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# Chapter 1

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## Godlessness and the Ethos of Being

They overlay the land  
The locusts of development  
Lay their eggs of promise  
& hatch the larvae  
Of meaninglessness

We have wiped out the line  
& the horizon now is  
Between us and nothing  
Nothing  
Except ourselves  
We think

The light in between  
We do not see it  
We look on what is below  
The sun is always above  
It casts no shadow  
We never see it  
We face only forward  
Nothing but ourselves  
Before us  
Our faces flat  
Towards the future

### GODLESSNESS

There is no question more ultimate than the question of the ultimate. This is the question of God. Non-philosophers may well be willing to grant this claim. They may even expect philosophers to come to their assistance. But we philosophers have long listened to the voices of suspicion, voices that when they do not make us hostile to the question, paralyze our thinking on the ultimate. We have become embarrassed by the question.

This is something astonishing. The most important question, the most fascinating question, the most enigmatic question, makes us squirm – squirm though we wear the unmoved mask of agnostic indifference. How make sense of this shame? Can we mark some of the way stations on this path of shame? And when we have passed along it, can we then ask: What then?

We in the West are heirs of a number of religious traditions, but as descendants we have turned our inheritance into hostility to itself. We emerge from religious traditions, notably the Jewish and Christian, but certain developments of just those traditions have made trouble for any untroubled living of those traditions. I mean that certain forms of theism are not to be absolved from atheisms that seem to be their opposite. Godlessness emerges from our being in relation to God. We think of ourselves as at the end of a “good” progress, even when we debunk progress. We are enlightened even when we pour scorn on Enlightenment. We see our scorn as our light – but suppose we are freaks. How freaks? Freaks because the natural condition is to be religious: it is unnatural to be atheist. This crime against nature arises from nature as we interpret it.

We open our eyes, we smell, we breathe, we touch, we are touched, by rock, by the satin of a flower petal, by skin. We are amazed, even delighted, we attend on a certain music of things. When much seems rough and repulsive our horror is the shadow of our astonishment. What is strangely there is strange because it intimates an other – in and through its very own otherness. There is no shadow of a question, yet: the divine is there,

though there as also not there, for there is nothing to which one could point univocally and say: That is God. But what that means one does not know.

Or say, one hears one's breath, in the quiet of sitting still, or in trepidation as if trailed, and one hears oneself in an intimacy idiotic to every conceptual objectification, and one does not know what the soul is, beyond knowing that one does not know. There is hinted a depth to selving beyond self, and the haunting of self by an other that slows one into uncertain expectancy. Is this then our being, this uncertain expectancy? But we do not yet know what this means.

Or again, another stirs delight and disquiet in us. We behold a beautiful boy or girl, woman or man, and the beauty can lift one up unbidden and yet also be unbearable, almost. It flows over one, and away from one, though one reaches to it, but it is always in excess, and gone. It comes forward to meet one, and yet is fugitive in its forwardness. A gift has been offered; it seems everywhere and nowhere; and one might be surprised into asking: Is this gift a sacramental sign? But what this all means, one does not know, and perhaps may never know.

But – knowing or not-knowing – there is *nothing contrived* about the question of God. It is elemental and enigmatic – elemental because of the givenness of self, other, nature; enigmatic because one is struck into an as-yet-uncomprehended astonishment by the givenness. The astonishing gift perplexes us about what offers it, or who. And our question is not something to which history determines us, even when it is historically mediated. It is not something grammar imposes on us, even when our speaking is grammatically conditioned. It is not the sly unconscious that presses it on us, though its roots go down deeper than the conscious or unconscious. It is not something to which our social status condemns us. It is not something insidious metaphysics imposes on us, though we cannot escape metaphysics, twist and turn as we will. The question is elemental and inescapable. But we have to be with the elemental, and face what cannot be evaded, to know what this means. Nor will we “overcome” the question, when we have baptized our chains as historicist chains, grammatological, psychoanalytical, socio-political, philosophical chains. There are other fetters, harder to unbind, for instance, lie in the soul, not to mention vices not always dignified with names in philosophy.

Why has the face of being come for many to seem void of communication of God, when everything within and without seems to press on us the question? The changed attitude to being marking modernity has much to do with the matter. This has been recognized by many, and with many different emphases.<sup>1</sup> My emphasis falls on our reconfiguration of the primal ethos along a particular line of response to the equivocity of givenness. This produces a certain devaluation of being stripped of signs suggestive of divine transcendence. This is coupled with a culture of autonomy which, tempted to absolutize itself, eclipses transcendence as other, though behind the mask of autonomy is a will to power usurping absoluteness in a world said to be void of absolutes. The specter of nihilism, now expressed, now recessed, in which all other-being is instrumentalized haunts our claim to mastery, finally inverting into an outcome in which it all seems to come to nothing.

Suppose one holds to a God the creator of all, a God other than creation. Suppose, further, that the creation is given its own being for itself – given to be, it yet has its own otherness. Suppose God is other yet intimate, and other with an unsurpassable transcendence that nothing finite in creation can match. Suppose we seek to relate genuinely to this transcendence. If the transcendence is absolute, the search seems futile. If the search augurs of success, the transcendence seems not absolute. What then are the options? If we say the transcendence is absolute, we drive God away from us into a beyond, and our futility is just our search itself: the search drives away from itself what it seems to be driving towards, and hence lacks the basis to yield even a half success. Better then to search by not searching at all? If to seek God is to drive God away, cease to search, and

<sup>1</sup> For example, the progress of the more exact sciences, the increase in technological control over the conditions of life, the secularization of everyday life, the alleged maturing of rational humanity, human self-responsibility, or perhaps the refusal of given nature, or self-intoxicated will to power, and so on. All these have their truth, but we must still pitch the question at the level of what it means to be.

let God come towards one. But if no God seems to come? Let us wait. How long must we wait? Since we wait for eternity, must we wait for an eternity? But we grow restless and impatient. We have waited and nothing seems to come. Or perhaps it came but we did not see it pass? And perhaps it is there, and there is no wait, only the call of transformation? We have waited, and still wait, and no God seems to come. What then? Why then transcendence seems to turn over into immanence: first, immanence grieving over its own failure of self-surpassing; then immanence hostile over its previous desire for God; then immanence hostile to God as depriving its own self-surpassing of its own esteem in itself; finally, immanence as willing the immanent esteem of its own worldly self-transcendence. And then there is no more waiting and expectancy. We have arrived – God has arrived. Transcendence overturned. We–God–Ourselves.

