Ontotheology
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'Ontotheology' has two main meanings, one arising from its usage by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and a second from its usage by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Though Kant's influence on Heidegger suggests at least a loose connection between these two senses of 'ontotheology', they are largely independent of one another.

For Kant, 'ontotheology' describes a kind of theology that aims to know something about the existence of God without recourse to scriptural or natural revelation through mere concepts of reason alone, such as the concept of the 'ens realissimum' (the most real being) or the 'ens originarium' (the original, most primordial being). Ontological arguments for the existence of God such as those offered by Anselm and Descartes are paradigm cases of ontotheology in the Kantian sense.

For Heidegger, 'ontotheology' is a critical term used to describe a putatively problematic approach to metaphysical theorizing that he claims is characteristic of Western philosophy in general. A metaphysics is an 'ontotheology' insofar as its account of ultimate reality combines—typically in a confused or conflated manner—two general forms of metaphysical explanation that, taken together, aim to make the entirety of reality intelligible to human understanding: an *ontology* that accounts for that which all beings have in common (universal or fundamental being) and a *theology* that accounts for that which causes and renders intelligible the system of beings as a whole (a highest or ultimate being or a first principle). Traditionally interpreted, Platonic metaphysics is a paradigm case of ontotheology in the Heideggerian sense insofar as it explains the existence of particular beings by recourse to universal forms (ontology) and explains the origin and intelligibility of the whole of beings by recourse to the Good as that from which everything else emanates (theology).

It is this Heideggerian sense of 'ontotheology'—and, in particular, Heidegger's influential critique of the approach to metaphysics it describes—that animates contemporary discussions of ontotheology, especially in 'continental' history of philosophy and philosophy of religion. The main problem with ontotheology, according to Heidegger and his heirs, is that it is driven by a desire to 'master' reality that masks a deeper anxiety over the challenge of existing as finite beings vulnerable to a world that resists and confounds our life projects. Critics maintain that this existential mood of stability-seeking angst disposes humanity to experience the world primarily as something to be subordinated to human intellect and will, and that this mood so pervades ontotheology that, within its purview, reality is reduced to what can be calculated, measured, and manipulated: beings are understood predominately as consumable resources, God is depersonalized into a first cause, and opportunities to experience awe and wonder at the indeterminate, inexplicable, mysterious, or holy aspects of reality are diminished or occluded.

I. The Ontotheological Constitution of Western Metaphysics
To grasp Heidegger's critical interpretation of ontotheology, one must first make sense of his idiosyncratic understanding of metaphysics. Taking cues from Aristotle, Heidegger maintains that Western metaphysics has traditionally sought to explain what

lies beyond (meta-) the causal order of beings (physics) for the purpose of anchoring this order in two distinct but intimately connected types of metaphysical ground.

First, metaphysics attempts to discern the most universal or general feature that beings share in common, namely being. Second, it attempts to discern the highest being (or, for some thinkers in the tradition, a first principle) from which all beings derive and through which they assume their places and purposes as parts of a coherent whole. In metaphysics, thus, two specific types of metaphysical ground that 'lie beyond beings' in significantly different ways are investigated under the same general disciplinary heading: the subsensuous foundation of beings (general being/the being of beings); and the suprasensuous source of beings (the highest being/first principle). (Heidegger 1995, 44)

Though these grounds are conceptually distinct, Heidegger maintains that in historical practice our investigations of them have become inextricably enmeshed, often confusedly, such that a mutually reinforcing feedback loop between them is now an essential part of our metaphysical heritage. In accounting for the being of beings we are led to posit a highest being; and in accounting for the highest being we arrive at a certain conception of the being of beings. (Heidegger 2002, 61)

With this interpretation of metaphysics as an essentially two-fold grounding enterprise in view, the meaning of Heidegger's oft-cited reference to 'the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics' comes into sharp relief (more on those hypens soon). What is at stake for metaphysics, after all, is grounding the intelligibility of the order of beings by fastening this order, via two distinct but intimately related 'logics' or modes of explanation, to the most basic element that undergirds its construction on the one side (being, by way of ontology—'onto-logic'), and to a highest being (or a first principle) that causes and sustains it on the other (God, or at least a god-surrogate, by way of theology—'theo-logic'). (Heidegger 2002, 70)

The ontology of an ontotheology thus supplies an account of that which all beings have in common, in virtue of which they are beings (or entities or existents). By accounting for the fundamental nature of beings as such, an ontology explains how beings as a whole are unified by their shared nature from the ground up, so to speak. By contrast, the theology of an ontotheology involves the postulation of a highest/paradigmatic being (e.g., an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God) or first principle (Hegel's 'absolute spirit') that serves to explain the origin, unity, and purpose of the rest of reality. The significance of any particular being within the whole of reality is thus a function of its relation to the highest being/principle, which secures that particular being's place in reality from the top down, as it were. In summary, the two explanatory projects of an ontotheology together aim to render the whole of reality intelligible to human understanding, grounding it—as one leading commentator describes—both from the bottom up (ontology) and from the top down (theology). (Thomson 2005; 2011)

