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Editor: Frederick J. Parrella, Secretary-Treasurer

Religious Studies Department Santa Clara University
Kenna Hall, Suite 300, Room H, Santa Clara, California 95053

Associate Editor: Jonathan Rothchild

Production Associate: Benjamin Petrick

Telephone: 408.554.4714 FAX: 408.554.2387

Email: fparrella@scu.edu

Website: www.NAPTS.org

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ANNUAL MEETING

A reminder: The annual meeting of the North American Paul Tillich Society will be held in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, on Friday, 6 November 2009, in conjunction with the meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The annual banquet will be held at the Holiday Inn Montréal Center-Ville Friday evening. Our speaker this year will be Raymond F. Bulman of Saint John's University. He is the author of the award-winning book, *A Blueprint for Humanity. Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture*. The AAR Group, Tillich: Issues in Theology, Religion, and Culture, will meet on Monday (9:00-11:30 and 4:00-6:30) at the AAR meeting. The Fall Bulletin will print the entire schedule for both meetings as well as the time of the annual meeting of the Board of Directors of the Society on Saturday morning and the time and location of the annual business meeting.

For information and registration, see:

http://www.aarweb.org/Meetings/Annual_Meeting/Current_Meeting/default.asp

N.B. *Because of a recent change in the law, any citizen of the United States attending the meeting in Montreal must be in the possession of a valid U.S. passport in order to re-enter the country.*

NEW PUBLICATIONS

Rodkey, Christopher D. *In the Horizon of the Infinite: Paul Tillich and the Dialectic of the Sacred*. Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, Graduate Division of Religion, 2008. viii + 426 pp. UMI/ProQuest #3340963.

Abstract: At the end of Paul Tillich's life, a small group of young theologians, calling themselves "radical" or "death of God" theologians, carried many of Tillich's own ideas forward, even if Tillich

disagreed with their agendas. Tillich was, however, deeply influential on this small group of thinkers. This dissertation explores the two most prominent of these radical theologians, Thomas J. J. Altizer and Mary Daly.

Editor's Note: A report of the APTEF Colloque in Paris, 15-17 May, will appear in the Fall Bulletin



**PAUL TILlich AND ERNEST BECKER:
CULTURAL MEANING AND THE
ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH**

JAMES CHAMPION

Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible,
nothing more true.
This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels.
Philip Larkin, "Aubade"¹

Degrees we know, unknown in days before;
The light is greater, hence the shadow more;
Herman Melville, *Clarel*²

Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker died in 1973. He won the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1974 for his remarkable book, *The Denial of Death*. The book shows how death-anxiety conditions culture, religion, and human behavior generally. Anxiety, Becker argued, generates heroic cultural activity that gives meaning to our lives. Yet death-anxiety also underlies the inclination of our species toward hatred, the collective madness of war, and the killing of innocent people, the many forms of evil, in short, that make history, as Hegel called it, a "butcher's bench."

The Denial of Death unveils the demonic side of religion. Yet Becker also looked towards the reintegration of science and religion, and he appreciated a number of religious thinkers, such as Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich. He cites Tillich at a number of junctures throughout his work. When Sam Keen—in an interview with Becker when Becker was on his deathbed in 1973—

Becker agreed, but added a qualification, namely, "the qualification that I believe in God."³ This remark is somewhat startling if you follow the logic of Becker's critique of the human propensity for soothing illusions. He must have been speaking of the creator God as a useful transference object—or is there more to it? In my view, Becker's frame of reference in his more personal references to God is in tandem with Tillich's. In this and other comments, he was pointing, like Tillich, to the God who is not an object of any kind, the God beyond the God of theistic belief.

The following essay comes out my ongoing attempt to fathom the connections between Ernest Becker and Paul Tillich. In the first section, I will summarize Becker's central ideas, and in the second section show how they relate to Tillich's standpoints. In the third section, I look to apophatic theology as a touchstone for understanding the relationship between these figures.

I. Becker's Theory

Becker's thesis in *The Denial of Death* (and its companion volume, *Escape from Evil*) goes something like this: The dynamic behind the creation and maintenance of civilization is not the repression of our sexuality, as Freud thought, but the repression of our awareness of death. It is our inability to come to terms with our mortality that motivates much of the activity in our lives. Many people say they are not afraid of death, or they just don't think about it, but it is the unconscious repression of the underlying awareness that is the irrevocable point. We will soon be gone forever and ever, but we have things to do, so there is not a lot of time to think about it. We are all a little like the soldiers going into battle observed by Aristotle; each man feels sorry for the man next to him who, poor guy, will probably die. Our natural narcissism keeps us buoyed up and in denial of our own inevitable demise.

Becker's analysis of the human condition begins with evolutionary theory and the Darwinian assumption that we share with all other life forms a basic biological predisposition towards survival in the service of reproduction. We got here through the combined effects of random mutation and natural selection over millions of years. Our distinctive adaptive feature is the development of large brains. We are not particularly strong, fast, or impressively enfolded. Our large brain adaptation enabled elaborate behaviors, like coordinated hunting, food shar-

ing and “behavioral flexibility in response to the demands of specific stimuli.”⁷⁴ It also generated the capacity for self-consciousness. That is, *homo sapiens* are aware of their consciousness, and “of themselves as potential objects of their own subjective inquiry.”⁷⁵ And here is the rub, for it is our capacity for self-consciousness that also makes us aware that we will die one day. As Becker puts it in *The Denial of Death*, “Man emerged from the instinctive thoughtless action of the lower animals and came to reflect on his condition. He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name. At the same time he was given consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay.”⁷⁶

However we might bracket the problem, some part of us knows that death is on the way, and it may arrive at random. One of Becker’s best commentators, Sheldon Solomon, lays out our predicament: We’re stuck with being “corporeal creatures—sentient pieces of bleeding, defecating, urinating, vomiting, exfoliating, perspiring, fornicating, menstruating, ejaculating, flatulence-producing, expectorating meat—that ultimately may be no more enduring than cockroaches or cucumbers. The continuous awareness of these circumstances within which we live, faced with inevitable death, compounded by the recognition of tragedy magnified by our carnal knowledge makes us humans vulnerable to potentially overwhelming terror at virtually any given moment. Yet people rarely experience that existential terror directly.”⁷⁷

What saves us, Solomon goes on to say in his summary of Becker, is the creation of culture. In other words, the same brain—from reptilian stem to frontal lobe—that got us into this mess in the first place is also awash with the capacity to generate meaning. The human animal that perceives the abyss below itself—thereby giving rise to dread—can deploy its intelligence to construct and maintain culture. From this angle, culture is a humanly created set of collective beliefs about the nature of reality, and a primary function of culture is to reduce the anxiety associated with the awareness of death. Cultures do this by providing us with world views, that is, “humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that are shared by individuals in a group that function to mitigate the horror and blunt the dread caused by knowledge of the human condition, that we all die.”⁷⁸

The worldviews endemic to culture provide formative narratives, creation stories not least of all. In tandem with these master, determining stories, cultures furnish hero-systems, and, implicitly or explicitly, the means for gaining and maintaining self-esteem. As Becker puts it in *The Denial of Death*, “It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.”⁷⁹

In our day, it is easy to see how fundamentalist belief systems around the globe meet the longing for literal afterlives that true believers seem to assume is their due—72 virgins in heaven, say, for a martyred terrorist male. But we can also see how cultures found all over the planet provide more symbolic ways for obtaining a sense of immortality. The fear of simply passing into a void can be assuaged, for example, by producing children and works of art that people hope will outlive them. In the modern world, where we are hardly limited to religions that practice immortality, we can contribute to science, or to the enlightenment project, or, more concretely, we can build commanding skyscrapers and the like. One can also get along far more modestly by following a strong leader or “by making some small but lasting contribution to ongoing life.”⁸⁰ In short, human cultures furnish social roles and provide prescriptions for conduct which, when met, establish the means for obtaining self-esteem, the overarching sense that one really is a person of value living in a world infused with meaning.

If culture performs a death-denying function, it should be possible, in carefully conducted observations, to detect such denial at work. That, at least, is the premise behind a new wave of research led by Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg. Inspired by Becker, these three scholars have spent over two decades conducting social scientific experiments to illustrate how awareness of death can provoke worldview defense. They have shown how what they call “mortality salience”—literally, thoughts about death—can trigger a range of emotions that affect people’s view of other races, religions, and nations. In more extreme situations, these researchers have shown, it is apparent that fear of death leads to the flagrant scapegoating of those who are different. One result of these extensive cross-cultural investigations, which have received

support from the American Psychological Association, is that Becker's *The Denial of Death* has re-emerged and is again receiving attention after two and a half decades of relative obscurity.¹¹

II. Tillich's Renewal

I want to turn now from Becker to Tillich. There are numerous places in Tillich's writings where he speaks forthrightly about the impact of facing the inevitability of death. In *The Courage to Be*, for example, he writes, "We are not always aware of our having to die, but in the light of the experience of having to die our whole life is experienced differently."¹² As with despair, we may continuously push awareness of death below the surface. But for any person who is awake in the modern world, it is bound to surface with urgency.

A cinematic illustration of Tillich's point can be seen in Ingmar Bergman's 1957 work, *Wild Strawberries*. In this film, we follow changes in the seemingly unfeeling character of Isak Borg, an elderly professor of medicine. After a nightmare sequence—one of the more horrific visions in all of cinema, to my mind—Borg is thrown into awareness of the utter emptiness of his life and of his impending death. This vividly rendered, hallucinogenic shock of non-being leads Borg to re-evaluate his life in its entirety as he journeys from Stockholm to a university to receive an honorary reward for lifetime achievement.

Tillich would appear to be aligned with the Bergman of *Wild Strawberries* and with a number of twentieth-century artists and philosophers in emphasizing the place of death in the human condition. In *The Courage to Be*, Tillich states that, "It is the anxiety of not being able to preserve one's own being which underlies every fear and is the frightening element in it."¹³ Tillich makes the same point in his more methodical analyses of ontological concepts. In Volume I of *Systematic Theology*, for example, he writes, "man realizes he is the prey of non-being."¹⁴ There is no smoothing over of our predicament in such formulations.

In part, Tillich may have derived his take on death from Kierkegaard's analysis of this topic. Tillich speaks about coming under the influence of Kierkegaard when he was a theological student between 1905 and 1907, and, in particular, he cites the "shaking impact" of Kierkegaard's "dialectical psychology."¹⁵ This is significant because it was Kierkegaard who breaks the spell of idealism by

showing that death for the existing individual cannot be a mere abstraction. As Johannes Climacus puts it in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, death may be something in general for systematians, "but for me, my dying is by no means something in general."¹⁶ "Suppose death," Climacus asks, "were insidious enough to come tomorrow?"¹⁷ Just as Becker was influenced by this side of Kierkegaard—in fact, Becker has a chapter on Kierkegaard in *The Denial of Death*—Tillich's treatment of the structure of finite freedom owes something to Kierkegaard and the insights forged by the Danish theologian in his efforts to jolt people into awareness of the impending threat and promise of nothingness.

Yet Tillich's recognition of the presence of death in human life stems more from the experience of war than from any intellectual forebear. When he claims in *The Courage to Be* that "the fear of death determines the element of anxiety in every fear," it is because he knew this fear first hand in the First World War. While serving as a Lutheran Chaplain in the German army, Tillich suffered two mental breakdowns. This cannot surprise anyone familiar with accounts of the horrors of the battlefields, of rats consuming the dead, of mud, disease, and fields of skeletal remains. To read about it is one thing, however. The intense shelling, the screams of the injured, and the dutiful performance of sermons over mass graves clearly shattered Tillich while the industrialized slaughter continued over four years. It shattered the belief system he carried into the war, and which had led him to speak in his official clerical capacity of "sacrifice for the Fatherland," "heroic action," and "immortal souls."¹⁸ Tillich's encounter with the demonic side of nationalism, in other words, destroyed personal illusions, and, at the same time, unveiled the broader ideological means for sentimentalizing, mystifying, and outright denying the reality of death in human life.

But Tillich's encounter with mass death is more than a point of note in his biography. It is, in effect, a starting point of his theology. For to theologize from below is first and foremost to begin with human being—and for this theologian human being is never *not* finite being, whether we happen to be talking about the essential or existential conditions of life. Differently put, when Tillich formulates theological answers to the questions arising from our fallen situation of estrangement, the theological answers do not remove the threat of non-being. In Tillich's system, when reason drives toward revelation, the ground of being is experienced ecstatically, but

as both fundamental threat and ultimate support. When Tillich posits the symbol of “new being,” its fragmentary manifestation is stressed. And when he discusses eternal life as a qualitative dimension of this life, he is openly rejecting what he calls the “myths of immortality” traditionally associated with the term.¹⁹

If Tillich battled against biblical literalism and its misuse of notions like eternal life, it was in no small measure because he knew its consequences. Alongside “the glory of religion,” he writes in *Theology of Culture*, “lies its shame.”²⁰

III. An Apophatic Way

A number of the insights of Tillich and Becker might be brought together under the aegis of contemporary apophatic theology. Apophatic thought—best represented, perhaps, by the figure of Meister Eckhart—has long worked in the shadows of the dominant dispensations of Christian theology in the West. In contrast to dogmatic systems that confidently name God as starting point, apophatic theology, as a species of negative theology, begins by denying “all descriptions and attributes as predicated of God.”²¹

The advent of post-structuralism in the latter twentieth century has renewed the apophatic standpoint by showing the tendency of language to turn away from what it represents, and by exposing the *aporias* of language. But as it finds new life today, apophatic theology does not need to limit itself to what has become routine poststructuralist linguistic critique. It can take on a broader mandate to give the negative its due. Such an undertaking is evident in William Franke’s two-volume study from 2007, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. Over the course of this work it becomes evident that there is an existential facet to the act of unsaying. In my view, this is also apparent in Michael Sells book, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, even though the author chooses “to bracket the concept of experience.”²² One implication of these innovative works is that apophatic theology can do far more than mimic poststructuralist deferrals of meaning. Renewed apophatic theology can evoke a sense of mystery in new ways, while also incorporating insights from the repressed other of post-structuralism, namely, existential awareness. In other words, if giving the negative its due means deconstructing transcendental authority and recognizing the limits of all modes of

representation, it also means facing finitude—Larkin’s “no tricks” kind.