If thought is too condensed in these statements, I will thin things in the sequel. To round off this opening sortie: We search other-being as *outer* – nature’s astonishing thereness. We search other-being as *inner* – the enigmatic abyss of our own selving. Each of these teases us into thought of God. (Kant: the starry sky above, the moral law within.) And yet God is other to both. But what if we conceive of divine transcendence in *dualistic terms*, as can easily happen? Then no community seems possible between God and creation. Not only does it seem that God withdraws into self-sufficient independence; world and we can seem to do so too. Or it might seem as if the flood tide of the divine ebbs, and world and we find ourselves beached on the solitude of a Godless shore. Something like this ebb of the great tide seems to occur in modernity.

What causes the ebb is very perplexing. Is it the self-withdrawal of God, as some have thought? Or was that space of transcendence always empty? Or have we, in a series of slight shifts – slight as singular, but momentous as a continuing series – blinded ourselves, deafened ourselves, numbed ourselves, though we call our sightlessness, our silence, our anesthesia enlightened? Something of the latter, I think, though I think so as one hard of hearing and as squinting. Yet, given the mystery of God, and the potential for equivocity in our openness to communication, there is some truth to the first suggestion. Our reconfiguration of the primal ethos produces a second ethos, and this makes more difficult our attunement to the signs of the divine. We can see this relative to the ebb: First relative to other-being as outer; then relative to other-being as inner. I mean, first, the desacralizing effects of the devaluation of being in modernity; I mean, second, the atheistic consequences of the self-assertion of human self-transcendence and its idolization of autonomy. In turning now to these points, our concern is the muffling of the signs communicating the divine in the ethos of being, a muffling our reconfiguration effects. At the ultimate, all this comes to nothing. In the chapter to follow, a reborn mindfulness of those signs, a mindfulness born out of the return to zero, will be at issue.

### DEVALUED BEING: THE STRIPPING OF THE SIGNS

The sources of the question of God are many, but major sources occur in astonishment and perplexity: astonishment before the sheer givenness of being; perplexity about the intelligibility, the meaning, indeed goodness of that given being. The astonishment is a beginning that is overdetermined, in excess of all determinacy. The perplexity follows the beginning in being a troubled thought about intelligibility, meaning, worth; it begins a move from the overdetermined givenness to a more determinate articulation for us. This perplexity, in turn, begets definite curiosity about the processes at work in the givenness. Out of curiosity the determinate cognitions of science emerge, and with a definite drift towards the utmost possible univocity in our articulation of intelligibility. (I say nothing yet about the urge to use the givenness, to exploit it for our own desires.) This movement from astonishment to perplexity to definite curiosity shows the transcending power of our mindfulness, but it can be fatal with equivocation relative to God. For the question of God does not arise in the determinate cognition of a definite matter of fact about which we are curious. It concerns more our metaphysical astonishment before the givenness of the being-there of being, also our perplexity as to what it might all mean, in relation to origin and end, what the point

of it all is in relation to its worthiness to be affirmed as good. The beginning, as indeed the end, is in excess of every curiosity and every determinate cognition.

The question of God precedes science, outlives it, but also always shadows it. It exceeds the will to complete determination that marks the move of curiosity to definite answers. Its excess is not that of an emotional murk that surrounds, like a penumbra, the clear light of our cognition. It bears on a mindfulness impossible to capture completely in the determinate categories of a definite cognition. This mode of mindfulness has not been well respected in modernity, and now is less and less spontaneously understood. Why? Because the momentum of modernity dominantly conceives our development as away from astonishment and perplexity towards as definite a determinate cognition as possible. Even if wonder, astonishment, perplexity are granted in the beginning, these are to be dispelled once the proper unfolding of mind is effected. The former are merely indefinite, and our task is to make things as definite as possible, that is, to conquer completely the putative indefiniteness of the beginning. We may even erect this into a historical destiny: religion for the primitives or children; metaphysics for the rationalistic adolescents; science for the adults come of age. And, of course, *we* are the grown-ups – enlightened, post-Comtean adults. For us, no more religion or metaphysics.

This claim to maturity, one suspects, is rife with misunderstanding, and misunderstanding derived, ironically, from a surfeit of cleverness. For this surfeit of cleverness is accompanied by an enfeebling of astonishment and an irritability with perplexity, especially metaphysical perplexity. The latter resists encapsulation in definite conceptualizations and hence chastens our intellectual self-esteem. Impatience with this resistance, irritation with intractable perplexity, these issue in an unprecedented will to univocalize being, a will that also makes being God-forsaken. But this is not evident at first.

The will to univocalize being is manifest in the project to mathematicize nature such as we find in Galileo, Descartes, and others. My interest is the changed attitude to being in this reconfiguration of the primal ethos. Most important is the loss of intimacy between being and the good, an intimacy witnessed to in a variety of ways in the premodern ethos. In the modern reconfiguration there comes to be a separation of being and the good. For the good is enigmatic and resistant to complete objectification and determination; it poses challenges to the univocalizing mind that this mind cannot fully meet. The premodern sense of the good was often identified with the end, in Aristotle and others, but the end is not univocally determinable. Even less is it possible to subject it to mathematical measure. To the univocalizing mind this is not satisfactory, and so this good is called into question, indeed put out of question, by being denied any place in explanatory schemes of intelligibility.

Excise thus the good and what results? We find ourselves in the between, which is now the ongoingness of process without end: a purposeless between, unless perhaps we reconstruct *ourselves as purposing in the face of the purposelessness of other-being*. The beginning is not good either; it is efficient cause reduced to the mechanism of effecting a happening. The mechanical effecting happens; it has no purpose; it has no good; it is valueless happening. And our condition? Between a worthless beginning and a purposeless end, without end; in a middle that in itself has no worth or inherent end. Upshot: the devaluation of being. Being is in itself worthless. It is there, yes; it is a happening, yes. Does it have value in itself, is its being a good in itself? Such questions should arise but do not properly. Univocalizing mind issues in the devaluation of being.