Heidegger's deliberate use of two hyphens to partition the 'onto-' and 'theo-' logics that he claims are simultaneously at work in metaphysics indicates an important caveat that can help to minimize confusion moving forward. It is common, if ultimately misleading, to think of 'ontotheology' as a term that refers, first and foremost, to a particular approach to theology (onto-theology)—a discourse (*logos*) about God (*theos*), especially the God of classical monotheism, in which foundational questions about being (*ontos*) motivate the account. To be sure, Heidegger's critical interpretation of

ontotheology has important implications for classically theistic metaphysics. However, one must be careful not to conflate this particular species of ontotheology with the broader genus—a much wider umbrella under which the 'theo-logic' in 'ontotheology' can be directed at explaining paradigmatic first principles as strange, un-God-like, and historically far-flung as Anaximander's *apeiron* (the indefinite, infinite) and Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. (Thomson 2005, 2; Thomson 2011, 106-131, 108)

Though positing the God of the philosophers as the metaphysical source and sustenance of one's great chain of being is perfectly sufficient to incur the charge 'ontotheology!', then, it is not by any means necessary. As long as the being or principle under discussion bears the weight of accounting for the unity of beings as a whole, it can be said to function as the 'theo-logic' in the ontotheology in question. To avoid conflating the genus 'ontotheology' and the species 'theistic ontotheology,' then, I first examine Heidegger's account of ontotheology's problematic legacy for Western philosophy in general, and then extend the discussion to its specific implications for Western theological and religious reflection.

II. Ontotheology's Problematic Legacy: Anxiety, Calculation, Oblivion

Heidegger maintains that this ontotheological approach is traceable throughout Western metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche in a series of relatively distinct and stable if slowly evolving historical epochs (e.g., ancient, medieval, modern, contemporary). As such, 'ontotheology' can refer both to the general approach of Western metaphysics as a whole and to each of the particular ontotheological frames of reference characteristic of the historical epochs that compose the tradition, each frame securing the order of beings in a particular time-period by establishing the parameters within which beings are typically understood for that time. On this view of the tradition, the meaning of what it is for something to be and the vision of how beings come into existence and are unified into a cohesive whole change as the ontotheology of one epoch evolves into the next. But if the conceptions of general being and highest being that frame the way the world is understood in any given age change as metaphysics evolves, the basic approach of seeking this two-fold ontotheological grounding is said to remain constant throughout.

Heidegger develops this narrative in a variety of texts by reference to many thinkers, and the territory is well surveyed in the secondary literature (Thomson 2005; Marion 1994; and Caputo 1986, 47-96). What is important here is to explain why Heidegger sees this history as one of decline in which philosophy moves toward increasingly reductive interpretations of the meaning of being that slowly but surely disenchant and flatten the world into a reserve of mere resources on demand for human consumption.

The story begins back before Plato with some latent inklings on being and truth that Heidegger claims philosophy has gradually forgotten over the past several millennia, much to its detriment. (Heidegger 1992) The wisdom between the lines of pre-Socratic thought, Heidegger argues, is that Western thinking—at its origins, anyway—is deeply attuned by the insights that being withholds and even conceals itself by nature because it is too rich to be fully revealed to finite human understanding; that beings, no matter how available they may seem for our purposes in some of their aspects, nonetheless always harbor traces of their enigmatic relation to being; and that truth-seeking should be not only open to accepting indeterminacy and mystery as essential features of its inquiries concerning being, but disposed in awe and wonder to these features of the search that

prompt us to preserve and protect what remains concealed of being against the hubris of vain attempts to lay it bare and thus to reduce it to something less than it is.