Calls to face up to absence in language and in lived experience have come from a number of directions. For example, they are part of the modern impetus to recover thinkers like Eckhart, with his prayer to God “to be free of God”²³ when God has been propounded as unduly and oppressively present. Such a call can be heard as well in the work of Douglas John Hall, who says theology needs to reinstate what he terms the “banished negative, that presentment of Nothingness at the very core of things.”²⁴

Reengagement with Becker’s work would compliment this end, for Becker shows how we keep presentment of nothingness at bay through constructed beliefs, including beliefs about the value of our scholarly projects. He lays bare the unconscious mechanisms behind immortality ideologies, whether they fuel ethnic cleansing or underwrite the self-image of academics. Most urgently, he shows why so many people follow toxic, authoritarian leaders who promise triumph over evil. In *The Denial of Death*, he writes, “Whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything.”²⁵ These could be watchwords for depth sociology or depth psychology, but they should also wake up theology when it traffics in terms like “the absence of meaning,” while leaving out the dread entailed in the experience.

In the case of Tillich, contemporary apophatic theology can rediscover a neglected angle of vision. John Thatmanil has done this in part by showing how Tillich’s characterization of God as the ground of being is often misread as foundational metaphysics. In the rush to a non-reified deity, Tillich often gets pegged as one more purveyor of Western logocentrism.²⁶ Yet, Tillich does not treat God as the edifice of pure being unquestionably in back of it all, forever identical with itself. In *The Courage to Be*, he writes, “We could not even think of ‘being’ without a double negation: being must be thought of as the negation of the negation of being.”²⁷

This is the crux. The God who appears in the midst of a radical encounter with loss is bound to be different from the Supreme Being of theism. Meaning that may arise at moments when meaninglessness is momentarily overturned is at odds with calculating reason and designs for self-preservation.²⁸ If there is an element of certainty in genuine faith, it does not eradicate emptiness, it does not stabilize the

displacements of language, and it does not leave suffering quarantined.

Theology that would give the negative its due can take important cues from Becker and Tillich. In the case of Christian theology, for example, greater honesty about death would ensue. Concerning the death of Jesus, for instance, John Dominic Crossan has noted that this event was, among other things, a harrowing political execution in an ancient police state. Crossan has pointed to archeological evidence that suggests, under these conditions, the body of Jesus, following crucifixion, would likely have been left to be eaten by wild dogs.²⁹ This account may be an affront to half-mythological beliefs in resuscitation; on the other hand, it opens up an understanding of the symbol of resurrection less encumbered by immortality delusions.

In this discussion of Becker, Tillich, and apophatic theology, I have left out positive factors galore. In the case of Becker, I did not mention, for example, his passionate reading of the Psalms, his passages on the wonder of life, his legacy as a teacher, or his well-developed sense of humor.³⁰ In the case of Tillich, I did not mention his insights into the transforming power of healing and grace, his extraordinary capacity to embrace life, or the “blessedness in anticipated fulfillment” he associated with faith.³¹ The emphasis here has been on the negative, but with a hopeful end in view. It’s an approach expressed in words that Becker attributed to Thomas Hardy and that he was fond of quoting: “If a way to the better there be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst.”³²

The worst is that our awareness of death provokes lethal adherence to fixed doctrines. Ways to the better could take the form of cultural and religious practices that made it possible for most people to find the value and meaning that make up self-esteem—without creating scapegoats, impoverished classes, or resident hate objects. Ways to the better could thrive in a culture that acknowledged the unknown and permitted reinterpretation of its own symbols, a culture of religious depth that would not disguise the “fear of death behind our normal functioning.”³³ As Simon Critchley states the matter in *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, “We cannot return the unasked-for gifts of nature and culture. Nor can we jump over the shadow of our mortality. But we can transform the manner in which we accept those gifts and we can stand more fully in the light that casts that shadow.”³⁴

¹ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 190.

² Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (New York: Hendricks House, 1960), 523.

³ See “A Conversation with Ernest Becker (1974)” in *The Ernest Becker Reader*, ed. Daniel Liechty (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 225.

⁴ Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 69.

⁷ Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 5.

¹⁰ Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 20.

¹¹ Terror Management Theory, the term now regularly applied to analytical work of Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, initially arose as a joke. In an interesting confirmation of a key premise of the theory, this term gained currency because audiences and respondents liked the idea of holding sway over terror. See *In The Wake of 9/11*, 7-8. For an outstanding documentary that covers this research and brings Becker’s central ideas to light, see *Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality*, dir. Patrick Shen and Greg Bennick (Transcendental Media, 2005).

¹² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 196.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 37.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁸ See Matthew Lon Weaver, “Thrown to the Boundary: Tillich’s World War I Chaplaincy Sermons,” *Bulletin of the North American Paul Tillich Society*. 32:2 (Spring 2006): 23-26.

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *Political Expectation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 156.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 9.

²¹ William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, vol. I (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1.

²² Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 214.

²³ Quoted in Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 188.

²⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 135.

²⁵ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 283-84.

²⁶ John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 95.

²⁷ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 179.

²⁸ In *The Denial of Death*, Becker writes, "there is a driving force behind a mystery that we cannot understand, and it includes more than reason alone" (284).

²⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 127. This point is also made by James P. Carse: "What is often overlooked is that in the gospel account Jesus dies a real

death. . . . But the habit of Christians to interpret the [resurrection] event as a guarantee of immortality has no basis in the New Testament." See *The Religious Case Against Belief* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 170-71.

³⁰ Becker talks about his daily reading of the Psalms in "Letters from Ernest" collected by his friend, Harvey Bates, *Christian Century*, vol. 94 (March 9, 1977), 217-227. Lest anyone think that Becker's focus on death left him morbid, the contrary is true. On a personal note, I can report that when I was a graduate student at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, Canada, the institution where Becker last taught, several of his former colleagues recalled his capacity for humor and laughter.

³¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), 419.

³² Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), ix.

³³ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 16.

³⁴ Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 248.

TILlich IN DIALOGUE WITH ADORNO

BRYAN WAGONER

Paul Tillich's personal and professional life overlapped with those of many of the so-called "Frankfurt School" members, first in Frankfurt, and again in New York during the years of the Third Reich.¹ In 1928 Tillich was appointed chair of philosophy at the young University of Frankfurt. In the following year, Tillich was instrumental in the selection of Max Horkheimer as the new Director of the *Institute for Social Research*,² often referred to as the "Frankfurt School" of "critical theory." From 1929-1933 Tillich was actively involved, both professionally and personally, with most of the members and associates of the Frankfurt School.³ This placed Tillich squarely within an impressive intellectual matrix which included intellectuals like Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and on whose periphery were thinkers like Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, and Erich Fromm. Tillich supervised Adorno's *Habilitation* on Kierkegaard's aesthetics⁴ and was influential in the eventual hiring of Adorno at Frankfurt. The

two reconnected in New York and remained friends and correspondents throughout their lives.

Although Tillich and nearly all of the Frankfurt School theorists had pursued a mediating position between the ailing Weimar Republic and communism, it was of course the nationalist fascists who were ultimately successful in unifying Germany. When the Nazis gained power in 1933, they immediately purged leftist intellectuals and Jews; Tillich and several Frankfurt School members were removed from their state university teaching posts quickly. The Tillichs soon left Germany for New York, followed by Horkheimer and later Adorno. Many of the writings of these thinkers in the years leading up to 1933 denounce both National Socialism and the insidious surge in anti-Semitism, raising intriguing historical and theoretical questions concerning these three thinkers' shared intellectual presuppositions, dialectical commitments, notions of justice and views on a 'mediating' socialism.

In addition to the historical synchronicity, professional overlaps and life-long friendships, these thinkers share Tillich's socialist convictions and critical social conscience. In the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer, these shared presuppositions are central tools intended to function to combat destabilizing forces of barbarism, especially the "unreason"

reflected in National Socialism, and attempt to help in reclaiming the Enlightenment legacy from empiricists and positivists. In the original 1944 Preface to their co-written volume *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer clearly articulate their goals—arguably the goals of the Frankfurt School as a whole as well as Tillich’s to an extent: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”⁵ This text remains surprisingly prescient 65 years later.

One of the central concerns of Tillich in the late 1920s through the end of the war is virtually identical to that of Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School—what is happening to humanity in modernity and why?—but their respective conceptions of what ‘humanity’ is, the limitations humanity faces, and the possibilities for seeking emancipation simultaneously reveal sharp lines of contrast and fertile ground for constructive engagement. This paper will focus on the interaction of Tillich and Adorno, particularly concerning anthropology.

Like Tillich, Theodor Adorno attempted to articulate the conditions for the possibility of human emancipation; the challenge is doing so in a way that takes full account of the limitations of human nature and the uses and abuses of rationality. Part of my goal here is to engage Tillich’s early political theology, perhaps best seen in his religious socialism, in conversation with the quasi-Jewish, yet secular political and critical theory of Adorno. I am deliberately excluding perhaps the most important text of Tillich’s political theology, *The Socialist Decision*, in order to focus here on texts of the late 1930s and 40s.

To that end, I will begin here to address some of the differences between Tillich and Adorno, while also identifying a comprehensive shared framework of meaning. With Adorno and most of the Frankfurt School members, Tillich shared an interest in dialectics, Hegel, Marx, neo-Marxism, Weber, and Freud, a common goal of social emancipation, and common foes in most forms of capitalism and in National Socialism. This shared framework is perhaps most clearly seen in their remarkably similar philosophies of history, drawing heavily on Hegel and Marx and influenced by Lukács’s Weberian reading of that philosophical tradition. Indicative of the commonalities is the philosophy of history shared by Tillich and Adorno, and the importance of the Marxian notion of *Entfremdung*, which literally means “alienation,” though in the case of these thinkers, it might

better be translated as “dehumanization.” Equally important to Tillich and Adorno was the goal of human emancipation in the face of such dehumanization. Exiled from their native country in the midst of World War II, these concerns were more than abstractions.

Adorno and Tillich share a common Marxian assumption about the ways in which human subjectivity is historically conditioned by class, technology, and progress. Each sought to articulate norms of liberation both for society and social philosophy; this is perhaps seen most clearly in their structurally parallel, yet distinct notions of the capacities and limitations of human nature and the limitations under which human rationality operates in seeking emancipation.⁶ Rejecting Hegelian essentialism, both Adorno and Tillich maintain that concepts can never reach the objects or ideas they purport to represent; there is always an epistemic gulf. For Tillich, this meant examining the fractured *imago Dei* whereby God was thematized as the ground of being, while Adorno’s skepticism concerning the existence and knowability of human nature is influenced in part by the Jewish prohibition against idolatry.

In this paper, I will briefly examine and explore this fertile intellectual and theological terrain in large part through Tillich’s 1943 essay “Man and Society in Religious Socialism,” and an important essay/letter written in response to Tillich by Adorno. The latter is a previously unknown 26-page letter from Adorno to Tillich, published with introductory remarks by Erdmann Sturm in 1994, evincing Adorno’s strong critique of Tillich’s anthropological assumptions. This document casts valuable light on a profound period of transition, both in Western culture generally, and in Tillich’s life and thought, *vis-à-vis* Adorno in particular. Adorno’s critique was written as a letter to Tillich, but Adorno first sent it to Max Horkheimer for critiques and revisions. As far as we know, Horkheimer found the letter too acerbic and could not agree with Adorno’s critique, so it is unlikely that Tillich ever knew of this letter, and perhaps never knew the full critique therein.⁷ This paper, therefore, entails a level of creative interpretation, attempting to pull together threads of a conversation that may never have occurred.

Although Tillich agrees with many of Adorno’s assessments and critiques of the instrumental rationality in modernity, herein lies one of the most crucial differences between Tillich on one side and Adorno (and other members of the Frankfurt School) on the other. Tillich asserts that reason can—and indeed

must—be grounded in a metaphysical or religious presupposition; his ideal is “theonomous” reason.⁸ Tillich suggests that Adorno operates with a tacit, unacknowledged, and possibly mythological metaphysics, which, without a foundation in concepts like “transcendence” and “ultimacy,” finally has no critical backbone,⁹ although both have a profound awareness of the aesthetic realm as at least a subjective grounding. Although I am focusing primarily on an anthropological disagreement here, this is itself a reflection of a broader epistemological conversation.

Tillich agrees with Adorno’s indictment of any religious or metaphysical orientation which rests on claims of secure epistemic access to the divine as an instrument of the forces of domination. The prevailing scientific and particularly empiricist account in the early twentieth century saw human nature as something fundamentally knowable and reducible to data; this mechanized scientific view diminished subjectivity and led to an atomistic individualism. Rejecting empiricism and Comtean positivism in “Subject and Object,”¹⁰ Adorno realized that critical theory must develop a new epistemology and anthropology, as the first step in what Max Horkheimer called a necessary and “radical reconsideration...of the knowing individual as such.”¹¹ Yet Adorno fundamentally rejects the development of any “positive” anthropology.¹²

The social analysis of Adorno is grounded in anthropological concerns, in part because he claims to reject any metaphysical grounding instructive of what humanity is or might ideally be; he rejects any essentialized human nature. Following on the work of other Frankfurt School thinkers in the 1930s, Adorno examines the individual *qua* member of a social group in his study of the “authoritarian personality” in the 1940s.

Tillich’s essay, “Man and Society in Religious Socialism,” seems to have been part of a larger working-group project wrestling with anthropology, of which Adorno almost certainly was a part.¹³ Adorno’s *Entwurf* [Design] suggests that this anthropological disagreement was part of a larger, ongoing debate about ontology. Tillich claims that humanity is marked by both contingency and transcendence: “Man is a being which is able to have historical change... Man not only *has* history but he also knows that he has history.”¹⁴ Positing that, “freedom is the possibility of transcending a given situation,”¹⁵ Tillich goes on to suggest that freedom implies an inherent insecurity because freedom is experientially finite.