Can one find signs of God in being thus devalued? Very hard. It is not that efforts were not made; by Pascal, for instance, by Descartes, by many others. The efforts often have a taint of artificiality and strain; they lack the tang of the elemental. It is as if the devalued milieu forces us to more and more twisted ways of finding a way back into the proximity of the divine, and none quite works. Then there comes a point when the atheism of devalued being comes to seem elementally *self-evident*. The twisting and turning is given up; but so also is the mystery of God. Our question then: Are we true to being in devaluing it? Is being as devalued true to being? If not, do we not have to find a different way? Of what is devalued being itself a sign? Nothing, it seems. The outcome seems nihilism. Does the issue, then, become, at least in part, one of a “revaluation” of being, at least in the sense of some

restoration of other-being as other, and its inherent worthiness to be affirmed as, in some enigmatic sense, good? If so, would perplexity about God again flare up with passion?

### IDOLIZED AUTONOMY: ECLIPSE OF TRANSCENDENCE AS OTHER

Devalued being is not the end of the matter. When we take into account our *own* being, the changed attitude also affects *us*. Just as the givenness of other-being in nature is stripped of the signs of qualitative worth, so also we assume an analogous relation to our own being given to be. For we are given to be before we give ourselves to be. There is a *passio essendi*, a patience of being, more primordial than our *conatus essendi*, our endeavor to be. This patience is intimately connected with our porosity to the divine, for we are first as having received our being rather than as having determined it for ourselves, through ourselves. The *passio essendi* is closer to the more ultimate energizing source of our *conatus essendi* but it also defines the vulnerability of our finitude. This vulnerability may seem exacerbated, if the ethos of other-being is valueless in itself; in fact, our *conatus essendi* seems rather spurred into an activism, a self-activation that can lead even to an extreme of hyper-activism. Then the *passio essendi* is forced into recess as the *conatus essendi*, expressing itself without hindrance, goes into overdrive. The patience of being is overridden in this overdrive of the endeavor to be, so overridden that the porosity to the divine constituting our being religious falls out of focus.

In the reconfigured ethos of devalued being, *we* find *ourselves* between a worthless beginning and a valueless, endless end. Nevertheless, in the middle *we* determine a relation to things. *Our* relativity is not neutral but charged with value. Even if other-being is valueless, *we* cannot be but as valuing being, again even if the value thus unavoidable is value *for us*. There's the rub. If we value other-being as *for us*, can we finally avoid a slide from valueless being into being as instrumentalized? Being is a means to an end; and what is the end? We are the end. Why? Because one necessity we cannot negate is that we are oriented to an end, some end, any end. Nietzsche hits the bull (albeit for different purposes than ours): man would rather will nothingness than not will.

We cannot be but valuing being; we cannot will not to be willing beings; for not willing or willing nothing is still willing. The question is what to will; and indeed how to will. What is the implicit sense of being that determines our relation to other-being, and the sense of our own being as willing? In the context of valueless being, being as a whole cannot escape its demotion to being instrumentalized. But is this not finally true of us also? We may assert ourselves as the power wielding the instrument, but the other we instrumentalize will finally be not only nature but human being itself. The end: *ontological tyranny on ourselves*. I will come to this, for at first the exact opposite seems the truth: namely, that now we are truly released into our own original freedom. As it turns out, the freedom is at best equivocal, at worst delusionary and megalomaniac.

How dare one say this? Do we not live in the epoch of freedom? And was not Hegel at least right about this, though his critics will begrudge him? Let freedom ring! Unhesitatingly, we fall prostrate before this god. But is the prostration not in collusion with the devaluation? For the univocalizing of other-being wills to make being completely determinate, with the loss of inherent value, and so it prepares an empty space *for us* as its proper users. It makes straight the way for *our determining power* as the sole source of value. And so we are a determining origin that passes into and through other-being as a means to itself as the true end. Other-being becomes the medium of our own self-determination. This tends to be the dominant logic of modern freedom, and not in any merely negative sense of freedom from external restraint. There is that, but there is more, namely our freedom to become the power of being we are already in promise. It may take centuries to unfold the implications of these views.

My point is not to deny freedom, but to question any absolutizing of autonomy as the fullest truth of freedom. Modernity exhibits the self-assertion of autonomy: determination comes to mean our power to determine other-being, so that in the medium of other-being,

*determination is self-determination.* What is the problem then? The recession of the patience of being, and the reconfiguration, to the point of distortion, of the essential relation to other-being. Other-being serves as the medium of our self-determining: we mediate with other-being because we finally want to mediate with ourselves. We also do not do justice to the intimate otherness of our own *passio essendi*. Self-determination can become a kind of idol, so enchanting to our self-understanding we do not see the equivocal relation to the other it generates. The other may be a means to further freedom or a possible threat, but if the primary stress is on autonomy, the other will always be secondary, serving for the self. The idol: autonomy as a *nomos* of *to auto* subjecting to *heteros* to its law. Not only nature, but God and other humans carry the insinuations of threats to the *auto*, and so their otherness as other has to be “overcome.” Of course, if my autonomy must coexist with the justified autonomy of the other, then autonomy cannot be absolutized. We have to rethink freedom outside of the hegemony of autonomy (see *EB*, *passim* on this). This also means revisiting both our own intimate otherness and God’s.

The ontological danger here is that we idolize ourselves and think it our destiny to create the world anew in our image. This project of the will to power is the open secret of modernity. It is an *ontological necessity* that human beings be will to power if being as such is valueless. It has no good, it is no good, it is worthless; we cannot live with this; we must hence *make it worthy*. Worthy of what? Worthy of itself, worthy of God? Rather, worthy of ourselves. We are original, we are the power. And the goal? What could be the point of it all? We are not given the point; we make the point; we will the point to be ourselves. So we say. And the other? The point of the other must be the self. But what is the point of the self when the self is just for itself, and the other is for the self? Finally, no point at all, and the outcome is nihilism. We will come again to this.

