantai-style, we should say it is only correct to say that Dasein is radically finite if we understand this to be synonymous with saying Dasein is radically infinite: it is both, and these are simply alternate ways of describing the human condition.

But if we do not interpret Heidegger in this way, his insistence on finitude becomes just another unsavory holdover of monotheism. In fact, as just noted, the sense of the openness of Being, the ek-static structure of Dasein, point away from taking the projective-retrospective structure of being-for-death as something that actually limits anything, that consolidates anything into any single anything. However, it is not evident that Heidegger himself was always clear on this point; indeed, we find him speaking of being as if it were opposed to nothingness, of “there being something at all” as a problem to be taken up as if it were something that could be solved, as if “there being nothing at all” were not also one way in which there is something. The real point of this question, of course, is that it should always remain as a question, not that it be solved; but is it really a question at all? On his own premises, we might suggest, there should be nothing particularly perplexing about this, for there is simply no conceivable either-or between there being something and there being nothing. Charitably, we can read this “keeping alive of this question” simply as a way of remaining alive to buoyant dynamism of this very fact, a mysteriousness that is not a mystery to be solved but an effervescent plenitude to be enjoyed, thrilled and awed and shaken up by constantly; but at times there seems to be some equivocation on this point. Similarly we find him sometimes talking about being suspended over an “abyss” of nothingness, as if there were anywhere to fall, as if finitude were indeed something that opposed and excluded the infinite, presupposing the dichotomy of being and nothing which he claims to have overcome—and which, we might say charitably, he really has overcome, if only implicitly and sometimes against his own explicit understanding, perhaps against his own wishes. In spite of all his attempts to distinguish this finitude experienced in my being-for-death from the in-itself thinghood of a finite thing, which could have led right into the heart of the atheist mysticism of Gelassenheit which finally haltingly arrives in the late Heidegger, we find in the early Heidegger the prioritization of projection and the future, of resoluteness in the face of finitude, of choice, of purpose. True, this stands just at the cusp of the approach we take here: the full convergence of purpose and purposelessness, resoluteness and being-for-death. It does seem that Heidegger himself had become aware of the way in which his earliest articulation of Dasein, in *Sein und Zeit*, was still beholden to the basic structure of the primacy of willing that is concomitant to the monotheist view of both finitude and infinity. Indeed, this can be seen as the central issue

animating his “turn” away from his earlier work. Whether he ever managed to land at a satisfactory alternative is another question.<sup>2</sup> It certainly does seem to me that the form of unity the early Heidegger inherits, the Christian either/or feeding his conception of Dasein from the depths of Kierkegaard and back into the New Testament, is still personal in the worst sense, even if he denies it is a question of consciousness and will: it is the unity that excludes, that is accountable, that appropriates, that is guilty, the selfhood of narrative and responsibility. We are still in the realm of an intense Compensatory Atheism in these early works. In the end it merely perpetuates the problem: the monotheist inheritance of an absolute dichotomy between the finite and the infinite, which is nothing more than a demand of God’s divine majesty: we must not be like our creator, it would be a blasphemous offense of his majesty to claim this, satanic pride; therefore we are finite and He is infinite. Take Him away, leaving only the universe or infinite time in His place: if these are still conceived in the way they were in monotheism, even without the God part, the structure remains the same, we are required to regard ourselves as finite.

But no one has ever experienced or conceived finitude in isolation from infinity, nor infinity in isolation from finitude, for one instant, either in thinking or in touching or in seeing or in dreaming or in wondering or in knowing. Everything we see is both—so much so that we should be able to see that “finite” and “infinite,” which seem to be two separate predicates, indeed opposite predicates, are really just two sides of one and the same fact, of the basic ontological condition of being, just as “inhaling” and “exhaling,” which seem to be two different and even opposite things, are really just halves of one thing called “respiration,” artificially separated in thought as if they were two self-standing entities—a separation that can sometimes be useful for specifying various objects of attention, but which is not to be taken as ontologically relevant. But in the present case, the two (infinity and finitude, indetermination and determination, the unconditioned and the conditioned) are not sequential, they are simultaneous—as a spatial thing is coterminous with the space it occupies. Students of Tiantai Buddhism will recognize here the basic structure of the Three Truths. If this idea seems obscure, it is because we have not taken in the points made by our atheist mystics; we shall begin to

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<sup>2</sup>For a penetrating inquiry into precisely this question, see Bret Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

unravel this identify of finitude and infinity in the discussion of Spinoza that launches Part Two, and trace its various forms in the rest of that section and onward into online appendix B.