Encompassing both contingency and transcendence, Tillich makes the quasi-essentializing claim that humans, or perhaps even human nature, can be defined as finite freedom. This apparent essentializing of human nature bears the brunt of Adorno’s critique, examined below. Tillich readily acknowledges the inherent problems with a doctrine of humanity, noting that such doctrines “cannot escape finitude, error, and tragedy,”¹⁶ but he understands the attempt as necessary nonetheless. Although Tillich attempts to proffer a positive description of human nature, he understands the tension between human freedom and finitude—indeed, they are polarities¹⁷—to be tragic. Humans are finite, “and if that which is finite acts in an infinite way it becomes tragic. The tragic is the finite, exercising an infinite freedom.”¹⁸ Tillich’s understanding of humanity as finite freedom, although tragic, “shows also the way to action.”¹⁹

Tillich continues, noting that human nature has a structure of not only of “finite freedom,” but also of “creative freedom,”²⁰ where creativity is characterized as the upshot of (tragic) finitude. Although it is tragic, finite freedom suggests, if not its own solution, at least the method to authentic action under the conditions of such freedom. Tillich writes: “Every act of freedom is finite but as a creative act it also has infinite significance.”²¹ Despite the finite and tragic nature of such freedom, it is also creative and active, and creative free action has “the full weight of the participation in divine creativity. This feeling alone can overcome the trend towards resignation and cynicism which is the shadow of Utopianism.”²²

In the broader social context, there is also a principle of “ultimate justice” with equality as its goal and which ensures each person her/his dignity.²³ Dehumanization for Tillich, in some ways like Marxian *Entfremdung*, reflects the denial of the natural human right to actualize one’s natural creative freedom. Thus the rampant power inequalities of modernity, whether political (in Fascism) or economic (capitalist) or social possibilities (class, education), are the modern sources of alienation and dehumanization,²⁴ reflecting finite freedom and its limitations in modernity. Religious socialism, as a Christian political theology, reflects Tillich’s understanding of the way forward in authentic and creative free action, even in the midst of dehumanization.

A very cursory analysis of Adorno’s critique is all I can address here, but it cuts to the heart of the debate between the two thinkers. I will be exploring it more fully elsewhere. Tillich’s claim cited above,

that “the structure of man is the structure of ‘finite freedom’” is met almost immediately in Adorno’s *Entwurf* where Adorno pointedly argues: “Every sentence which takes the form of ‘the human is...’ implies that a content is already written through just this form: the human person is filth [*der Mensch ist Dreck*].”²⁵ Positive and essentializing claims about human nature have been used and abused by the Nazis, *inter al.*, and Adorno is rightly concerned about such claims. Adorno suggests that there is a similar and direct connection between religion and anthropology that can only be described as repressive.

Any anthropology contains disguised power dynamics, according to Adorno: “The logical control of the individual through its subsumption under the form of human nature involves societal control.”²⁶ Although Adorno prefaces his critique with the stated desire to not resume an ongoing debate about ontology,²⁷ it is precisely on the basis of ontology that Adorno critiques Tillich. Adorno implies that Tillich tries to ground the idea of the human person in the idea of being itself. Adorno writes: “Bringing the idea of the person back to the existence of being is a gesture of authority which is to be greeted with contempt in the convenient pre-decision which dissects the human.”²⁸

With Adorno, Tillich agrees that claims concerning human nature—or such denials—are always already claims of power and authority, but the two differ in their conclusions. Tillich says this is a responsibility; such claims will inevitably be made and an elite avoidance will accomplish little. Those who are aware of the implicit power dynamics have perhaps a special responsibility and opportunity.

Tillich points out that while both Barthians and Marxians claim to reject any positive anthropology, they both in fact have an implicit operative anthropology. Barthians claim to be able to diagnose a clear problem in human nature, though they claim that human nature cannot authentically be known apart from the “cure” of the divine Word. Marxians similarly describe both the de-humanizing aspects of modernity and an ideal revolutionary human society, using both as a critique of other operative anthropologies. While both Barthians and Marxians claim not to have operative anthropologies, Tillich argues that every ideology reflects anthropological presuppositions, whether implicit or explicit, static or dynamic. But, Tillich writes, “they do not want to confess [their anthropology] for reasons of political or religious strategy.”²⁹

The anthropology of Tillich is admittedly more essentialized than that of Adorno, and Tillich does maintain that humanity can be understood to an extent because humans are made in *imago Dei*. Yet Tillich’s primary anthropological orientation is more focused on the experiential nature of finite freedom than a social concept of humanity, and his theological anthropology likewise focuses primarily on the individual, suggesting three modes of human existence.³⁰ Adorno appropriately critiques Tillich’s analysis of the individual at the expense of the group.

If “essence” reflects an essentialized definition of human nature, “existence” describes the human experience of other humans, and is of course subjective in nature. That said, however, Adorno and others who reject any knowable essence of human nature nevertheless experience and claim to know something about the existence of human nature. Tillich notes that every society and culture, including modern liberalism, presupposes knowledge of the structure of humanity.³¹

For Adorno, repression and *Entfremdung* reflect the knowable existence of human nature, much as for Tillich, dehumanization and estrangement through sin reflects the knowable existence of human nature. The heart of the debate is whether knowing or making claims concerning the existence of human nature (as alienated, etc.) necessarily implies an essence over and against which to judge contemporary existence wanting and in need of transformation. In other words, what is human nature estranged from? Tillich notes that even “Marx could not talk permanently about the dehumanization in early capitalism without a vague picture of a really human society.”³²

As Tillich notes at several points in this brief essay, he is merely pointing out the ways in which critics of any positive anthropology nevertheless *presuppose* an anthropological norm against which current existence is judged. Although in this essay, presented in this form to a Christian audience, Tillich begins with essence and moves to existence, there would seem to be little problem when, in dialogue with Adorno, for example, Tillich were to begin with the agreed-upon structures of current human existence and move from there to his Christian faith in a created human essence. The “positive” anthropology of Tillich is not so much an essentialized ontological norm (as Adorno suggests) as it is the (created) standard against which current existence (dehumanization, etc.) is measured. Regardless of

the starting point, the “third” part of humanity, beyond essence and existence, presupposes both.

There is an inherent though neutral insecurity associated with finite freedom, though Tillich laments the existential “angst of our present social order, which is rooted in the threat of being prevented from any actualization of finite freedom and of being thrown in to the horror of meaninglessness.”³³ As a political theology, Tillich argues that religious socialism sees such angst manifest on both an individual and a social level. As his starting point, Adorno understands this angst to function primarily on the social level since he attempts to avoid any reifying concepts of human nature.

On the individual level, according to Tillich, angst cannot be overcome because human freedom will always remain finite and it is not unique to modernity, but the social level can and should be questioned and critiqued, given the essential nature of humanity as “finite freedom,” and as a hopeful benchmark for concrete change. By comparison, Adorno seems to err on the utopian side of hoping for a future in which even social angst can be overcome.³⁴ Recognizing the effects of social structures such as active and definitive sources of sin and estrangement on individual agency, Tillich’s anthropology is able to locate a greater degree of agency than can Adorno, and with greater agency, there is greater potential for resistance in the individual.³⁵

While Adorno’s critique of Tillich’s individualist anthropology has some merit, Tillich rejects atomistic individualism and as a Christian theologian, his anthropology is decidedly positive and hopeful compared to the often-bleak pessimism of Adorno. In Tillich’s Christian anthropological terms, sin is a denial or repression of the tragic freedom that is always already a central component of human persons who are able to posit themselves and their own histories against an infinite horizon. Adorno’s critique is significant nonetheless; he reads Tillich as overly focused on the individual, which occludes the ways humans act within and adapt to social structures. Tillich’s concern with the social sphere³⁶ almost always begins with the individual *qua* individual initially, while his analysis of the individual *qua* social being is secondary.

Rationality is of course a determinative aspect of anthropology, and here I am looking at human rationality in terms of an ideal versus the actuality, given individual and structural limitations on reason. Perhaps the central point of disagreement, particularly between Tillich and Adorno, is whether such

limitations on human rationality are perceived to be external or internal. I do not have the space to develop the claim here, but I argue that Adorno (and others, especially Horkheimer) did not sufficiently acknowledge their quasi-metaphysical assumptions. They did not reflect sufficiently upon the panoply of *internal* limitations on humanity and rationality, imposed in part by social structures over which individuals have little control. The lack of focus on internal agential limitations in the works of both Adorno and Horkheimer seem to ironically suggest a more essentialized or reified notion of reason; Tillich’s conception of reason seems far more dialectical by comparison.

Because the human structure of finite freedom reveals that humanity is “inescapably...related to the infinite,”³⁷ Tillich’s anthropological sketch raises the question of reuniting essence and existence. It seems that in the creative human act (necessity) of facing this question, we are met by God’s answer through the method of correlation. Understood in the Tillichian sense of God as the “ground of being,” this appears to be the answer implied by the question of human finitude, just as the awareness that humans are finite suggests an awareness of infinity as its antipode. And since all knowledge is mediated and limited by finitude, what we can say and know about God or the infinite or the ground of being, is always symbolic. This creative, yet finite freedom that characterizes human experience requires “the courage to be.”

If Adorno had been more willing to engage Tillich’s anthropology and had focused more directly on the internal limitations of human rationality and possibilities for resistance, particularly concerning estrangement and the demonic, his critique may have been substantially more trenchant. On the other hand, if Tillich had had a less idealistic notion of human nature and had addressed questions of social agency more directly, I believe his theology would have been strengthened. The expected future in Tillich’s religious critical theory functions as a source of transcendence and orientation for justice—what Tillich called a “dialectical eschatology”—which is at least potentially capable of funding a more potent critique of the status quo than can a secular critical theory. Significantly, Tillich’s constructive approach to an anthropology oriented towards emancipation recognizes both internal and external limitations on the human person and on human rationality.

I have only been able to begin suggesting here that when placed in conversation with one another,

the written legacy, however fragmentary, of the encounters and debates between Adorno (and other members of the Frankfurt School, notably Horkheimer) and Tillich can productively supplement the evolving positions of one another, even if only to sharpen conceptual impasses and help the other further refine their own stated agendas and aims. My claim, which I will more fully develop in another context, is that Tillich's anthropology, with its religiously inspired categories, seeks to achieve the goals of later "critical theory" in a way that offers a more dialectical conception of reason than that of Adorno, et. al., insofar as Tillich proposes a more nuanced and complex conception of both agency and freedom, which better facilitates and enables the type of emancipation that is the goal of both thinkers.

¹ The continuing intellectual and personal connections between these thinkers during and after the war are even less well known and researched, though it lies outside the immediate scope of this paper.

² Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 117.

³ See, inter. al., Pauck, pp. 115 ff.

⁴ Pauck, 116.

⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

⁶ My claim concerning the perceived limitations on rationality in Adorno and Tillich lies beyond the scope of this paper but I am developing it elsewhere.

⁷ *Zur Testgeschichte*, editorial preface to "Man and Society in Religious Socialism," in MW/HW 3, 487-8.

⁸ Theonomy is a mediating position between autonomy, on the one hand, and heteronomy, or between an isolating individualism and a collective mentality which can play into Fascist manipulation. Theonomy recognizes that personal identity is rooted in God and identity is thus united with the 'ground of its being.'

⁹ "Even a critical social theory cannot avoid an 'ultimate' in which its criticism is rooted because reason itself is rooted therein." Paul Tillich, Review of Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*) 9 (1941): 476-8.

¹⁰ To distinguish the work of the *Institut* from Comte and Saint Simon's positivism, Horkheimer referred to their work as 'materialism' up until his 1937 essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory."

¹¹ Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory*, 199.

¹² Martin Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 266.

¹³ The immediate context of the essay was a presentation Tillich gave to the "National Council of Religion in Higher Education," in Haverford, Penn., in September, 1943. It was initially published in *Christianity and Society*, a journal edited by Reinhold Niebuhr.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, "Man and Society in Religious Socialism," in *Main Works/Haupt Werke*, vol. 3, ed. by Carl Heinz Ratschow (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 491. Henceforth MSRS.

¹⁵ MSRS, 493.

¹⁶ MSRS, 491.

¹⁷ MSRS, 493.

¹⁸ MSRS, 493.

¹⁹ MSRS, 494.

²⁰ MSRS, 496.

²¹ MSRS, 494.

²² MSRS, 494.

²³ MSRS, 496.

²⁴ MSRS, 497.

²⁵ My translation of Theodor W. Adorno, "Theodor W. Adorno contra Paul Tillich: Eine bisher unveröffentlichte Tillich-Kritik Adornos aus dem Jahre 1944," hrsg. von Erdmann Sturm, in *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologie Geschichte*, bd. 3, 1996, s. 281. This essay is also known as the "Entwurf contra Paulum."

²⁶ *Entwurf*, 281.

²⁷ *Entwurf*, 281.

²⁸ *Entwurf*, 281.

²⁹ MSRS, 491.

³⁰ The three are: "essential goodness, existential estrangement, and the possibility of a 'third' beyond essence and existence. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 119.

³¹ MSRS, 495, 497.

³² MSRS, 491.

³³ MSRS, 497.

³⁴ This is an oversimplification of Adorno's nuanced understanding of "utopia," which lies outside of the scope of this paper.

³⁵ Tillich delineates at least four challenges or limitations to human rationality: sin, finitude, estrangement, and the "demonic."

³⁶ Tillich particularly addresses the social dimension in his work in "religious socialism," and preeminently in his 1933 *Socialist Decision*.

³⁷ MSRS, 501.

Coming the Fall Bulletin: the complete program of the NAPTS meeting and AAR Tillich sessions in Montreal

**ANXIETY AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER:
TILlich AND LEVINAS ON THE ORIGIN OF
QUESTIONING**

NATHAN ERIC DICKMAN

Abstract

With almost a century of historical distance between Heidegger's retrieval of the question of being and contemporary concern about the Other, we have accrued invaluable experiences for critical leverage about what it is to ask one another questions. I offer a sketch aimed at adapting Tillich's theological system grounded in existential questioning to today by juxtaposing him with Levinas' philosophical ethics. Tillich and Levinas provide motive for taking seriously a reflection on questioning. In the case of Tillich, questions constitute a crucial moment in the dialogue between our contemporary existential situation and religious symbols, or what he called the method of correlation. Furthermore, Tillich locates in the very structure of questioning the germ of our participation in our essential nature despite existential disruption. Beneath his more provocative and prophetic discourse on the absolute desolation and height of the Other, Levinas sees in questions a different kind of possibility. It is not our essential and existential selves, but oneself and the absolutely Other who come together in the question yet retain their infinite difference. This relationship, Levinas insists, has its most rigorous determination only in an ethics that cuts through ontology.