## TRANSCENDENCES

We can better find our bearings if we distinguish the following senses of transcendence. In broad strokes, they correspond to the other-being of nature, of the self-being of the human, and the difference of the divine. It is not only their character but their interrelations that are important. How we understand them is rooted in our attunement to the primal ethos, and reflected in the reconfigured ethos.

First transcendence (T<sup>1</sup>): The transcendence of beings as other in exteriority. The transcendence of such beings consists in their not being the product of our process of thinking; their otherness to us resists complete reduction to our categories, especially in so far as they simply are at all. Their otherness as being at all gives rise to the question: What makes possible both their possibility, as well as their actuality? What makes possible the possibility of their being at all? This is a metaphysical question not about the “what” of their being but the “that” of their being there at all: Why beings and not nothing? The possibility of a further transcendence as other to their transcendence is opened by such questions.

Second transcendence (T<sup>2</sup>): The transcendence of *self-being*, self-transcendence. The meaning of possibility is here realized in interiority rather than determined externally. Human self-transcendence is of special moment here. There is possibility as freedom, as the promise of self-determination. We are impelled to the further question: Is this self-transcendence, in relation to the first transcendence (T<sup>1</sup>), an anomalous overreaching into emptiness, or a genuine self-surpassing towards an even further transcendence as other? Is our self-surpassing driven by a lack to fulfill only itself, or to seeking fulfillment in what is other to itself? Is it more than lacking and seeking what is infinitely more than itself, whether lacking or not? An important question here: Does our understanding of our own self-transcending rely too much on the *conatus essendi* and not enough on the *passio essendi*?

Third Transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>): original transcendence as still *other – transcendence itself*, not as the exterior, not as the interior, but as the superior. This would be a *hyperbolic* sense of transcendence, bringing to mind the question of God beyond the immanence of transcendence in nature and human being. If we were to call this third hyperbolic form “Transcendence itself,” it would be in excess of determinate beings, as their original

ground; it would be beyond human self-transcendence, as its most ultimate possibilizing source. It would also be beyond the ordinary doublet of possibility/reality, as their most ultimate possibilizing source. It would not be just a possibility, nor indeed a determinate realization of possibility. It would have to be “real” possibilizing power, in a manner more original and other than immanent possibility and realization. It would have to be original, creative possibilizing beyond determinate possibility, and “real” beyond all determinate realization, beyond all self-determining self-realization.

If such third transcendence were in excess of determinacy and our self-determining, would it be but a merely *indefinite beyond* to finite being? If so, would not its participation in the happening of the between be feeble? Is there rather a third transcendence that is not such an empty indefinite but excessive: overdetermined in a surplus sense, hyperbolic, not indefinite? If so, it would not be comprehended under any finite category of the possible or real. It would be above, *hyper, über* them, and yet most intimate to finite being as enabling it to be at all, and to be free. What must this possibilizing power be, such as to give rise to finite being as *other* to itself, and hence as possibilizing the finite space, or middle, for first and second transcendence? Such a third transcendence could not be identified with any projection onto some ultimate other of the first two senses. There could be no objectification (T<sup>1</sup>) or subjectification (T<sup>2</sup>) of third transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>). Rather it would seem that second transcendence (T<sup>2</sup>), in its ineradicable recalcitrance to complete objectification, is pointed beyond both objectness and subjectness to transobjective and transsubjective transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>). And perhaps first transcendence (T<sup>1</sup>) is not also devoid of its own ambiguous signs of this hyperbolic transcendence.

Much more must be said, but for now this is the relevant point.<sup>2</sup> Third transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>) has been made problematic in modernity, both by a univocalizing objectification of first transcendence (T<sup>1</sup>), and by developments of second transcendence (T<sup>2</sup>), especially when this last defines itself hugely in terms of its own autonomy. Then a logic of *self-determination* stands guard over all our thinking, and the thinking of what is other to our self-determination. Inevitably, third transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>) becomes endowed with an equivocal position. There is a tension, indeed an antinomy, between autonomy and transcendence. This is not just a mere contradiction, but a tension wherein different possibilities for human thought and life take shape. In this equivocal space the traditional respect accorded to third transcendence (T<sup>3</sup>) from an essentially religious point of view comes under onslaught. Into that space of equivocality, our “creativity,” our “poetry,” so to speak, inserts itself, as somehow answering the tension of autonomy and transcendence. Human “art” comes to assume roles previously accorded to religion. Is the antinomy resolved? Or does third transcendence still remain mockingly “beyond” – or welcoming?<sup>3</sup>

### THE ANTINOMY OF AUTONOMY AND TRANSCENDENCE

What might be said here of this antinomy of autonomy and transcendence? The ideal of autonomy accents our determining power; it may indeed grant our relatedness to others, yet the primary stress is on self-determining, the *nomos* of the *auto*. By contrast, transcendence must put the stress on the importance of otherness; for the *trans* is a going beyond or across towards what is not now oneself. If God is third transcendence, there is an otherness not reducible to our self-determining. Third transcendence cannot univocally coexist with an absolutized autonomy which is absolutely for itself. Alternatives: if autonomy is primary, third transcendence has to be subordinated; if third transcendence is primary, autonomy cannot be absolute. Western modernity generally has opted for some version of the first alternative, with incalculable consequences for the second.

<sup>2</sup> We will come to explore the connections between these different senses of transcendences and the hyperboles of being: T<sup>1</sup> is perhaps more intimately tied to the idiotic and aesthetic, T<sup>2</sup> and T<sup>3</sup> (especially with respect to the porosity and passage between them) are more bound up with the erotic and the agapeic.

<sup>3</sup> See AOO, Chapter 8 “Art and the Impossible Burden of Transcendence,” where I also remark on the post-modern response to the antinomy, which tends to equivocate between the aesthetic and the religious.