Heidegger sees this 'heedfulness' of the importance of preserving the hiddenness of what lies beyond full explanation exemplified, for instance, in Parmenides' uninhibited recourse to mythology, poetry, and mystical experience in articulating his cosmology. But if Heidegger commends this supplementation of philosophical discourse with other, less theoretical, more experiential ways of connecting with and preserving respect for the unexplained and unexplainable, he maintains that the history of ontotheological metaphysics from Plato onward has been animated by a decidedly different disposition toward the concealment of being from our ground-hungry gaze—that of an increasingly consumptive anxiety which attempts to compensate for human finitude and vulnerability through calculative reasoning or 'calculation'. (Heidegger 1998)

The hallmark of calculation is its myopic preoccupation with the mastery of beings: measuring them, dissecting them, understanding their causes, predicting and controlling their effects, and—most of all—rendering them available for ready use, both for theoretical and practical construction and consumption. This mastery, however, comes at a cost. For within the purview of calculation, only those aspects of beings (and of being, for that matter) that lend themselves to objectification and deployment in this fashion register as significant. In order to reveal beings as master-able in these aspects, calculation must conceal (or at least underemphasize) other aspects that resist objectification, especially those that defy tidy explanation or court mystery. (Heidegger 1998, 235)

In casting a critical eye on the limitations of calculation, Heidegger's point is certainly not that all such reasoning is suspect or that we'd be better off without its objectifying disposition in our interpretive stockpile. Without calculation, we couldn't make our way in the world. The problem arises when calculation's inarguable success in certain types of dealings with beings is taken to license its ascension to the *dominant* disposition of human understanding in every arena. When calculation becomes the default frame of reference for engaging the world, Heidegger maintains, our attunement to the importance of protecting what remains concealed of being diminishes. As the procedures of calculation become increasingly rarefied and its reach becomes increasingly comprehensive, opportunities decrease to trace the strange, uncanny, or inexplicable aspects of beings back to their hidden wellspring in being. The more control we gain over beings, the more we are inclined to forget being until eventually we forget that we have forgotten being at all. This state of being destitute of any mindfulness of our connection to or responsibility for preserving what lies beyond the master-able is what Heidegger calls 'oblivion'.

It is precisely this path from anxiety through calculation into oblivion that Heidegger claims is the itinerary of ontotheological history. What better way to sublimate anxiety about our lack of certainty and vulnerability than to embark on a quest for a rigorous two-fold grounding of everything that explains the order of beings bottom to top from the most general being to the highest being? Early on in the enterprise, glimmers of the necessity to honor our hidden debts to concealment occasionally interrupt the dominant ontotheological tradition in the counter-narratives of the cognitively unreachable 'beyond being' of Neoplatonism and the unknowable God of medieval mystical theology. But as philosophy accommodates itself increasingly to modern science as a means of insulating

itself from threats to its credibility like revealed theology, superstition, and fanaticism, opportunities to experience awe and wonder from without are increasingly supplanted by fascination with the world-subjugating powers within, first reason and finally will.

By the seventeenth century, confidence in the prospect of overcoming anxiety through calculation has reached breathtaking heights and the writing of oblivion is on the wall in Descartes' vision of a new philosophy:

> [The physical sciences] opened my eyes to the possibility of gaining knowledge which would be very useful in life, and of discovering a practical philosophy which might replace the speculative philosophy taught in the schools [Aristotle]. Through this philosophy we could know the power and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies in our environment, as distinctly as we know the power and action of our artisans; and we could use the knowledge—as the artisans use theirs—for all the purposes for which it is appropriate, and thus make ourselves, as it were, the lords and masters of nature. This is desirable not only for the invention of innumerable devices which would facilitate our enjoyment of the fruits of the earth and all the goods we find there, but also, and most importantly, for the maintenance of health, which is undoubtedly the chief good and foundation of all the other goods in life. (*Discourse on Method*, AT 62)

But just as the will to dominate the world seems to be achieving the means for total mastery through the conscription of science into technology, the truth begins to dawn that our domination of beings is increasingly resulting in our material and spiritual destitution.

III. **Ontotheology and God**

This attitude of mastery over mystery exemplified in the contemporary technological dominance of a disenchanted, instrumentalized, and increasingly depleted world of resources at our disposal is an apt metaphor for the risks that Heidegger associates with ontotheology's disposition to the God question. For Heidegger, in fact, the reign of technology in the present age is much more than a metaphor. It is the expectable outcome, indeed even the "destiny," of a tradition that begins by treating God as a theoretical posit, the primary purpose of which is to secure finite human thought regimes against an infinite regress that would otherwise unsettle the ground beneath all rational construction. The 'God' of ontotheology, in this light, is one of humanity's first and most important intellectual technologies—a prosthesis that, when appended to our finite powers of reason, ostensibly enables us to reach across the gap from the causal order of beings to being, the ultimate source of its intelligibility.