Heidegger is the immediate predecessor from whom both Tillich and Levinas inherit a predilection for reflection on questioning. What is at stake is not merely the legacy of Heidegger's construal of questioning, but, more importantly here, the fundamental sources Tillich and Levinas posit as the origin of our questioning.

The events surrounding 9/11 and the war in Iraq mark the culmination of a shift to a new era. The contemporary era defined by the enigma of the "Other" has eclipsed the era of existential crisis (Klemm 1987, 455). The question "What is the meaning of life?" no longer has the existential import it had during the climax of Existentialism.¹ In recent decades, many have seen in that question not an expression of shock at the "ontological difference," but instead a rhetorical indulgence performed by solitary elites in their leisure.² For many, the most

urgent and existentially wrought question today is "How can we live in this world together?" In other words, how are we going to reach an understanding with one another such that it mediates our differences without canceling them? This is the question pursued by leading contemporary thinkers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as Jürgen Habermas (1984), Luce Irigaray (1993), and Richard Rorty (1999).

Despite the change of eras, we are well served by remaining in conversation with Paul Tillich, whose open theological system is capable of adaptation to today's questions. Tillich's theological system is, as Robert P. Scharlemann underscores, simultaneously open and systematic: avoiding the absolutism and exclusivism associated with traditional systematics, and succeeding in "defining the presence and object which prevent ontology and theology from becoming nihilistic or arbitrary" (1969, 189). Meaningfulness and the enigma of the Other do not make up an exclusive disjunction, but, rather, a productive tension. Tillich provides warrant for persisting in a "both/ and" hermeneutical form of thinking. I here offer a sketch aimed at adapting Tillich to today by juxtaposing him with Levinas's philosophical ethics.

A productive theme for this endeavor, among others,³ is the activity of questioning. Tillich and Levinas provide motive for taking seriously a double reflection on this activity: on both its structure and its origin. In the case of Tillich, this is obvious in that questions constitute a crucial moment in the theological practice of fostering a productive dialogue between our contemporary existential situation and religious symbols, or what he called the "method of correlation." Furthermore, and more importantly for our purposes, Tillich locates in the very structure of questioning the germ of our participation in our essential nature, despite existential disruption.

While buried beneath his more provocative and prophetic discourse on the absolute desolation and height of the Other, Levinas sees in questions a different kind of possibility to hold unity and difference in a tenuous balance. It is not our essential and existential selves, but oneself and the absolutely Other who come together in the question yet retain their infinite difference. As Levinas puts the matter, "A relationship and a non-relationship. Does the question not signify that?" (1998b, 107). This relationship, Levinas insists, has its most rigorous determination only in an ethics that cuts through and reaches beyond ontology.⁴

Heidegger is the immediate predecessor from whom both Tillich and Levinas inherit a predilection for reflection on questioning. With almost a century of historical distance between Heidegger's retrieval of the question of being and contemporary concern about the Other, we have accrued invaluable experiences for critical leverage. What is at stake is not merely the legacy of Heidegger's construal of questioning, but, more importantly here, the fundamental sources Tillich and Levinas posit as the origin of our questioning.

In what follows, we will first reexamine Tillich's ontological analysis of questioning. I will show that it is inadequate to the degree that it neglects to take seriously the fact that questions are not merely cognitive processes performed and undergone by the solitary individual, but are essentially a way of communicating with and listening to another. Second, we will turn to examine Levinas' construal of questioning as advancing a form of discourse in which we preserve relationship with others across an abyss, first through the Other's calling us into question and then by our responding to the Other with our own questions. However, as I will show, Levinas is not neutral with regard to his characterization of the Other's questions. In fact, these are not questions at all, but commands. Along the way, we will identify the origins of questioning posited by Tillich and Levinas to determine whether they make possible the kind of question we ask when we listen to another, or what I call "genuine questions." I take Tillich's own self-conception and Levinas's idea of responsibility as warrants for the construction of an alternative to their positions about the origin of questioning, and I suggest that we conceive of the origin of our genuine questioning as itself communicated to us in the form of a genuine question.

I. The Ontological Question

The basic ontological question has been articulated in a variety of ways: Why is there something; why not nothing?⁵ What is the meaning of being?⁶ Or Tillich's preferred wording, "What is being itself?"⁷ The basic ontological question is, Tillich writes, "the ultimate question, although fundamentally it is the expression of a state of existence rather than a formulated question" (1951, 164). The specific state so expressed is "anxiety," the state in which we are aware of our finitude,⁸ of our being limited by nonbeing (Tillich 1951, 189). We experience this realization of anxiety as a "metaphysical"

(*ibid.*, 163) or "ontological" (*ibid.*, 113) shock, or the "shock of nonbeing" (*ibid.*, 186), which is concretized along temporal lines of existence in our anticipation of our having to die (*ibid.*, 193), in the realization of death as the "possible impossibility" of our existence.⁹ The act of asking the question, then, *articulates* the shock;¹⁰ the force of nonbeing, however, *produces* the question insofar as it produces the shock.¹¹ Thus, for Tillich, the dawning of nonbeing is the motivation and origination of our act of asking the question.¹² Without such a threat, asking the question would not occur to us.¹³

What is being-itself? "Being" cannot be defined because it does not admit of division by genera and species. If it can even be considered a concept, it is the most universal. This does not make ontology impossible, however, because we have available to our thinking a number of different concepts which, while less universal than being, are more universal than any ontic concept or concept designating a realm of particular beings (1951, 164). While Tillich distinguishes between four levels of these universal concepts, only the first level—as he writes, "*the basic ontological structure which is the implicit condition of the ontological question*" (*ibid.*; original emphasis)—concerns us here. Because, as Tillich says, analysis of the question is the very first ontological task, let us examine his precise wording in detail:

The ontological question *presupposes an asking subject and an object about which the question is asked*; it presupposes the subject-object structure of being, which in turn *presupposes the self-world structure as the basic articulation of being*. The self having a world to which it belongs—this highly dialectical structure—logically and experientially precedes all other structures (Tillich 1951, 164; emphasis added).

Tillich's words here merit repetition. The question presupposes "an asking *subject*" and "an *object* about which the question is asked." This wording, however, requires serious qualification in light of Tillich's essay, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*. In differentiating between ontology and biblical personalism, Tillich argues persuasively that, as he writes, "Subject and object, in ontological research, are, so to speak, at one and the same place. *They do not speak* to each other" (1955, 34; emphasis added). Insofar as asking a question, whether profound or mundane, is a form of speaking and not merely a form of cognition, then a subject does not ask a question about an object.¹⁴

By conjoining “ontology” and “questioning” in the ontological question, we run the risk of conflating the order of cognition or consciousness with the order of language in its use—what we can refer to with Paul Ricoeur as “discourse” (1977, 7). Thinking about being (ontology) is a mode of intentionality where the “*noesis*” and the “*noema*” (Husserl 1983)¹⁵ are in a reflective sense one and the same—the “I” thinks about itself. The ontological *question*, however, is a mode of discourse where that mode of intentionality is its subject matter (i.e. reflexivity). Embedding ontology within discourse gives hermeneutics priority in any ontological endeavor and supports Hans-Georg Gadamer’s thesis that language is the horizon of any hermeneutic ontology (2004). Keeping the domain of discourse relatively distinct from the domain of reflective cognition is what Tillich usually does in separately addressing the question of reason and the question of being, or the subject-object structure and the self-world structure, respectively.

Despite Tillich’s usual distinction, I have a misgiving, and a remark by Scharlemann helps bring my misgiving to light:

[Tillich’s] basic ontological structure is constituted by the two terms of “self” and “world”; his analysis of the cross implies a polarity, equally basic, between the freedom of an I-subject and a he-subject. This discrepancy can be remedied, I think, only by an analysis of the ontological structure which has *three* basic terms rather than two. The structure is constituted not by the self-world polarity but by a self-world-other-self triad.... (Scharlemann 1969, 201; emphasis added)

While Scharlemann argues that Tillich’s analysis of the symbol of the cross—that it can be wholly true in one’s affirmation and in another’s denial, and thus is unconditionally true¹⁶—demands an ontology with three basic terms of self-world-other, I argue here that the ontological question, as a *question*, also necessitates such an ontology. To do so, let us briefly turn to Heidegger’s explication of the structure of questioning in order to highlight a peculiar ambiguity that, when we turn to Levinas, we will exploit in building up the “who” of who is asked the genuine question.

With Heidegger, the question of being is transformed, as Leonard Lawlor explains, into the “being of the question” (2003, ix). Heidegger sets out to resolve the tension between our inability to define “being” and our regular use of the word through a

formal analysis of the structure of the question, and by means of this replace metaphysics with an existential analysis of *Dasein* as fundamental ontology. He defines questions early on, and deviates little from this in all subsequent reflections on questions (see Heidegger 2000, 24; and Heidegger 1982, 72). As Joan Stambaugh translates Heidegger’s first delineation of questions:

Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from that which is sought [...] As questioning about... questioning has *what it asks about*. All asking about... is in some way an inquiring of.... Besides what is asked, what is *interrogated* also belongs to questioning. What is questioned is to be defined and conceptualized in the investigating [...] As what is really intended, what is *ascertained* lies in what is questioned; here questioning arrives at its goal (Heidegger 1996, 4; original emphasis).¹⁷

The conjunction of five structural elements constitute a question: (a) an agent of questioning, (b) the activity of questioning, (c) the object which the activity intends, (d) the interrogated object through which the intention is fulfilled, and (e) the fulfillment of the activity in the resolution of the question.¹⁸ When it comes to the question of the meaning of being in particular, all four elements are at one: (a) a being, (b) in the mode of being of interrogation, questions (d) a being about (c) being in order to ascertain (e) the meaning of being (see Heidegger 1996, 4-5; and Heidegger 1962, 25-26). But, wonders Heidegger, which being among beings will we *interrogate*? He turns to *Dasein*, the being, he writes, “which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being...” (Heidegger 1996, 6).

Heidegger’s notion of the (d) “interrogated object,” the “what [which] is interrogated” (see Heidegger 1962, 26), is disturbingly ambiguous, however. Precisely on the status of this “interrogated object” rests the lever that supports the possibility of juxtaposing Levinas with Tillich. The tension here is between the “what” and the “who” of *Dasein*. Is the “interrogated object” in this case *something* we anatomize as we seek the fulfillment of our intention in theoretical clarification?¹⁹ Or, instead, is this “interrogated object” *someone* who speaks and to whom we listen when we pose our question to her? If the “ontological question” is a *question*, rather than merely a cognitive process by which we negate “noise” and arrive at “informativeness,”²⁰ then it

must be the latter. In other words, if questioning is an irreducible component of the ontological question, then another self with whom we speak, even if that other is the “other” within oneself, must be added as an additional moment in the basic ontological structure implied in the question. Thus, dialogue, as the practice to which this activity is proper, is an essential structure of being as such. To distinguish between interrogative processes restricted to the cognitive domain and those interrogatives that involve us with another in dialogue, I refer to the former as “typical interrogatives” and the latter as “genuine questions.” We will now turn to resources in Levinas that inform this notion of genuine questioning.

II. Levinasian Questions

While Tillich, following Heidegger, begins by analyzing what it is to *pose* a question and posits anxiety as the condition of the possibility of genuine questioning, Levinas reverses this. In his development of what is implied by the Infinity expressed in the face of the Other, he sheds light first on what it is to *be asked* a question. “The face speaks,” writes Levinas (1969, 66). This is the face of the “Other,” who is often reduced to something approximating Buber’s notion of the “Thou.” According to Levinas, the “I-Thou” is a closed society, a couple; the Other, however, disturbs this intimacy from the outside as “the third party” (1998a, 21).²¹ Levinas calls this the contemporary “crisis of religion”—stemming from an awareness that “a third party listens, wounded, to the amorous dialogue [of the I-Thou], and that with regard to him, the society of love is in the wrong” (ibid.). This Other inaugurates discourse because in facing me he makes the clandestine nature of the couple public; his turning inaugurates the face-to-face of public discourse and sociality (1998a, 22).²² Third parties listening-in always already threaten the amorous and exclusive dialogue, but when we face such parties and speak with them, this new dialogue preserves exchange while also incorporating severe self-criticism and vigilant self-awareness, or in sum “responsibility.”

Allow me to explain. The face of the Other puts me *in question* through a “request” which lays a claim on me (Levinas 1998b, 164).²³ “However, I cannot,” writes Levinas, “enter this by questioning myself in the theoretical mode...” (1998b, 164). That is, I—as a reflective and contemplative solitary individual—cannot put myself in question through

some cognitive or epistemological process.²⁴ Rather, in the dawning upon me of the face of the Other, a question is asked of me that “does not await a theoretical response in the guise of ‘information,’” but “appeals to responsibility” (Levinas 1998b, 165). For Levinas, nothing on the ontological order of basic structures or categories obliges me to responsibility, and so the face of the Other as the *origin* of responsibility is “*otherwise* than being” (1998b, 168; emphasis added). The face of the Other is, Levinas writes, “an *interrogation* that, behind responsibility and as its *ultimate motivation*, is a question about the right to be” (Levinas 1998b, 169; emphasis added). The Other inaugurates discourse by posing a question. The question *par excellence* is not, however, “What is being itself?” but “By what right are you?”²⁵ Rather than originating in anxiety over *my own death* and the meaning of my life, this question originates in a crescendo of anxiety and in an awakening of responsibility *for the death of the Other* (Levinas 1998b, 176).²⁶ In Levinas, the problem is not about meaningfulness, but about service.

More fundamental than the self-interrogation of the ontological question is, according to Levinas, one’s interrogation by the Other through this basic ethical question. This question situates us such that whatever we do is a response to it. It “makes [us] responsible, that is, articulate” (1998a, 32). Levinas suggests that language is a significant modality of responsibility, and, what is more, asking our own question back to the Other constitutes a crucial form of this articulate responsibility (1998a, 71-72).²⁷ As Levinas writes,

Must we not admit...that the request and the prayer that cannot be dissimulated in the question attest to a *relation to the other person*, a relation that cannot be accommodated in the interiority of a solitary soul, and that is delineated in the question? [...] As a relationship to the absolutely other—to the non-limited by the same—to the Infinite—would transcendence not be equivalent to an originary question? (1998a, 72-73; original emphasis)²⁸

Levinas here suggests that a relationship with the Other is a constitutive accomplishment of the genuine question, or “prayer” (see 1998a, 7),²⁹ because such a question, considered performatively, situates us with regard to one another. As a function of our responsibility, which is ultimately motivated by the call of the Other, our questioning in this way neither indicates a void nor expresses our finitude; our ques-

tioning is instead our awakening “to the Excessive” (1998a, 70).