The choice is more complicated in that the need of transcendence does not die, cannot die. Indeed autonomy is a formation of self itself derived from an energy of transcendence of which we are first beneficiaries rather than possessors. Something of this may even be granted when we acknowledge that the human being is an immanent transcending power. This power is *self-transcendence* (T<sup>2</sup>). And so we are tempted to say that in self-transcendence we have *both* autonomy and immanent transcendence; we have no need for an other transcendence.

Can we sustain this reassurance? Suppose we find ourselves, so to speak, slipping below the surface of our own self-transcendence? Open the door into this dark, and what then? What answers this opening is itself a new darkness. The more our self-transcending delves into its own immanent power, the more enigmatic that power comes to seem, and the less we are assured of our autonomy. Our self-transcendence goes beyond itself to what as outer is other, but it also goes beyond itself into its immanent resources, into depths bottomless, depths murky, depths terrifying. The infinite restlessness of human selving in its outward throw shows to us the external side of an infinitely enigmatic abyss in inwardness itself. Step into that abyss and the warm self-esteem of autonomy will soon shiver in strange icy blasts that blow from undiscovered bourns. There is an inward otherness whence energies erupt or surface, and the sure “self” is no master but a derivative therefrom. In a sense, these depths are more intimate with the mystery of the givenness of being in the primal ethos. Perhaps, then, autonomy is less the sovereign it takes itself to be as the dark issue of an origin more enigmatic than its own self-determining powers. Autonomy as self-transcendence opens into transcendence beyond autonomy – opens into, because it opens up out of this more mysterious other transcendence.

There is a dialectical lesson here, rather a double dialectical lesson. First autonomy as self-transcendence only *seems* to solve the antinomy and dialectically overcome the tension of autonomy and transcendence, and indeed surmount every need for reference to a “beyond.” This is the first dialectic. But there is a kind of *doppelgänger* dialectic behind or beyond this. There is an *other otherness* beyond the seemingly dialectically overcome otherness. Immanent exploration of autonomy as self-transcendence shows the self to be the issue of a transcending source not itself self-transcendence. Our self-transcending is first energized by the given endowment of the *passio essendi*, and only then by the endeavor of the *conatus essendi*. Self-transcendence is not made possible by an autonomous self, but the transcendence of the autonomous self is made possible by transcendence as other to self-transcendence. This other transcendence brings us back into the neighborhood of perplexity about God.

This last point is not often granted. If the *other* origin is granted at all, and if there is any breakthrough into the energies of the primal ethos, it tends to be in terms of the occlusion already pervasively at work in the reconfigured ethos. I mean that the devaluation of being produces further results here, both in thinking of human self-transcendence and thinking of the origin as other. The latter is seen in terms of what I will call the *dark origin*; the former is often understood as some variation of *will to power*.<sup>4</sup> To these two points in turn.

#### DARK ORIGINS AND TRANSCENDENCE AS OTHER

What I mean by “the dark origin” concerns, first, the continued exigence for transcendence as other, even in devalued being, and second, a view of this transcendence that, nevertheless, perpetuates a reflection of the reconfigured ethos of worthless being – “worthless” sometimes in the sense of being merely neutral, other times in the presentiment of its being

<sup>4</sup> My points of reference here include Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as Hegel, Kant, and others, and you might say “Surely these thinkers are behind us?” Yet Nietzsche brings something to a head that has not yet had its adequate response. What he uttered was in formation through those who came before him. We still live in the shadow of these thinkers, and how they found themselves in the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence.

*hostile* to us, perhaps even evil. Still we cannot but ask about the ground or origin of that valueless middle: What is ultimate, what is being ultimately, at bottom, or in origin? Above the reply was heard: there is no ultimate good in the end. Now we hear: there is no good at all in the beginning.

Undoubtedly, we are always tempted to define the ultimate relative to our being in the middle: we reconfigure the primal ethos in terms of ourselves. If we see the middle as worthless, it is hard not to think of the origin/ultimate as also worthless. You interject, benignly, “the middle as valueless is there, indifferently there, neutral: neither good nor evil.” I hear you. But can we maintain this stance, finally? For in the middle we twist in the tension of plurality, racked by strains between us and ourselves, between humans, between humans and other beings of nature, between beings in nature other than us. “Nature red in tooth and claw” is hard to blink away, despite all precautions of agnostic indifferentism. *Homo homini lupus*, no honest person can deny, despite all quarantines of studied neutralism. In truth, *no immunization from value is effective finally*. Any agnostic indifferentism seems only a way station along a slippery path from the worthless middle to the worthless origin. More, any suggestion that the origin might be good becomes incredible to those gliding along the frictionless pathway of ontological neutralization. And it is not that *we fail*, that *we* cannot live the truth of a “neutral” world. That is true but not the main point. We cannot live it, because to live always shows the truth of the value of life. Valueless neutrality is impossible because there lives no such thing. Its truth is death. And perhaps not even death, since there is nothing neutral about death.

The point could be elaborated relative to the longer arc of modernity, for the turning of this arc from its upward motion to its downward spiral can be shown *in nuce* in the transition from Hegel to Schopenhauer. It is not incidental that Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1812–16) was written at almost exactly the same time as Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation* (Vol. I, 1818). We fail to take much notice of this, perhaps because Schopenhauer only exerted influence well after Hegel’s death. And yet the Hegelian hymn to ascendant reason is contemporaneous with the Schopenhauerian descent into a more ultimate darkness prior to reason. Can the ascent of one be divorced from the descent of the other? Do we not still live out of the consequences of that ascent and descent?

Hegel might be seen as the epitome, the consummation of the upward movement of modern self-determination from its first primitive expression to an extraordinarily complex dialectical determination. To be absolute is to be self-determining. I have given many essential qualifications elsewhere (e.g., *Hegel’s God*), but Hegel’s absolute is identified with the free self-realization of reason itself: the origin becomes itself fully by overcoming the indefiniteness of the beginning, becomes thus completely self-mediating and self-fulfilled. Hegel is one of the major philosophers in modernity who struggled against devalued being (he might not put it thus); but equivocalities in his dialectic, with respect to self-determining being and relative to otherness, issue in *both* a claim to the completion of self-determining being, and the dialectical reversal of that completion.