The scare quotes around 'God' here are important, however. For as Heidegger acknowledges and as heirs to his critique have also observed, there are any number of ways in which a perceived relation to the divine can obtain, not all of which approach the relation as an ultimate grounding strategy or even as a straightforwardly calculative form of engagement at all. Consider, for instance, ancient pagan encounters with patron deities in the practice of a craft or a flash of insight, or scriptural examples such as Moses' encounter with the burning bush, Paul's confrontation on the road to Damascus, or for that matter any encounter of putatively divine significance achieved through more prosaic acts of prayer, reflection, meditation, poetic contemplation, worship, liturgical

expression, love of self, neighbor, or enemy, or aesthetic appreciation. Consider, also, any more formalized theological practices—say, certain mystical approaches at the headier end of the theological spectrum or pastoral theology at the more practical end—that aim to extend one's understanding of God in some direction other than that of God's utility as a theoretical ground or as an instrument for wielding influence over or justifying the subjugation of other beings. These sorts of perceived conduits to the divine, insofar as they are not the dominant means by which Western metaphysics has made its approach, are not the targets of Heidegger's critique.

On the contrary, one of the chief concerns of the critique vis-à-vis the God question is precisely to illuminate the increasing risk of humanity's spiritual destitution through estrangement from these more intense, immediate, experiential, and humbling paths to the divine, especially in its most awe-inspiring and mysterious aspects. As the anxious impulse to flee finitude into mastering the causal order of beings by recourse to the first cause comes into increasingly sophisticated intellectual and material means of achieving this mastery, the temptation for humanity to exalt itself as lord of the earth becomes increasingly irresistible even and especially as attunement to the hidden holy fades away.

The unconcealed god that remains, according to Heidegger, is one before which we can 'neither pray nor sacrifice,' neither 'fall to [our] knees in awe' nor 'play music and dance.' (Heidegger 2002, 71-72) The idea here is that ontotheology depersonalizes God into an *unmoved* mover in the face of which worship is pointless. Dancing and praying, after all, are acts of worship that are oriented toward *moving* God in some way, perhaps toward changing God's mind or eliciting God's pleasure, forgiveness, pity, or assistance. But an ontotheological God's mind cannot be changed (immutable) nor can such a God experience pain or pleasure (impassible), and so dancing or praying before such a God—at least for the usual reasons—is simply a non-starter.

The concrete effects of this withdrawal of the holy for humanity's spiritual prospects may become more vivid in view of some key (if idealized) differences between the pre- and post-technological worlds. In the days before modern science and technology (not to mention philosophical systems modeled on scientific standards of calculative power), opportunities for awe and wonder were in no short supply. The world pushed back against our best efforts at mastery in ways that both foregrounded the mysterious character of beings (especially the finitude and dependence of human beings) and placed very rigorous limits on the control that humanity could exert over beings. Weather and crop viability conveyed news of divine blessing or disapproval. Geography posed insuperable obstacles to trade, travel, and intellectual and cultural exchange. Widespread, untreatable illnesses made for intimate familiarity with suffering and death.

In the present age, by contrast, the illusion exists that virtually anything can be explained by recourse to an Internet search. Weather forecasts are updated minute-to-minute on cell phone home-screens. Video clips of political revolutions happening thousands of miles away are available in real-time. The means are at hand to transplant or even regrow human organs, as well as to convert cities into radioactive wastelands, billions of animals into meat machines, mountains into ore, rain forests into grazing fields, rivers into electric power, and books, films, and music into digital streams of information accessible on any screen anywhere. The mystery of being is less accessible in beings and beings are more easily dominated, both because of our generally demystified

attitude toward them and because of the increasingly powerful means at our disposal to manipulate and control them.

If one is not remiss to catch a whiff of nostalgia here, the most charitable reading of Heidegger's point is not that humanity was 'better off back then,' but that the conditions are ripe now for a spiritual destitution so papered over by 'successful' prediction and control that it is virtually undetectable. The danger is significant, on Heidegger's view, that our current predicament will alienate us from any authentic experience of the holy, whether that is because our reliance on science and technology has become a god-surrogate that keeps the mystery from breaking through or because we are in thrall to a fully revealed God projected in our own image—a God presiding over the world as we understand it as a standing reserve of power for legitimating the uses into which we conscript it. And insofar as one of the key symptoms of this self-concealing spiritual destitution is a drive to dominate the world in ways that degrade and deplete it, the threat of material destitution looms increasingly large as well.

It merits mention, in conclusion, that there is a robust literature in contemporary discussions of ontotheology that offers deconstructive re-interpretations of the work of major figures whose 'histories of effect'—the dominant ways in which their work has been understood and handed down to contemporary philosophy by leading thinkers including Heidegger himself—have tarred these figures with an ontotheological brush notwithstanding good (if usually lesser known) textual evidence for a more expansive, less stringently metaphysical rendering of their dispositions toward the divine. Among the figures whose legacies well-known commentators have attempted to redress through such strategies are Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Descartes, a list that raises the question of whether the scope of the critique of ontotheology is narrower than it is sometimes characterized in the popular narrative on which the entirety of Western philosophy is alleged to be ontotheological in character.

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