To reinforce this point about excessiveness beyond mere cognitive processes, Levinas asks, “Why is there saying?” (1998b, 150). Why does it not suffice us merely to think about the things we think? Do we not say what we think precisely because speech “goes beyond” that which suffices us and because “language carries this deep movement?” (ibid.)³⁰ For Levinas, speaking with the Other, especially in the form of questions, is excessive, an unnecessary emission of surplus. By asking the Other this question, I address and invoke the Other rather than reducing him to a mere cognitive representation (Levinas 1998a, 32).³¹ The relationship built in this form of discourse, this “saying,” cannot, according to Levinas, be reduced to a representation through which intentionality might reach its fulfillment; rather, it rests on an intentionality subject to failure (1998a, 71).³² While we can say what we mean, and we can say it in the way we want to say it without much trouble, we cannot completely control the effects on others of what we say.³³ However much speech act theorists or other linguists want to reduce the interrogative mood to the imperative mood (see Bell 1975; Searle 1979; and Harrah 1987), for Levinas, *our* questions remain “open questions” because we do not have the power to coerce or command another to reciprocate (Levinas 1984, 98). We merely remain self-critically open to that possibility.

At this point, we see the extreme difference between our questions and the question of the Other, between our responsibility articulated in questions to the Other and the power of the Other to call us into question and thereby to produce our responsibility. Why is it that Levinas sees our questions as a mode of responsibility for the Other but sees the Other’s question as a “command”? Levinas reduces the Other’s “originary expression” to the imperative mood. Despite his reputation for radicality, Levinas’s reduction of questioning to the imperative mood is one of the most conventional strategies shared across philosophical loyalties.³⁴ Whatever else the face might express, it is always already essentially saying, according to Levinas, “Thou shall not kill.” The infinity conveyed in the face of the Other, writes Levinas, “is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (1969, 199; Levinas’s emphasis). This rests on the contention that the Other’s infinite otherness cannot be represented, consumed, or exchanged like other goods, but only killed (ibid.). But not all questioning

is so reducible, as Levinas himself acknowledges in his development of our questions. Feminists, such as Luce Irigaray³⁵ and Robin Lakoff,³⁶ share this thesis about the irreducibility of questions. According to these thinkers, questions are a way we “present a dialogic style of engagement” and thereby defer to others (Hass 2000, 75). In other words, some questions are a way in which we listen to others. These are genuine questions. Is the Other capable of listening in Levinas?

Levinas overlooks the fact that on the margins of every face there are ears. Overlooking the ears explains Levinas’s oversight in tying to the face the illocutionary force of a command, but without sufficiently excluding the possibility that the face poses a genuine question. Insofar as a face has ears, it listens as well as expresses. The face is not merely a mechanism of self-positing and self-assertion. The face is also passive; it suffers. What other than a genuine question expresses such listening, synthesizing both activity and passivity? There is warrant for considering genuine questions, as a mode of articulate listening, as a viable alternative to the command as the primordial “Saying” that inaugurates all discourse. Via this route of interpreting the face of the Other as posing an open question, let us briefly conclude with a reflection on its import for Tillichian apologetics.³⁷

III. The Origin of Genuine Questions

Tillich’s theological project is in a large measure based upon his *listening* to others. In his words,

I take into consideration the attitude of those who are in doubt about or in estrangement from or in opposition to everything ecclesiastical and religious, including Christianity.... *My work is with those who ask questions, and for them I am here.*³⁸

Tillich’s “I am here” is only a grammatical transformation away from “Here I am.” Would this make the *questions* the call of God? Whatever the case may be, Tillich embodies precisely the kind of comportment at stake in genuine questions. By way of his “method of correlation,” Tillich takes questions others ask seriously. However, he quiets and stills them by conveying to questioners the power and meaning latent in religious symbols. Are all questions, though, expressions of an anxiety that needs to be taken up in courage? Might not some questions themselves be the appearance of depth (or height, á

la Levinas) donating a power and meaning that transcends the structure of being?

I see some warrant for thinking through this possibility on symbolic grounds as well. Jesus poses over three hundred questions in the four canonized gospels alone (Dear 2004). While certainly many of these questions are rhetorical or slanted, perhaps some are genuine, or at the very least can and ought to be read as such. The same goes as well for the many questions posed by the biblical God. If a genuine question can be found in their direct discourse, then we must posit an alternative origin of genuine questions to that which Tillich posits for typical interrogatives and to that which Levinas posits for our genuine questions. In such a vision, we might be able to account for an ontology of “being heard” where we are simultaneously empowered and responsive because we are always already being heard in being-itself. In such a case, God, as the agent of being-itself,³⁹ would speak as a questioner, as a listener. Tillich claims that, “God speaks *to* the human situation, *against* it, and *for* it” (1957, 13; emphasis added).⁴⁰ In thinking of God through the genuine question, God might no longer need to be seen as merely “barking orders” at us, but also as speaking *with* us (Irigaray 2004). And by this, we might ourselves gain the power not to speak for or at, but *with* the Other.

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¹ Levinas describes the question as rhetorical, though a trace of the depth of the question can still be heard in it. He writes, "A questioning of the affirmation and confirmation of being, which is found in the famous—and easily rhetorical—quest for the 'meaning of life...'" (Levinas 1998a, 129). Moreover, the majority of analytic philosophers consider the question to be poorly formed (see Wiggins 1988).

² Eagleton points this out in his recent reflections on the meaning of life (Eagleton 2007). Moreover, already in the first half of the last century, Adorno criticized Heidegger's emphasis on "authenticity" (Adorno 1973).

³ The possibilities of philosophical and theological parallels are often striking. For instance, is Levinas' concept of "face" as that which bears the trace of the infinite

a “self-negating symbol”? Alternatively, is the “power of being” also “otherwise than being”?

⁴ When it comes to matters concerning the Other, for Levinas, a failed, rather than fulfilled, experience “is inverted... into a *beyond* experience, into a *transcendence* whose rigorous *determination* is described by ethical attitudes and exigencies, and by responsibility, of which language is but one modality” (1998b, 106; original emphasis).

⁵ Tillich considers this formulation to be senseless because “[t]hought must begin with being.... If one asks why there *is* not nothing, one attributes being even to nothing” (1951, 162).

⁶ This is Heidegger’s famous formulation of the question: “Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of being*” (1996, xix; original emphasis).

⁷ Tillich declares that *this* is the ontological question (1951, 163).

⁸ As Tillich writes, “Anxiety is self-awareness of the finite self as finite” (1951, 192).

⁹ As Heidegger writes, “In *Angst*, Da-sein finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence” (1996, 245).

¹⁰ Tillich agrees with this when he writes, “This experience of ontological shock is expressed in the cognitive function by the basic philosophical question...” (1951, 113).

¹¹ This is the implication of Tillich’s claiming that “[t]he threat of nonbeing, grasping the mind, produces the ‘ontological shock’...” (1951, 113).

¹² Scharlemann reads Tillich as identifying the “unconditional” as another origin of the ontological question, and does this by way of reading Tillich’s analysis of the arguments for God’s existence back into the ontological question. As Scharlemann writes, “The question of being arises from an experience of an *unconditional* element and a *threatening* element... [One] *can* ask the question because there is an unconditional element in the structure; [one] *must* ask it because the structure—by which [one] is constituted—is threatened” (1969, 141-142). I find this identification of the origin inadequate because, as Tillich says, the ontological question is *implied* in human existence, which I take to mean that while some people might not actually ask the question, the question is nonetheless latent in their lives. So we can and must ask the *ontological* question under the conditions of being threatened by nonbeing. On this reading, we might say that the “unconditional” element *orients* the sense of the question, thus making it meaningful to ask the question.

¹³ In Tillich’s words, “Only man can ask the ontological question because he alone is able to look beyond the limits of his own being and every other being. Looked at from the standpoint of possible nonbeing, being is a mystery. Man is able to take this standpoint because he is free to transcend every given reality. He is not bound to ‘beingness’; he can envisage nothingness; he can ask the ontological question” (1951, 186).

¹⁴ This is not to say that the subject-object structure is not implied in the question of being. This is, rather, to note that the rigorous ontological determination of the basic ontological structure reveals that the subject-object structure is mediated, and thus secondary despite its apparent immediacy.

¹⁵ See also Moran’s summary, where he writes, “For Husserl, the most important thing to emphasize is that *noesis* and *noema* are correlative parts of the structure of the mental process... The *noesis* is ‘the concretely complete intensive mental process,’” and the *noema* is a single complex ideal entity graspable by a special act of transcendental reflection (2000, 155-157).

¹⁶ Cf. Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith* (2001).

¹⁷ The following is roughly the same passage in John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson’s translation: “Every inquiry is a seeking [Suchen]. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what it sought... Any inquiry, as an inquiry about something, has *that which is asked about* [sein *Gefragtes*]. But all inquiry about something is somehow a questioning of something [Anfragen bei...]. So in addition to what is asked about, an inquiry has *that which is interrogated* [ein *Befragtes*]. In investigative questions—that is, in questions which are specifically theoretical—what is asked about is determined and conceptualized. Furthermore, in what is asked about there lies also *that which is to be found out by asking* [das *Erfragte*]; this is what is really intended: with this the inquiry reaches its goal” (Heidegger 1962, 24).

¹⁸ Cf. David E. Klemm’s exposition of this: “Questioning presupposes (1) an activity of inquiring (*Fragen*), which is guided by what is sought, (2) that about which we inquire (*ein Gefragtes*), investigated through (3) some concrete reality (*ein Befragtes*), in order to yield (4) some theoretical result (*ein Erfragtes*). In posing the question ‘What does it mean to be?’ some interesting connections appear. The activity of inquiring is (1) *a mode of being* of the inquirer, which reflects (2) *being* as that which we inquire about, which intends (4) the *meaning of being* as theoretical result. By choosing the *being of the questioner* as (3) the concrete reality investigated, all four elements reflect being... A post-metaphysical ontology is possible

as the existential analysis of the being that is there in its questioning” (Klemm 1987, 449-450).

¹⁹ By implication, this would entail that we would anatomize Dasein since Dasein is that which Heidegger determines is the proper being to interrogate about being.

²⁰ See Bruin’s thoroughgoing phenomenology of questioning modeled on information theory (Bruin 1990).

²¹ Levinas elaborates, “The love that contemporary religious thought, cleared of magical notions, has promoted to the rank of the essential situation of religious existence, does not contain social reality. The latter inevitably entails the existence of the third party” (1998a, 21).

²² This is crucial to understand, because despite Levinas’ disparagement of dialogue he does believe that an exchange (or in other words, a “dialogue”) nonetheless takes place between the one and the Other. As he writes, “The relationship with the third party—responsibility extending beyond intention’s ‘range of action’—characterizes the subjective existence capable of discourse *essentially*” (1998a, 22; original emphasis).

²³ Bergo uses the word “demand” to translate Levinas’ use of the French verb “demander.” In English, the word “demand” carries more force and burden than its French cognate implies. “Demander la parole,” for instance, means, “to ask for permission to speak.”

²⁴ Although Levinas uses the terms “epistemology” and “knowledge,” it is clear from the context he means something quite similar to Tillich’s characterization of philosophy as a cognitive endeavor.

²⁵ I chose to write this in the second person pronoun because, as Levinas says, this question comes to me from the Other. Levinas writes, “The question *par excellence*, or the first question, is not ‘why is there being rather than nothing?’ but ‘have I the right to be?’” (1998b, 171)

²⁶ Levinas writes that, “The death of the other man implicates me and puts me in question as if, by this death that is invisible to the other who is thereby exposed, I became the accomplice by way of my indifference; and as if... I had to answer for this death of the other and not to leave the other in solitude” (1998b, 162-163). In his diagnosis, Heidegger’s understanding of death—and Tillich’s by association—is inadequate with regard to the utter passivity of undergoing something. As he writes, “The *being-toward-death* or being unto death is still a being-able-to-be, and death, according to a significant terminology, is the *possibility* of impossibility and not at all an extreme instant, torn from all assumption; not at all an impossibility of being-able, beyond all [grasp] or all dispossession, and beyond all welcome, pure abduction...” (1998b, 47).

²⁷ Levinas has a very subtle and nuanced understanding of what it is to question that is distinct from Heidegger and Tillich. It is something we do with others, not the cognitive process performed by the solitary individual. He is critical of giving privilege to the epistemological interpretation of the activity of questioning. He writes, “Is the question *always*, as in functional language (or scientific language, whose answers open onto new questions, but questions that aim only at answers), a knowledge in the process of constituting itself, a *still* insufficient thought of the *datum*, which latter might satisfy it by measuring up to the expectation? Is then the question that of the famous question/answer sequence in the soul’s dialogue with itself in which Plato saw thought, initially solitary, moving toward coinciding with itself—toward self-consciousness?” (1998a, 72)

²⁸ Cf. the alternative translation in Levinas’ *Of God Who Comes to Mind*: “Must we not admit... that the request and the entreaty, which one could not dissimulate in the question, bear witness to a *relationship to another*, a relationship that does not remain within the interiority of a solitary soul, a relationship that, within the question, takes shape? [...] The relationship to the absolutely other—to the un-limited by the same—to the Infinite; would not transcendence be equivalent to an original question?” (1998b, 107)

²⁹ See Levinas’ claim that the “essence of discourse is prayer” (1998a, 7).

³⁰ Levinas reinforces this in the following: “In discourse I have always distinguished between the *saying* and the *said*. That the *saying* must bear a *said* is a necessity of the same order as that which imposes a society with laws, institutions and social relations. But the *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him. It is difficult to be silent in someone’s presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him” (1985, 88).

³¹ In his words, “Language, in its expressive function, addresses and invokes the other... In speech, we do not just think of the interlocutor, we speak to him” (Levinas 1998a, 32).