The following is *one way* I would put it (there are others): thought thinking itself is reversed into thought thinking what is *other* to thought. The difficult question is: What is this other? There have been different responses, and the matter is still deeply in question. Schopenhauer reveals something about the reversal, though, oddly enough, it is already prepared in Kant, unbeknown to Kant himself. Reason becomes the bright side of a more basic energy of being other to reason; indeed, in the present instance, other in a way that turns reason into an instrument or means. Reason becomes the slave of will – not sovereign master but a tool. It can be both a *weapon* of the will identified with the dark origin, and a *protection* for humans against this very darkness. Schopenhauer’s will is a blind, insatiable striving, a dark version of an erotic absolute; Hegel’s *Geist*, or Idea, is a bright rational version of the erotic absolute (see *BB*, pp. 242–51, 260–1; *PU*, pp. 238–51). Could one venture that, after Hegel, the erotics of being present themselves more and more in the form of *eros turranos*?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Whitehead speaks of the “eros of the universe” – *Adventure of Ideas* [1933] (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 253; also pp. 68, 251, 268; *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* [1929],

Schopenhauer explicitly stylizes himself as an “atheist,” contemptuous of the moral God (Hegel and Nietzsche share something of this contempt). Nevertheless, Schopenhauer has his “god,” though this god looks more like Descartes’ evil genius than any benevolent Providence. Hegel too has his “atheist” side, detected by Kierkegaard, enacted by Feuerbach and Marx, and other left-Hegelian spawn. A lesson I take from this: the question of God and atheism is not amenable to simple oppositional categories, despite the polemical crudities of some of Hegel’s successors. This is the main point here: there is something ironical, in an entirely *just* respect, in the emergence of the dark origin against the horizon of the consummate self-determining rational origin in Hegel. The dream of this idealistic origin begins to bring forth monsters. The human being also becomes hard to see as more than a puppet of this dark origin. We witness the beginnings of the decomposition of the “god” autonomy. More, we see the eruption of dark transcendence *in* human self-transcendence, and yet this darkness tells of a deeper, unfathomable darkness that is other to human self-transcendence.

Here begins the *downward* movement of the arc of self-determining being. It is foolish to think the question of God is finished because of the rash of “announcements” in recent centuries of humankind being beyond religion or God. The downward movement brings us to this point about will to power. We come to think of ourselves in the image of the origin, as well as the origin in our own image. For we are originals, are we not? What does this mean? It means we are sources of origination that instantiate the original power of the ultimate source. If the latter is will, other to thought thinking itself, we too are will, or more affirmatively, will to power. This resort to will to power unfolds rather than transforms the basic ontological attitude governing the situation. And so to the second point.

#### WILL TO POWER AND THE COUNTERFEIT DOUBLE OF “YES”

In Schopenhauer, art and religion are releases from the *eros turranos* of the dark origin, art episodically, ascetic religion more completely. It is by a radical “no” (a “no” at the roots) to the erotic origin that, pace Schopenhauer, ascetic religions release us. Religion is thus reconfigured in the image of the dark origin as itself the great “no” to life and the evil of the “to be.” There is here a certain reversal of “yes” and “no,” by contrast with the “yes” to life and the good of the “to be” that we find, for instance, in the great monotheistic religions deriving from biblical inspiration. This reversal is more reminiscent of a Gnostic revulsion to creation as given: “It is not good.” At one level Nietzsche inherits this reversal from Schopenhauer, but he also wants to say “yes” against Schopenhauer’s “no,” and so in a way reverse that reversal. Yet Nietzsche also revolts against the counterfeit double of “yes” he claims to find in the alleged religious “no.” But has the deeper truth of the primal religious “yes” to the good of the “to be” already been inverted and corrupted here? A more ultimate “yes” to the God of amen? A God and an amen impossible to grant, finally, outside of some agapeic sense of the origin, and not just an erotic sense? Yes, I think, though the equivocations at play in our intermediate condition are subtle.

Turn again to the downward movement. Kant’s affirmation of the autonomy of the moral subject, Hegel’s absolute as self-determining spirit, are high points in the upward curve of autonomy. But in the recesses of this development all is not quiet. Both Kant and Hegel contribute to a peculiar *chastening* of reason, the first by the putative *delimitation* of reason’s legitimate exercise, the second by its putative *release* from all such delimitation. The other of thought thinking itself shadows the ideal of autonomous being. For our reconfiguration of the primal ethos is always (under)grounded by those ontological reserves of

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edited by David Griffin and Donald Sherburne. Corrected edition (New York: The Free Press, 1985), pp. 244, 346; *Religion in the Making* [1926] (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 68, 73). Other process thinkers, as well as evolutionary thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin, tend to agree. This eros tends to have resonances of a benign ontological desire, but what of the *tyrannical* form of eros? Mention of this can quickly dissipate the magic charms of eros – unless, of course, one is under the enchantment of a blacker magic.

the ethos that our reconfiguration consigns to recess. Thus our reconfiguration always has its reserved side, and what is recessed is not thereby put out of play. When we begin to suspect this, we will never cease to look over our shoulders at the source of the shadow we cannot see. Our reconfiguring reason will become unsettled and uncertain about itself. Not incidentally, Kant's idealism can be seen as the *self*-critique of reason. Hegel's idealism can also be seen as such – only the self-critique here claims to *overcome* its own critical nature in a speculative affirmation of thought thinking itself; it claims to consume its own shadow. Yet if the other to thought thinking itself gains a hearing, the self-critique opens into an abyss beyond reason; or at the least, reason's pretension to sovereignty is countered. The shadow we flee grows larger as we flee it. The dark on the other side of reason has no sufficient reason, at least in the classical sense: human reason emerges out of this other, and hence is derivative. Schopenhauer calls this other "will," claiming that it is really Kant's thing in itself. Nietzsche calls it will to power. I prefer to resort to the terms of the agapeic origin, for reasons that will emerge.

Will to power seems intelligible enough (paradoxically) if the world is not intelligible in itself. Moreover, if intelligibility is the product of will, we too must "create" the intelligibility, as well as the good of being. Of course, will to power can be given different renditions: the more common acceptation as power *over* the other, through superior dominance and so on; alternatively, as self-affirming power that affirms itself in its own self-increase. In either case, be it the cruder form or the more refined, will to power is finally for its own sake. Nietzsche mixes these senses, though the second is for him the most creative and ultimate source of value. Nevertheless, there is no inherent hospitality of being to value: there is a *disjunction* of being and good, a discordance. Nietzsche sees what is at stake: we cannot finally live with this discordance. Either we have to protect ourselves from the *horror of the truth of being*, be it through Apollonian illusion, Dionysian intoxication, or Socratic–Alexandrian dialectic, or, we can transvalue all value: sing the world beyond good and evil, in all its joy and monstrousness, its rapture and suffering. Nietzschean will to power seeks to overcome the discordance of being and good by affirming all being as "good": highest will to power is the will that in affirming itself affirms all being as it is. Singing of all this is to be gleaned from Nietzsche's ultimate love: *amor fati*.

There is much more that could be said here (see *IST?*, Chapter 6). For myself I would ask: What love is this *amor*? Is it eros, or self-affirming love, or philia, or agape? What fate is this? Eternal necessity? *Moirai*? The eternal return of the same? But why *love* that? You say it is consent to the happening of becoming? But does "It is so" now become "It must be so"? What kind of amen is this "must"? What kind of "So be it"? For there are counterfeit doubles of "yes." These are not entirely false, but something false in them makes what is true in them false, finally. Then they are false doubles of "yes." What is true in the "yes" to fate? The ultimate love of will to power seems altogether too close to an *eros turranos*. Is there not too much of a hypertrophied *conatus essendi* in this, to the atrophy of the religious porosity of the *passio essendi*? And what then of the bloody crushing of innocence: are we also to sing our "yes" to an evil fate? What kind of "yes" is this? Nietzsche has no satisfactory response to monstrous evil. And he joyfully tells of the world as a *monster* of energy, will to power, and nothing else besides.<sup>6</sup> Who would dream of bowing to this monster? Who would dream of loving it?

You remind me: Nietzsche would not speak of being and good. I grant that, but that is not my problem. Nietzsche, properly interpreted, and this means sometimes interpreted against himself, is on the right track in asking about the ultimate amen; but he is betrayed by the whole horizon of his thinking. What is this horizon? I note four major aspects: First, it is defined by the view of valueless being, worse, by being as pain, even horror, at bottom. Second, by a view of the protective, recuperative power of creative will to power as affirming, *despite* worthlessness and horror. I call this whistling in the dark.

<sup>6</sup> *Der Wille zur Macht. Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1930), pp. 696–97 and *The Will To Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 549–50; see AOO, pp. 205–6.

Third, by a totalizing claim with respect to will to power (*all being* is will to power, and in either of the above two senses). But this totalized claim cannot sustain in full the sought affirmation. A different consent to otherness is needed – beyond the will to power that either dominates the other or wills its own will. We need an agapeic origination and self-transcendence. Fourth, by the fact that our affirming will to power collapses in view of the totalized will to power: if all being is valueless, we too are valueless finally, in the valueless whole, and all our brave, heroic valuing is swallowed by the valueless whole. Inference: for the Nietzschean affirmation to make any sense at all, there must be some *inherent hospitality* of being to good,

Nietzsche never provides us with the proper ground of this ontological hospitality. Quite the contrary. Despite the self-authorized official profile, he never really escaped from Schopenhauer's pessimism, and the bitter wisdom of the Silenus, companion of Dionysus, expressed in words Nietzsche, as Schopenhauer well before him, liked: "Best of all, not to be; and second best, to die quickly."<sup>7</sup> There are no ontological resources in the later Nietzsche, which allow us unashamedly to say "It is good to be"; though this is just what Nietzsche in practice wants to sing. The song of affirmation of will to power is a song masking its own metaphysical despair, even as it overtly seeks metaphysical consent beyond despair.

What do we learn from this? Taking into account the reconfigured ethos of modernity, and against Nietzsche's own self-interpretation and self-advertisement, the metaphysics of will to power is a *reactive* response to the sickness of devalued being. Try as hard to hide it as he did, it seeks to affirm *despite*. Its sense of human will to power mirrors the sense of the origin as valueless. Is Nietzsche willing to say the origin is good? No. Why? Were he to do so, we would need some straighter talk about God, drawn otherwise than in the crude lines of polemical cartoons. If there is a worthlessness about the origin, there must be a futility about its consummation: there can be no end, only futile striving in the end; and our middle condition is an evasive alternation between a dishonest "creativity" that prides itself on being the original of the value of being and a half honest confession about the ultimate horror of being at all. Schopenhauer had already taken us closer to this point, with less baroque subterfuge. Perhaps Nietzsche never knew that he too arrived there, namely, back at his beginning, circling around a never dispelled despair. And even if active, really reactive, will to power acts, reacts once more, and once more again, there is no really *honest* way finally to avoid the futility of it all.

Valueless being leads to nihilism, it does not matter whether by a scientific, political, or aesthetic route. Let will to power sing its songs, hurl its curses, it still sings and howls within this horizon. It only produces the *posture* of affirmation. And where it seems to allow an other, it is still enthralled by its song of itself. Despite its posture of release to all being other than itself, it is a prisoner of the idol of autonomy. If the origin comes to nothing, the world comes to nothing, our will to power comes to nothing, our affirmation comes to nothing. The rest is rhetoric and pretense. We need an other thinking of origin, world, ourselves and others, an other affirmation. With a singular confusion of vision and blindness, Nietzsche felt the snap of chains, but he leaves us still in chains, even as he exhorts us to lift our legs in dance. We lift our legs, but it is despite the weight of chains. And in the soaring song, ecstatic in its strained and fevered beauty, we cannot quite deafen ourselves to the grim clink of iron. This song, too, is a counterfeit double of the ultimate amen.