³² Or as Levinas puts it, “The very relationship of the *saying* cannot be reduced to intentionality, or that it rests, properly speaking, on an intentionality that fails” (1998a, 71).

³³ These three distinctions correspond to the three acts that inhere in every speech act: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary acts, respectively. It is the perlocutionary expectations that are often thwarted when people do not respond to what we say as we would hope. For an exposition on the components of performative utterances, see Austin's *How to do Things with Words* (1976) and Searle's *Expression and Meaning* (1979). On questions in particular, see Martin Bell's article on questioning (1975).

³⁴ For a brief exposition about this trend in continental philosophy, see Lawlor's *The Being of the Question* (2003). See the preceding paragraph for representatives in the analytic tradition.

³⁵ See Hass's study of Irigaray's use of questioning in her article "The Style of the Speaking Subject: Irigaray's Empirical Studies of Language Production" (2000).

³⁶ See Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (2004) where she underscores women's use of "tag questions" as a strategy for deferral.

³⁷ I am thinking in particular of Tillich's effort to convey the power of being to others who feel disabled under the tensions of existence, especially in stressing the courage to accept acceptance, such as in his *The Courage to Be* (1952).

³⁸ Pauck cites Tillich as having said this in a seminar discussion at the University of California in Santa Barbara in 1965 (1979, 22; emphasis added).

³⁹ This is taken from Scharlemann's superb studies of Tillich's theology. According to Scharlemann, "There is a universal subject... and 'God' can be defined in literal terms as that subject.... The prius of thought must be called not just 'being' but 'being is' or, better, 'God is.' If, then, the whole structure of being is not simply the structure of 'being' but the structure of 'God is,' this would entail that 'God' has a literal referent (namely, as the implied subject of any action) as well as a symbolic usage (expressing the ground of subjectivity); that 'being' has a literal referent (namely, the objective being in everything that is) as well as a symbolic usage (expressing the ground of objectivity); and that 'God is' has a literal usage (to refer to the subject-object structure as a whole) as well as a symbolic usage (to express the depth of the subject-object structure)" (1966, 98-101).

⁴⁰ Cf. Wolterstorff's recent philosophical analysis of God's speaking in *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God Speaks* (1995) and "Resuscitating the Author" (2006).

SOUNDING THE DEPTH OF THE SECULAR: TILlich WITH THOREAU

J. HEATH ATCHLEY

Depth is like the famous geological line from NE to SW, the line which comes diagonally from the heart of things and distributes volcanoes.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

I shall frequently be saying something one could not fail to know; and that will appear trivial.

—Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*

“Beginning to think,” Albert Camus writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “is beginning to be undermined.”²¹ Such a sentiment seems contrary to common sense (and to the aspirations of intellectuals). Thought, we likely imagine, should bring the confidence that comes from knowledge, the authority that comes from expertise. Only in its absence should we feel undermined. What Camus has in mind, however, is

that one of the chief strategies for enduring a life that has no ultimate rational account—that is absurd—is to live through habit. Why go on in the face of absurdity? Why live when the reasons for doing so might seem flimsy?—because I did so yesterday (as did most everyone else, as did previous generations). It is this pattern of going on as before, allowing past routine to determine the present and future, that thought undermines. Thought counteracts habit.

The issue here is not simply one of repetition, boredom, or ennui. Spontaneity and excitement are not adequate remedies for the absurdity of existence. The issue, rather, is attachment to life. Camus worries that our attachment to life is really no attachment at all but is, instead, a fearful thoughtlessness, a comfort achieved through blindness. Habit is an avoidance, not an affirmation.

This sounds, of course, a bit melodramatic. After all, one could probably find myriad mundane reasons to live that do not address the lack of a rational principle behind life itself (e.g. My kids need me. I enjoy playing tennis.). But certainly habit is one of the ways many of us make it through our days, and just as certainly there is a quality of thought that in-

terrupts our accustomed patterns of cognition and action, an interruption that results, not just in frustration, but also in novelty and unforeseen value.

Through our *habits* we establish our *habitats*; our routine activities settle the spaces in which we dwell. Both terms derive from the Latin *habere*, which indicates possession, holding. Our habits allow us to hold onto things (or, it could just as easily be said that habits hold onto to us—they are tough to get away from). This line of reasoning then suggests that thought undermines the drive for possession, the urge to have something, to grab it and make it one's own.

In the realm of thought—understood here as the scholarly professions—habits and habitats are not easy to elude. Habits are our methods; habitats are our fields. Putting them together we can speak of having (or belonging to) a discipline. Consistent routines and boundaries create the conditions for expertise—the immediate validation of one's thoughts and words. So it should come as no surprise that a significant part of our efforts to think involves placing thinkers (along with ourselves) in their proper habitats—Nineteenth-Century Thought, Liberal Theology, Continental Philosophy, Modernism, Romanticism, Transcendentalism—and these habitats are often treated as discrete, offering up their own unique opportunities for the cultivation of authoritative knowledge.

Following the logic implied by Camus, however, thought itself would undermine this practice. If this is so, how are we to pursue thought if the habitats we build for it hinder the pursuit? One strategy, I suggest, is to engage in strange juxtapositions, to place together concepts and thinkers whose points of intersection are not ready-made and do not correspond to a syllabus or professional program. To entertain a strange juxtaposition threatens expertise but hopes for vibrant thought, the kind that might elicit a more interesting and more deliberate attachment to life.

The juxtaposition I want to make in this essay is with Paul Tillich and Henry David Thoreau. These thinkers are from different worlds. The philosophical theologian Tillich occupies the twentieth century on two continents—one devastated by two world wars, the other confident (and complacent) in its victories—while the naturalist philosopher Thoreau dwells in the apparently pastoral powder keg of antebellum America. The thought of Tillich and Thoreau intersect at the concept of depth. Both are concerned with the depth (and false depth) of their

respective worlds. So giving attention to the play of this concept within and between their works is an expression of concern for the depth (and overall condition) of this current world.

It is common enough to prefer things to be deep rather than shallow, or superficial. In cooking, one wants a sauce to have depth, which means it should be adequately thick (have “body”) and possess a textured, rather than simplistic, flavor. Knowledge is better deep than shallow; a deep knowledge of baseball will reach back into the layered history of the sport for understanding, rather than rely solely on the statistics of this season's players. My partner's love for me is deep because it reaches beyond my balding head and modest achievements and grasps qualities of self that no one else can see or care about. Yes, with just about everything, the deeper the better.

There are, nevertheless, legitimate suspicions of depth. Most smart people have likely had the experience of expressing an insight they have judged to be poignant only to be mocked by someone who might say, “That is *so* deep.” Such sarcasm indicates that the aspiration for depth can be a mask for pretension, the self-congratulations that grows where there is no self-critique. (The *Saturday Night Live* sketch, book, and website *Deep Thoughts* by Jack Handey is a hilarious example of the critical mocking of the desire for depths.)² Philosophy (and any other form of serious thinking) also has reason to be suspicious. Knowledge of depth, especially that which is justified through arcane argument or privileged revelation, can be used to empower and authorize. If my authority comes from a depth of existence to which you have no access, then it becomes difficult to question or resist that authority. So from the point of view of critical thinking, depth appears to have a troubling relationship to domineering power. It makes sense, then, that in political rhetoric transparency confers legitimacy. Power should sit on surfaces that offer themselves to the complete comprehension of consciousness.

In addition, appealing to depths can be a way of longing for some kind of structure that provides a comforting, yet reductive, determination to existence. One example would be the notion of a core identity, the idea that, despite the superficial variety within one's personality, one's most authentic identity is deep and unchanging. Certain relatives of mine who might feel alienated by my intellectual pursuits and New England residence could draw

comfort from the supposition that *deep down* I will always be a small-town, *Southern* boy. This could, in some way, be true (attentive listeners, for example, can still hear my Southern accent), but more significantly it is a defense against the difficult fact that a loved-one can grow into worlds different from one's own. (Arguments for the superiority of one's cultural, or ethnic identity, are a more disturbing version of this mode of thought.)

So while the suspicion of depth is an important and necessary premise for critical thought, I want to suggest in this essay that the concept has a (largely overlooked) critical capacity—that is, rather than securing some kind of suspiciously authorized knowledge or a comfortable identity, it challenges our need for such things, prodding us into new layers of truth. It is in this endeavor that the strange juxtaposition of Tillich with Thoreau pays dividends. It leads me to think that the depth of existence is not a mystical or magical place of secret authorization or metaphysical comfort but is, rather, a call for a patient and persistent attention to life, an attention that is simultaneously an affirmation.

Depth is a spatial metaphor for a spiritual quality, Tillich writes early in a sermon entitled, "The Depth of Existence."³ This fact is seen easily enough, but it is an important starting point. Bringing up the issue of metaphor moves one into a non-literal state of mind where there should be less expectation for talk of the depth of existence to result in a simple revelation, an unveiling of a stale truth—the truth would be the depth, the veil would be the surface that requires piercing. We can almost see it coming: god is the depth of life. Tillich will say this, but he will say much more, and that much more will avoid the superficiality of such a simple equation.

Life's depth is not something just waiting to be discovered. Any talk of depth first indicates a desire: All visible things have a surface. Surface is that side of things which first appears to us. If we look at it, we know what things *seem* to be. Yet if we act according to what things and persons *seem* to be, we are disappointed. Our expectations are frustrated. And so we try to penetrate below the surfaces in order to learn what things really are. Why have men always asked for truth? Is it because they have been disappointed with the surfaces, and have known that the truth which does *not* disappoint dwells below the surfaces in the depth? And therefore, men have dug through one level after another.⁴

My sense is that the most important terms in this passage are *disappoint*, *surface*, *seem*, and *truth*. The longing for depth is not, we might say, natural, in the sense that it is always there and that there is no reason behind it that should catch our interest. In other words, we should not just take it for granted. The desire for depth is prodded by a disappointment, and we should ask how this is the case. The disappointment, of course, is with surfaces. All visible things have them, but if we base our actions or decisions on them, disappointment arises. The reason for this appears to be that surfaces partake mostly in seeming, and this shifty quality frustrates our expectations. To seem, of course, means that something could be otherwise than it appears. Surfaces change, and therefore, cannot be trusted, especially as bases for important actions or decisions. If we dwell on surfaces, consciousness is confounded by instability. Truth is the balm to such instability. It lies below surfaces, and it eases the disappointment caused by them, because (presumably) it is the arena of being rather than seeming. Truth is being, and it satisfies. It is not hard to detect here a latent (though partial) doctrine of Platonism: truth is the unchanging reality that grounds the becoming of ordinary experience.

Before this all sounds a little too obvious, a little too much like common intellectual (if not religious) piety, I want to ask: Where does the disappointment *really* lie? Is it with being, the fact that being hides itself behind shifting surfaces? Perhaps. But it could just as well be the case that the disappointment lies within us. Notice that in this passage Tillich does not specify *what* the truth is or *what* lies in the depths beyond surfaces. (Later he will call it god, but he says that one can substitute any term of ultimate concern for god; thus, depth is never a settled thing easily contained by a term, even a transcendental one. Like surfaces, depth is shifty.) Instead, more emphasis falls on the disappointment, which is, of course, an emotion, a psychological state (literally, a state of the soul). The focus is on us. A surface is that aspect of a thing which first appears to us; it is our first look at a thing. And the disappointment emerges when we desire actionable knowledge from this first look. That is no good, because there is always more to see; this desire for more takes the shape of a desire for depth. (This implies that the shiftness of surfaces is more of an unfolding than a falsity. Viewed in this way, the problem with surfaces is not their incorrectness but their simplicity, smoothness, and homogeneity.) We are frustrated not only by surfaces themselves, but also with our

inability to see more within surfaces. So depth, according to this reading, is wrapped up in the urge to look again, to grow a greater capacity for attention. There is activity here. Such looking again constitutes an action; it is not a passive reception. This is worth noting because a basis for action is one of the things desired from a surface. Along these lines, later in the sermon, Tillich writes, "There can be no depth without the way to the depth. Truth without the way to truth is dead."⁵ The desire for depth leads to a way, a practice, doing something to see beyond the flat veneer that plagues so much experience.

Perhaps at this point the notion of a surface sounds too vague, or the notion of depth too mystical. Here are some lines that give some flesh to these concepts:

Most of our life continues on the surface. We are enslaved by the routine of our daily lives, in work and pleasure, in business and recreation. We are conquered by innumerable hazards, both good and evil. We are more driven than driving. We do not stop to look at the height above us, or the depth below us. We are always moving forward, although usually in a circle, which finally brings us back to the place from which we first moved. We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth. We accept ourselves as we appear to ourselves, and do not care what we really are. Like hit-and-run drivers, we injure our souls by the speed with which we move on the surface; and then we rush away, leaving our bleeding souls alone. We miss, therefore, our depth and our true life. And it is only when the picture that we have of ourselves breaks down completely, only when we find ourselves acting against all the expectations we had derived from that picture, and only when an earthquake shakes and disrupts the surface of our self knowledge, that we are willing to look into a deeper level of our being.⁶

Surface, these lines suggest, is another word for habit, routine, and patterns of life that lack the quality of thoughtfulness. We are attracted to habit and routine, no doubt, because of the comfort they bring, the soothing repetition of the same. In addition, they are built into the world as we find it, comprising the structures of work, business, and recreation. To accommodate myself to the worlds in which I dwell, I must adopt certain habits and routines; my survival demands it. When such accommodations are dis-

rupted, life's greater depth emerges into view. But it is up to me to take notice. It is here that we should consider the curious combination of passivity and activity in these lines: "We are more driven than driving." There are forces moving us, of which we are not completely aware; our hurried movement is not our own; we should be the drivers. "We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth." Stop talking and listen. Getting beyond life's surfaces requires deliberate effort (something akin to driving), but the effort prepares the ground for receptivity necessary to acknowledge the depths of existence. We do not *grasp* the depths; we look at them and listen to them.