### RETURN TO ZERO: COMING TO NOTHING

Suppose though there is *some* truth to nihilism. Suppose the origin is worthless, the world void of inherent value, our energy of being either reactive to or transformative of

<sup>7</sup> See especially, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy, 1872), sect. 3: Das Allerbeste ist für dich gänzlich unerreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu *sein*, *nichts* zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich—bald zu sterben." Also AOO, Chapter 6 "Eros Frenzied and the Redemption of Art: Nietzsche and the Dionysian Origin." See AOO, Chapter 5 on Schopenhauer's dark origin.

this worthlessness. What then? No transformation we can effect will change the basic truth of being: It all comes to nothing. But this outcome also includes *us*, and all our grand projects come to nothing. Our reconfiguration of the primal ethos comes to lack any ultimate point.

And do we not experience some such coming to nothing in our knowing, our doing, our feeling for life? *Knowing*: the self-critique of reason in modernity shows reason to *tear itself* apart: reason comes to this impasse – it cannot take *itself* seriously. We shine an excess of our own light on things and the now shadowless things lose their light and weight. The more we rationalize life the more life seems to lack reason.

*Doing*: we may will to stamp our value on things, but we have to “psyche” ourselves up to the needed act of faith in our willing. We have to become willingly deaf to the quieter sense that such willing is in a void. The will’s faith in itself must be sustained through itself alone, that is, through its own lack of faith. And then we meet the ethical relativism that is only the self-deceiving moral chatter that is penultimate to the collapse into ethical nihilism. We will show our hand, but this has no hidden aces, not even a joker, only a sheaf of null cards.

*Feeling*: the élan of life is drained when we lose the aesthetic feel of the agape of being. We may work ourselves into frenzies of excitement about the latest novelty, but this frenzy is the hysterical mask of a dead numbness. Feelings are the bodies of value. This anesthesia of being is this nihilism of the aesthetic. We should not be fooled by whoops of wow and floods of gush. The sincerity of sentiment is affected in the end if, in the end, it all comes to nothing.

Can we live with this coming to nothing? The simple answer is: no. Our ruses of escape are testament enough to this. We distract ourselves with “meaning.” Perhaps we should live the shattering more deeply. We do come to nothing. We are as nothing: a double ambiguous conjunction of being and nothing. We are but are as nothing, and experience our nothingness as the frailty of our finitude, as the perplexity of being that resists being dispelled, as the mystery of being that remains despite our best conceptual maneuvers. The truth brings us to despair of truth, and of ourselves, and of the good. Nihilism, the truth of nihilism brings us to despair of God.

Despair may destroy; despair may also bring one to a bottom, to a crisis, hence to a turning point. What can happen then? The idol of autonomy can be broken open. The shattered idol shows us nothing, shows us our own nothingness. Coming to nothing may be the reopening in us of the porosity of being. The event of being shattered is not in itself decisive; it is more the moment of truth in which we must decide. It is critical in this exact sense: it brings on a crisis. We are brought before judgment. The ordeal is an *oordeel*, a judgment, as much on us as our being called to judgment. Equally so, the crisis is a *krinein*, it asks for a discrimination. And what then, on this sharp edge that cuts (us) to the quick? We can give the doubleness of our “being as nothing” over to nothing. Or we can live the tension of our “being as nothing” differently. The ghost of God haunts the despair of nothing.

Nihilism? Surely this is your wonted tendency to exaggeration, dramatic and postured. Tosh. Nihilism? – a posture, once à la mode, now passé for the advanced intellectuals who have gone way beyond it to the weightless delights of unencumbered irony. While for those who reckon less on these advances, surely we live in an age of comfort and air-conditioning, and niceness. Nihilism? Come now!

Yes, there is something to such a protest. And yet . . . at the bland heart of having a nice day horror can nest – and the niceness of it all, if finally without ultimate point, hints more a horror than an honest confession of horror that it all comes to nothing. Niceness can be a profane parody of the agape of being, but it grins with emptiness, if that agape is gone. And that indeed is nihilism – the faking of the festivity of this agape. Let us have a nice day, but let us not sleep too deep in the comfort of this shadowless light.

For the various projects of will to power hide failure, not on the obvious level of pragmatic successes, but at a subtler level of metaphysical basics, that is to say, estrangements from the primal ethos. Pragmatic successes may hugely crowd the foreground of our everyday absorptions but they crowd out the hollowness – in the background – of our hold

on metaphysical basics. Can one carry on as if calculated contentment with the necessary pragmatic compromises were enough, as if it were in bad taste to be passionately earnest about this ultimate issue? Pragmatic compromises are essential and necessary, but gird them round with prudent rationalizations and we may reveal less our fear of truth as perhaps alarm at what might be required of us, were we truthful. Perhaps the archaic disquiet, in being startled by traces of the divine, attuned more to the primal ethos, was a more noble disquiet. (Once upon a time the atheist had to go in hiding; being godless enforced esotericism. Who now among the savants is the inquisitor – the pious or the impious? Is it the pious who now must dissemble, become differently esoteric? Query too exoterically posed, perhaps.)

Suppose coming to nothing, “being as nothing,” constituted a kind of ontological ordeal. Suppose in this there is both a deepening and a sifting: deepening, since we are thrown back on ourselves; sifting, in that we may be purged of impediments blocking our release to what is beyond us. Self-knowing may come to know that self is not enough, and ask if there is an other beyond self, intimated either in the inward otherness of the *passio essendi*, or in the transcendent as other (be it inner or outer, it does not matter). Suppose the return to zero intensifies the tension in the antinomy of autonomy and transcendence, and at a certain pitch of stress, the idol of autonomy crumbles. The antinomy need not be resolved simplistically relative to one side or the other. Rather, in breakdown there may be offered a breakthrough; and not of transcendence as simply *in opposition* to autonomy, but of transcendence as communicating a quite other exigence, calling on the release of our seeking beyond autonomy.

Seen so, this ordeal does not offer a secular *nunc dimittis* which dispenses us to turn away from perplexity about ultimacy. Faced with the blank front of pointlessness, the ordeal returns us to a zero point. World, or self, or others do not vanish, but finding their immanent point forsaken, the point of it all must be sought again by us. Can return to zero resurrect a new perplexity, intensified by loss? Can it hollow out a purer space in which we can seek anew concerning the divine? Can it prepare for a resurrected patience to ultimate transcendence, a new porosity to God?