It would be easy to get lost in a concern for *what* the depth of existence is. Tillich calls it god, hope, truth, and joy. But too much focus on these grand terms can lead to simplistic equations that approach cliché: the depth of life is hope; the depth of life is truth; enough said. Such formulations are, of course, superficial. To avoid such superficiality, I want to ask what does the *concept* of depth *do*? What does it cultivate or make happen? What are its practical effects? What is going on when one *thinks* about the depth of life? With depth, Tillich has introduced a concept that stimulates critical thought. When depth has been raised as an issue, when it situates itself as a prodding presence in my mind, I must reconsider the surface in front of me, *give* to it more attention than I have before. Is it dissatisfying? What will another look do? The surface could be a loved one, a pattern of behavior in my life, or the political arrangements of the world in which I find myself. Depth disrupts casual experience so experience can no longer be so casual.

One of the pervasive habits of modernity is to compartmentalize religion as something knowable and discrete, something that can be embraced or just as easily set aside. According to this pattern of thought, one might inherit one's religion from family or culture, but ultimately one *chooses* to acknowledge and participate in one's religion, or not to. Such choice is possible because the larger social world gives no single or dominant (and therefore enforceable) image or doctrine of ultimate reality; secular society is agnostic. And though the choices are numerous, they are pretty well defined; religion *is* Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, etc. (It should not be forgotten, of course, that there are multiple versions to each of these traditions.)

This tendency to sequester religion into a realm of its own where it can be more or less unaffected by and unaffacting to other realms of life has been good for business and civil order—an achievement that should not be dismissed lightly. But it has also diminished the capacity for creatively encountering and giving voice to what is real. Expressing what is real and important all too often feels limited to the vocabularies of the recognized religions or the disciplines of empirical verification (along with, perhaps, affirmations of personal sentiment). Affirmation gets stuck between narrow subjectivity and banal observation.

In his *Theology of Culture*, Tillich describes this situation as a “schizophrenic split...which threatens our spiritual freedom by driving the contemporary mind into irrational and compulsive affirmations or negations of religion.”⁷ To say that spiritual freedom is threatened does not mean that the freedom to practice a particular religion is threatened. (Indeed that is what is guaranteed in most versions of the secular.) Instead, it suggests that the problem is an emaciation of spiritual life that forces one into narrow, oppositional thinking: When it comes to religion, you are either for it or against it, and you know exactly what *it* is. Such epistemological confidence is one of the surfaces of modern experience. This happens, according to Tillich, when religion is confined to belief in divine beings. If I believe in god (or the gods), then I believe in religion; if I think such belief is naïve and cannot be empirically demonstrated, then I don’t believe in religion. One could easily criticize such a stance from an anthropological perspective by observing that for many religions neither the cognitive operation of belief nor the existence of divine beings is all that important. Tillich criticizes it philosophically by arguing that if the divine is a thing among other things, potentially available to human perception and knowledge, then it is not really divine because it is not really *ultimate*. Religion is not about a divine being (one whose existence can be proven or not proven, affirmed or denied) but is about ultimate concern, and ultimate concern is expressed, takes form, through culture. Not just the cultural creativity that represents and is sanctioned by the recognizable religious traditions, but virtually any kind of cultural creativity. The one qualifier Tillich gives in this formulation is *depth*. Religion is the depth dimension of culture, that is, the quality of depth that potentially inheres in all human activity. This means that religion does not have a fixed habitat; it cannot be confined to what we habitually rec-

ognize as religion, and it cannot be designated as fulfilling a specialized function in human life. Religion is homeless. Tillich puts the matter this way:

In this situation, without a home, without a place in which to dwell, religion suddenly realizes that it does not need such a place, that it does not need to seek for a home. It is at home everywhere, namely, in the depth of all functions of man’s spiritual life. Religion is the dimension of depth in all of them. Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit.⁸

Depth is that which is “ultimate, infinite, and unconditional in man’s spiritual life.”⁹ It motivates and articulates ultimate concern: “Religion in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit.”¹⁰ So the homelessness of religion is a happy one...if we can recognize it. The lack of such recognition, the habitual split between the religious and the secular, derives from “the tragic estrangement of man’s spiritual life from its own ground and depth.”¹¹ The separation of the secular and religious amounts to an avoidance of depth. So it is not so much that religion is the sphere of deep things (ways of getting at the depth of existence, its ultimate reality). It is, rather, that thinking of religion, *or the secular*, as a self-contained unit keeps us out of the sphere of deep things. The religious/ secular divide is surface, and we should notice how disappointing it is.

The concept of depth calls attention to that disappointment. It would be easy to fixate on the questions of what and where this depth is. What is this ultimate, infinite, and unconditional *thing* or *place* from which modernity with its religious/secular split is estranged? Answer that, and we can go get it, grasp it, and cure our estrangement. But Tillich causes me to think that depth is not an object to be found or a place to be discovered. It is the signaling of a disappointment and the seeking and seeing stimulated by such disappointment; it is the discomfort caused by the reduction of experience to simplistically oppositional categories and the reduction of the sacred to a hyperbolic imitation of the human. Abiding with such disappointment means acknowledging that desire moves thought toward what is real, where value has its continual birth, where affirmation happens.

Thoreau’s experiment in economical, which is to say philosophical (and I would add spiritual), living chronicled in his masterwork *Walden* is well known.

Also well known are his motivations. In some of the most famous lines of the text, he articulates them this way:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹²

Why go to the woods? Why take on such a cheerful, yet still ascetic, solitude? To live deeply, of course. Life’s depth is its marrow, its core substance, the essence that conditions its vibrancy. This is not a Platonic claim, where the essence of a thing grants certain and complete knowledge of that thing and others like it. Thoreau’s endeavor is not really epistemological. He wants to know life, but not in a way that grants expertise, authority, or power. His concern is with value, with the possibility of missing life’s value through the confinement to surfaces (habits of thought and action). Life is not a cognitive object but a thing to be lived. So simply being alive, not being (literally and physically) dead, is not living. Deep living is deliberate living, attending to the ways our activities and thoughts cover life’s value, the conditions that compel its affirmation. What does it take to say yes to life? How do we come to the feeling that life is a good thing? (Notice that Thoreau is not talking about *his* life. His sentiments are not an autobiographical concern for success; instead they express a philosophical concern for reality and the possible responses to it.) If we are not living deliberately, pursuing depth, then we are probably not confident that life is worth much, except as a means to an end, something to be endured for a transcendent good—often called the glory of god. This

is a hasty conclusion. To suck out life’s marrow requires one to see it, to recognize that it lies within, that it does not come from the outside, especially from a deity with a penchant for glory. Marrow is a substance, not a being. It has no will. It makes no specific demands. Its existence does not elicit debate. But it is hidden from normal view. It lies deep. To taste it requires the work of putting things to rout, setting aside what usually draws attachment in order to feel where the urge for attachment comes from. Thoreau, it seems, would rather have marrow than god. Maybe marrow is the god we’ve been missing.

Speaking of missing something, consider this hypothetical anecdote Thoreau reports in the chapter called “Reading”:

The solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is driven as he believes into the silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, traveled the same road and he had the same experience; but he being wise knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and through the humble influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let “our church” go by the board.¹³

This hired man misses out on the religiosity of his experience; he cannot see it. At first glance this anecdote reeks of romantic grandiosity. The farm hand could be, perhaps should be, held up with the likes of Jesus, Zoroaster, and other “worthies”—presumably other founding figures of religious traditions. Because the farm hand is hypothetical; he could be anyone. Perhaps Thoreau is thinking of himself. Even if that is not the case, and Thoreau doesn’t place himself among the worthies, he still assumes the authority to judge the nature of their experiences and find it equal to that of a local laborer. I don’t think Thoreau is saying, however, that anybody can be Jesus or Zoroaster. Instead, his anecdote is an urge to give credence to experience (once it is examined deliberately), to be open to the possibility of its validity without the express consent of an authority. One’s experience might not correspond to the images and doctrines of reality given by “our church.” But that should be no matter. Experience can be religious *and* peculiar. It might not correspond well to *anything* known, and such singular-

ity might warrant, might beckon, the description *religious*. After all, religious things are set apart from the ordinary and routine. So the religiosity of an experience, one might say, can grow out of its peculiarity, its evasion of our habits of mind (along with the thrust toward life such evasion compels—value is not always a function of knowledge). When something is peculiar it draws attention because it has not instantly and easily been absorbed into accustomed categories of thought. But peculiar things can just as easily be dismissed and disregarded. A lack of recognition can be taken for a lack of value. Thoreau worries that “our church” does this. The peculiar religious experience is excluded from serious consideration and the farm hand resigns to the silent gravity imposed by his faith. If we let “our church” go by the board, then we are releasing its exclusive grasp on what counts as religious, what counts as real. The secular and the religious then blend with one another. Such blending resides in the deliberation one gives to experience. Deliberate living is deep living.

One possible danger of such talk of depth is that it could be a little too consoling, that living deliberating is something one might wish to congratulate oneself for, and in so doing undermine deliberation, thoughtfulness itself. Depth without the critical action of thought would revert into a surface. One of the things this means is that depth can become the subject of rumors and mythology, something to be believed rather than encountered, something that inspires dubious knowledge and the complacency that comes with it. In other words, life’s depth could be treated like a transcendent god—an ultimate object that demands belief and belittles thought. When this happens, depth ceases to be deep; it lifts into a stratosphere supported by fantasy and wish.

To express this concern, Thoreau goes literal. He reports that he has heard much talk that Walden pond is bottomless—that means its depth is beyond our capacity to measure, or its sandy bottom is so soft that measuring instruments cannot distinguish it from the pond water. This strikes him as wrong. So he wants to *see* for himself. In this case, seeing is sounding:

There have been many stories about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly have no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without going to the trouble to sound it.¹⁴

Bottomlessness invites belief and stifles curiosity. Has anyone bothered to check out this mythology of Walden pond? Apparently not. So the belief in this bottomlessness must provide some sort of value or interest in itself. It might, one can imagine, provoke conversations between strangers or acquaintances, the way the weather does—safe talk that soothes the discomfort of confrontation. Or maybe a pond thought to be infinite makes a transcendent god feel closer: infinity is just outside of town. Thoreau prefers deliberative encounter to rumors of the infinite:

But I can assure my readers that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half... The greatest depth was exactly one hundred and two feet; to which may be added the five feet which it has risen since, making one hundred and seven. This is a remarkable depth for so small an area; yet not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite, some ponds will be thought to be bottomless.¹⁵

He makes it sound easy, as if he punched the correct numbers into a calculator when no one else could. But this effort at sounding occurred in the heart of winter and involved cutting over one hundred holes in Walden’s ice to drop the sounding line and accurately survey the bottom. Why bother? This labor does not bear the normal fruit of profit. Maybe there is in it some satisfaction in being right (we have all felt that). But, more importantly, this effort strikes me as part of a spiritual practice—call it an exercise of immanence. Walden pond—as beautiful as it is and as important as it is for Thoreau’s meditations—does not reach into an infinite nether region; it is not a magical well that stretches through to the other side of the world. It is still just a pond, and there is no need to turn away from it, as if it were Yahweh granting us a passing but dangerous glance. Thoreau’s sounding is not merely empirical but radically so. It doesn’t grant him any kind of mastery over the pond; his knowledge of it does not make him its owner and does not bring him any money. To get that, one has to stay on Walden’s surface, like the ice harvesters who cut large blocks of ice from the frozen pond, wrap them in sawdust, and sell them to customers in the southeast who want to

cool their drinks. Instead, Walden's real depth (and its purity), once known, can become a symbol. Whereas the mythological notion of a bottomless pond impedes thought, the symbol of Walden's true depth invites and propels it.

Here is where this symbol takes Thoreau:

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails... Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion that covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This Is, and no mistake.¹⁶

Spending one's days deliberately is a critical movement, a movement downward, a settling—yes, but also an unsettling, a working and wedging—it takes effort, and with it something is lost—I want to call it the world—cities, institutions, opinions, prejudices, traditions—the surfaces to which we have become accustomed for living, things we might pass over without thought because we think they give us thought. But thought moves (deliberately) down through and below them. Losing the world, putting it to rout, diving beneath it could be like drowning or vertigo, except that there is a hard bottom, here called reality. Reality is not the world, but it is not another world. The only thing we know about it is that it is hard, which could mean that it admits of no stories or rumors, no hysterical language that covers attention rather than cultivating it. It could also mean being, not its being, not a grand object of an inquisitive intellect, but being as a trial to beings, the

source of the urge to move deeper—or the urge itself.

What I take out of this juxtaposition of Tillich and Thoreau is that there is a depth of existence that, if given the attention it calls for, jars us from the habits, categories, and stories used to make life manageable, to make it something that *merely* reflects our own images and interests. The thought that the secular excludes religion and that religion amounts to the affirmations of well-known traditions is a surface of contemporary experience. Sounding the depth beneath this surface releases an enigmatic religiosity that awaits political acknowledgment.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1983), 4.

² See www.deepthoughtsbyjackhandey.com

³ Paul Tillich, "The Depth of Existence," in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribners, 1948), 52.

⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

⁵ *Ibid*, 55.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1959), 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7-8.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8.

¹² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993), 75.

¹³ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 236.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 237.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 80; original emphasis

CAN AN EVANGELICAL SAY THAT GOD DOES NOT EXIST?

CARLOS BOVELL

With all the hype being made over the new atheism, it occurred to me that there might be a form of atheism that can prove serviceable to evangelical philosophy. To test this idea, I decided to re-engage some of the older anti-theistic arguments against theism through a more Tillichian lens. Perhaps At

theism can be re-interpreted as a surprisingly God honoring position and as a means of getting evangelical theists to ask some fresh meta-theological questions.

The atheism in mind would not limit itself to *methodological* atheism, although methodological atheism might be a start. The atheism under consideration involves more, namely a gestalt switch toward an existential commitment of thinking and believing with all sincerity that God does not exist. At least three reasons can be presented for considering whether atheism might be interpreted as a God-

honoring position. First, if evangelicals concede that God does not exist, there will no longer be a need to allocate considerable apologetic resources toward defending and persuading others that God exists. Then the intellectual resources poured into that question can be re-appropriated toward other more timely philosophical projects. Second, theistic philosophers would have the opportunity to work harder, as it were, since the existence of God would no longer be available to them as a resource in the course of their theistic philosophizing. Third, perhaps atheism can be regarded as a respectable way to grant God a measure of glory and integrity that evangelical theology does not typically afford. Atheism might be interpreted as a spiritual gesture that encourages evangelicals to stop conceiving of God as a being among beings. In what follows, I restrict my focus to this third reason.

Atheism is defined by one atheist as any belief system that “denies the existence of a personal transcendent creator of the universe.”² It should be immediately apparent, however, that there are numerous ways to meet this particular criterion without necessarily being an atheist. For starters, one could affirm the existence of an impersonal transcendent creator of the universe. Or one might affirm the existence of a personal immanent creator of the universe. Or one might affirm the existence of a personal transcendent being who did not create the universe and so on. This goes to show that claiming one is an atheist can be a tricky thing since the atheistic position is a derivative position insofar as it depends upon a theist’s assertion for its material content. The position that theists take with respect to their understanding of God will always set the terms for discussion. After all, an atheist must know what theistic position is being posited before she can say that she denies it.

For the sake of simplicity, let us begin by observing that atheism typically denies the existence of a supernatural realm (which is not to say that atheism *is* the denial of a supernatural realm). We are interested here in the fact that there is a difference between denying theological supernaturalism (TS) in favor of methodological naturalism (MN) and espousing atheism. MN entails engaging in critical inquiry in such a way that no reference to or reliance upon supernatural realms is permitted. One could conceivably comply with MN and yet retain TS personally both on and off duty (though some theists deny this). In addition, one could just as well abandon TS methodologically and personally and still

continue to believe in a god(s) who does not occupy a spiritual realm. For our purposes, it is important to understand that proceeding as if no supernatural realms exist is clearly not the same as believing that no supernatural realms exist. In other words, atheism presumes MN but MN does not necessarily entail atheism.³ For now, let us focus upon that aspect of TS that emphasizes God in contradistinction to the more vague notion of a supernatural realm introduced above. By and large, evangelicals tend to be traditional theists who affirm, among other things, that God exists; an atheist will deny this, claiming that God does not exist. Traditionally, atheists have attacked the very concept of God by arguing that the concept is incoherent. As an empty concept, all talk of God is inherently unintelligible. A generation ago, several discussions arose regarding how philosophers have historically taken for granted that “existence” is well understood even though it is a concept that calls for critical analysis. For our part, let us investigate whether in the assertion “God exists” the (grammatical) predicate is theologically appropriate to the (grammatical) subject and consider whether it is appropriate to say of God that he “exists.”

Is talk of “existence” appropriate to God? Paul Tillich takes up a related question in his *Systematic Theology*. On the way that the Christian tradition has historically broached the subject, he remarks: “The scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. But they perverted their insight when in spite of this assessment they spoke of the existence of God and tried to argue in favor of it.”⁴ What Christian thinkers have historically spoken of could not really have been “existence,” according to Tillich. It must have been something else (for Tillich, reality, etc.). By contrast, Tillich holds that

It would be a great victory for Christian apologetics if the words “God” and “existence” were very definitely separated except in the paradox of God becoming manifest under the conditions of existence, that is, in the christological paradox. God does not exist. He is the being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.⁵

There has been a wide range of reactions to Tillich’s suggestion that “to argue that God exists is to deny him.” For our purposes we shall take a look at the response of the pragmatist Sidney Hook. Hook objected to Tillich’s line of reasoning, explaining:

[Tillich] is right in understanding that what all beings have in common cannot be another being

just as what all men have in common is not another man. But he does not see that it makes no sense to ask what all beings have in common, since that would give us an Essence or definition or common predicable.⁶

Sidney Hook, recall, claimed that “the alleged category of ‘being’ [is] a non-cognitive, as well as non-communicative, and therefore perfectly dispensable, term in discourse.”⁷ Let us take up Hook’s argument and endeavor to champion the claim that if one says that God does not exist she is truly honoring him. We shall do so by first considering whether it “makes no sense” to ask what all beings have in common and then by considering whether it is the case that if a concept or category is non-cognitive and non-communicative, it is also dispensable.

Is it true that when one asks what all things have in common that he or she is necessarily assigning an essence or definition? Although this may often be the result of such queries, it is not *always* the case that asking what all things have in common will result in the postulation of an essence or definition. The paradigmatic counterexample is our present topic, “being,” or simply, “existence.” Surely, all will admit that all things that exist have existence in common. Yet the mere observation that things hold existence in common does not necessarily entail an essence or a definition. Rather, it is the simple acknowledgement that we commonly say “they exist” of all the things that exist. Hence, as varied as things may be in the world, at least one commonality is readily discernible—that of their existence.

If one were to explain simply that, “Existence is that which all things that exist share,” we would not have an essence or definition or anything of the like for there are other things for which the very same thing could be said. The question at hand, which Hook seems to have overlooked, is the one that has most typically been posed of Being: namely, *how* is Being held in common by all things that exist? This is the question that probes whether we can classify Existence by substance, essence, definition, etc. Traditionally, various attempts have been made to answer the question of how it is that all things have being in common. The aim is to eventually surmise the most adequate account for this scenario, indeed if one can be given at all.

One question that has attracted the attention of philosophers is: “Is Existence a predicate?” By this question, it is typically not intended to ask whether existence can syntactically take its place as a grammatical predicate but rather whether it is a logical

one. Philosophers have been generally inclined to answer here in the negative. “The reasons for saying that ‘exists’ is not a (logical) predicate come down, then, to saying that though ‘exists’ is a predicate it is a dispensable one,” explains Thomson.⁸ The dispensability of existence is also supported by the construction of “referential tautologies,” “referential contradictions,” and the like.⁹ At the very least, we would have to say with Pears that existence, if it is a predicate at all, is certainly a “peculiar predicate.” Kneale arrives at a similar conclusion, relegating existence to “a logical auxiliary symbol.”¹⁰ When analyzed logically, existence, in many cases, proves redundant in the sense that it seems in some way to already be presupposed. Compare what Immanuel Kant had to say:

The proposition, God is omnipotent, contains two conceptions, which have a certain object or content; the word is, is no additional predicate—it merely indicates the relation of the predicate to the subject. Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new predicate to the conception of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates—I posit the object in relation to my conception. The content of both is the same; and there is no addition made to the conception, which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by my cogitating the object—in the expression, it is—as absolutely given or existing. Thus the real contains no more than the possible.¹¹

The same redundancy is evident when existence is analyzed in terms of substances and accidents. If “human being” is understood—to use Aristotle’s example—to be essentially “a two-footed animal,” then existence has nothing to do with its substance. Yet for any human being with whom a person has ever come into contact, existence is somehow already automatically given. Furthermore, if existence were to be admitted as pertaining to the substance of human being, it could not be restricted to that substance. It would rather pertain to every substance. In some unclear way, existence must somehow exceed substance. Yet existence does not appear to be an accident either since a human being does not “exist” in the same way that he or she might happen to be white, for example. “Existence” and “whiteness” do not appear to be of the same order. Existence is somehow more fundamental than whiteness could ever be: it is ontologically prior. There is also the matter that existence has a far wider range of instan-

tiation than any other accident seems to have (and the same problem arises when existence is considered as a property). In short, existence does not seem to fit any of the traditional metaphysical categories.

Hook does not appear to be right in his claim that by asking what all beings have in common, one will inevitably end up with an essence, a definition or a common predicable.¹² In most cases, this may be the result of such inquiries into commonalities, but in the case of existence, it most certainly is not the case. For Tillich, the case of Existence is the case of God, who is Being-itself. With this identification in mind, he clarifies: “For it is wrong to speak of God as the universal essence as it is to speak of him existing” because “God is being-itself, not *a* being.”¹³ Nevertheless, “Man is bound to the categories of finitude” and will inevitably lapse into the language of substance and causality and the like.¹⁴ Hook’s claim that an essence is inevitably sought seems to miss Tillich’s point. Tillich repeatedly insists (as Hook himself notes) that existence does not qualify as a predicate or any of the other usual suspects and that consequently there is a crucial need for the religious use of symbols when reflecting upon it. Such is the result of Tillich’s emphasis on *how* all things have existence in common rather than *whether* existence is that which all things have in common.

Hook’s second charge is that since Being is non-cognitive and non-communicable, it is therefore dispensable. From Tillich’s vantage, the exact opposite holds: since Being is non-cognitive and non-communicable it is genuinely invaluable. Hook himself admits that he (Hook) privileges the logical aspects of inquiry over and against other aspects of inquiry. He would, therefore, be more prone to dispense with existence if at all possible. That said, he would, no doubt, agree with Williams when he writes, “Now, I respect a person who stares at a doorknob, for example, which is not doing anything in particular, and thinks that he can see at any rate that it is *existing*. I acknowledge for myself that I hardly know what to look for, and may well lack the requisite intuition.”¹⁵ But, Williams concludes, in the end he would see only doorknob; existence would elude him and go undiscerned. Here we seem to have slight indications of the non-cognitivity and non-communicability that Hook detects in Existence. But is it therefore *dispensable*?

Williams comments that “Existence must be such that any explicit doctrine that does not impute much too much to it will impute much too little.”¹⁶

Even a doctrine that said too little about existence, however, would not dispense entirely with existence (as Hook seems to want to do). As Barrett remarks, when it comes down to it, only the word “existence” would be dispensed with, never its actual meaning (as inchoate as it might be).¹⁷ Barrett insists: “True, I do not know any satisfactory analysis of what the reality of the perception consists in, but this does not cast any doubt on the fact that we do have such perceptions.” In other words, existence is so *prima facie* that it cannot be denied, for it is discerned as something fundamental to every thing present.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it may seem prudent for theists to equate existence with God and to say of God that he exists and that his existence and essence are one (as I have intimated). But perhaps this should not be done. For it invariably suggests that God is a being—a unique being, to be sure, but a being nonetheless. It seems far more honorable not to affirm that God is a greater being than we, but to insist that God is not a being at all. Rather he is Being-itself. Then one could say with Tillich that “we are unable to have a perception or even an imagination of that which belongs to the divine life.”¹⁸ Thus, God is preserved as God and not idolatized as a being among beings. Evangelicals would then be in a better position to acknowledge more fully that “[t]he mystery of being beyond essence and existence is hidden in the mystery of the creativity of divine life.”¹⁹ In fact, existence is so foreign to God that Tillich says, “The question with which the doctrine of God *concludes* is the quest for a doctrine of existence and the Christ.”²⁰ Atheism, with its claim that God does not exist, is thus eminently preferable to theism—at least in the respects now considered.

Such considerations suggest that a cumulatively plausible case might be made for the real serviceability of atheism for evangelical theists. This need not entail some process of atheistic de-conversion. Rather, the evangelical insistence that God exists is simply re-interpreted as an *ontological commitment* to the truth of God as Being-itself. In this way, too, evangelicals may finally and with good conscience engage in a profound spiritual exercise that aims to re-describe and re-conceptualize God in such a way that a pestering philosophical problem (the matter of proving God’s existence) is finally transcended, a problem that perhaps has long outlived its usefulness.

In terms of the above engagement with Tillich and in light of our discussion regarding MN, evan-

gelical theists might consider granting the atheist her point, as it were, and concede that God does not exist. The implications, however, reach further in that it would no longer make sense to speak of theists and atheists, at least as traditionally conceived. Since atheists depend on the theists' articulation in order to formulate their various forms of denial, perhaps atheists would no longer be atheists if theists were no longer theists. If theists become atheists, it is not clear what form of denial remains for the former atheists. Surely, there lurks some contrary position to take up. As Macquarrie points out: "The dispute between the theist and the atheist has not so much been overcome as shifted into another conceptual-ity."²¹ But this was precisely our pragmatic intent from the start: to re-describe the situation with hopes of eliciting newer and more interesting philosophical and theological questions that can contribute in a more tangible way to the flourishing of human kind. All parties involved would benefit if evangelicals could be given the existential courage to take just such a step.

Evangelicals follow Christian tradition and incorporate existence into God's substance. Most evangelicals hold that God exists in such a way that his existence and essence are one. I have suggested that this should not be encouraged. God then is conceived as a being, a less than desirable outcome. Perhaps it would be more pious to move from conceiving of God as a greater being than others to insisting that God is not a being at all. Evangelicals may have something to gain from such a move. At the very least, there is the prospect of shifting the grounds for atheistic and skeptical attacks.²²

² As in Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvii.

³ Though Barbara Forrest admits that the one does not necessarily entail the other, she does argue that MN should lead people to conclude that philosophical naturalism is the only reasonable position to hold. See Forrest, "Methodological Naturalism and Philosophical Naturalism: Clarifying the Connection." *Philo* 3 (2000): 7-29.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 1.205.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.205.

⁶ Sidney Hook, 'The Atheism of Paul Tillich,' in *Religious Experience and Truth*. (ed. S. Hook; New York: New York University Press, 1961), 59-64, 60.

⁷ Sidney Hook, 'The Quest for Being,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1951): 709-731, 716.

⁸ James Thomson, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' in *Philosophical Logic*, ed. P. F. Strawson (New York: Oxford, 1967), 103-106, 105.

⁹ See D. F. Pears, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' in *Philosophical Logic*, ed. P. F. Strawson (New York: Oxford, 1967), 97-102.

¹⁰ William Kneale, 'Is Existence a Predicate?' in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, ed. H. Feigl and W. Sellars (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, Inc., 1949), 29-43, 36.

¹¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1990), 327-337.

¹² Hook elaborates his charge in 'The Quest for "Being"' *The Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1953): 709-731.

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.236, 1.237.

¹⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.237.

¹⁵ Donald C. Williams, 'Dispensing with Existence,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 59 (1962): 748-762, 751, italics his).

¹⁶ Williams, 'Dispensing with Existence,' 752.

¹⁷ William Barrett, 'One Hundred Real Dollars (or Doorknobs),' *The Journal of Philosophy* 59 (1962): 762-763, 763.

¹⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.237.

¹⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.237.

²⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.289, italics mine.

²¹ John Macquarrie, *Martin Heidegger*. (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 58. I am reminded here of William Dean's suggestion that there is a cultural cycle that involves a dialectic between theism and atheism. See his 'The Irony of Atheism and the Invisibility of America,' *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21 (2000): 59-72.

²² Tillich talks about how certainty is afforded to theists in, for example, *The New Being*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 77, and *Dynamics of Faith*, (Haper-Collins, 1957), 54.

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