

Foreword to *Sein und Gott*

This book exists thanks to the timely coincidence of two factors. The first factor was an intention of mine further to expand the structural-systematic conception of philosophy, whose general theoretical framework I presented in *Structure and Being. A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy* (2006/2008), to cover at least some additional, central topics. One of these topics is being and God, which is the crown of that part of this philosophy that *Struktur und Sein* calls comprehensive systematics.

The second factor was my conviction that I could and should work to clarify the arena within which, at present, the so-called question of God is being discussed. How this question is currently being posed, considered, and answered can drive philosophers who think systematically nearly to despair. The question “Does God exist?” is in every respect so vague, so indeterminate, so unclear, and above all so ambiguous as to rule out the possibility of its having a clear and well-reasoned answer. Having given many lectures and participated in many discussions at more than a few universities in many countries over the past few years, I had concluded that the confused state of the discussion is due primarily, even if not exclusively, to a fundamental lack of clarity concerning what it is about (no matter how that may be designated) and therefore also concerning what can, should, or must be presupposed by and demanded of articulations of it.

This conclusion led me to envisage this book in its current form. That form was shaped more precisely by two additional convictions. The first, drawn from years of philosophical investigation and reflection, is that what the question of God asks about can be clearly identified only within the framework of a comprehensive conception of

reality or—in more precise philosophical terms—of being as such and as pervasive. The second is drawn from intensive analyses of works of authors involved in the current discussions of the question of God, and of the approaches to the question taken by those authors. This second conviction is that the most radical resistance to clarification of the question of God comes not from the traditional opponents and critics of so-called metaphysics, but instead from authors classified as postmodernist.

To make this last conviction more precise but also more complicated—perhaps, one might say, to make matters worse—I must add that the postmodernist authors who most radically reject approaching the question of God via frameworks including conceptions of being are ones who accept and insistently defend conceptions of God that are putatively Jewish or Christian.

As is well known, postmodernism flows from many historical sources, especially the works of authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. With respect to the subject matter of this book and the position it defends, Heidegger is doubtless the most important of those sources because the postmodernists who classify themselves as Jewish or Christian rely decisively on him. This book shows that for the most part this reliance is only apparent, because these authors' interpretations of Heidegger are distortions.

I have discovered that in discussions with postmodernist authors, particularly concerning the subject matter of this book, as a rule nothing is said beyond general characterizations and obviously superficial remarks. Scarcely any interpreter or critic gets at the heart of postmodernist positions. It is my intention to do otherwise. I attempt to accomplish two tasks: first, I seek to reveal the initial and fundamental assumptions from

which the often astonishing views of postmodernists grow; second, I determine how coherent those positions are. The results of my accomplishing these tasks are themselves astonishing.

It is impossible, in a single book, to accomplish these two tasks for the entire spectrum of postmodernist thinking. For this reason I decided to subject to extremely thorough critical analysis the approaches of two of the most important postmodernist thinkers—more precisely, the two postmodernist authors who are the most important critics and opponents of systematic approaches to the question of God such as the one undertaken in this book. These are—how could it be otherwise?—two French authors: Emmanuel Lévinas, whose orientation is Jewish, and Jean-Luc Marion, whose orientation is Christian. Required both by the critiques of these authors and for adequate understanding of this book's systematic conception is a thoroughgoing interpretation and evaluation of Heidegger's thinking, so the book also includes a chapter devoted to it.

The explanations given above clarify the title and subtitle of this book. Additional clarification is provided by the Introduction.

This book often relies on my systematic work *Structure and Being*, mentioned above, both in its interpretative-critical chapters (1, 2, and 4) and—especially—in its systematic chapter (3). This reliance is unavoidable because it would be impossible fully to provide complete systematic explains of and arguments for both the systematic conception and the critiques presented in this book. As is well known, it is rarely the case that authors, in criticizing other positions, can rely on any already articulated comprehensive positions. Almost always there is no such comprehensive position, at least

not in any publicly available form. Reliance on *Structure and Being* is thus an extraordinarily valuable asset both for the presentation of my own systematic position as it relates to the subject matter of this book and for my critiques of other positions.

In developing and presenting the conception defended in this book I have been supported by many colleagues and friends from many countries. I thank them all, although I can name only a few: Christina Schneider, Karl-Heinz Uthemann, Josef Schmidt (all from Germany), Philippe Capelle (Paris), Manfredo A. de Oliveira and Emildo Stein (both from Brazil). I am uniquely grateful to Alan White (Williams College, USA), who scrupulously read various drafts of the book's individual chapters, making important suggestions concerning both content and linguistic presentation. At the same time, he began work on an English version.

Last but not least I would like to thank Dr. Georg Siebeck for his constant interest, his tireless engagement, and his fairness and generosity.

Munich-Augsburg, October 2009

Lorenz B. Puntel

Introduction

There is at present no question so often posed, so differently formulated, so radically misunderstood, and so often wholly inadequately answered as the so-called question of God. The overall goal of this book is to overcome the inadequacies, unclarity, and biases that currently befog this question, and to do so on the philosophical level. For that reason, this book is philosophical in the strict sense of being theoretical; it therefore provides nothing like instructions concerning how clearly understanding the question of God could or should lead anyone to change his or her life. Emphasizing this is important because consideration of the question of God has now reached the grotesque point at which the voices speaking for and against God are not only those of philosophical theoreticians, but also those of media figures of all sorts and indeed those of anonymous drafters of slogans that appear on public transportation vehicles.¹

This book is not only philosophical, it is *systematically* philosophical. Its most important and most comprehensive thesis is the following: it is philosophically reasonable, intelligible, and appropriate to raise questions about “God,” effectively to deal with those questions, and to provide answers to those questions that are rational in every respect only within the framework of a comprehensive conception of reality or—better—

¹ The “Atheist Bus Campaign” began in London in October 2008 when space on buses bore the slogan “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” There followed many similar campaigns in the major cities of many other countries.

of being as such and as pervasive. This thesis is indicated, in a nutshell, by the title of this book: *Being and God*. Any conception of “God” that is not situated within an explicitly presented or implicitly presupposed theory of being as such and as pervasive—hence, obviously, any such conception presented in conjunction with the rejection of such theories—can only be a conception of something or other, an X, that putatively does or does not “exist” beyond the world familiar to us and somehow separate from it, but that cannot ultimately be made either intelligible or reasonable. Expressed in the terminology of a long tradition: such a “God,” such a something-or-other, such an X could be nothing but an idol.

The specific goal of this book is not the development of a theory of God that would be in any way complete; it is instead the clarification of a philosophical framework within which such a theory could be developed. “God” is a term (and *God* a concept) from the realm of religion rather than from that of philosophy. It has (or ought to have or to retain) a strict connection to religion. For this reason, Heidegger’s famous question, “How does God [come into philosophy]?” (ID 55) is a good one, although it should be more precisely formulated, as follows: when, in what way, and under what presuppositions does God in the genuine sense (and that is the religious sense) become a subject matter for philosophy? This does not first happen when in one way or another something “primordial” is brought into view (traditionally, the something is a first principle, no matter how designated: a first cause, a first or highest being, etc.). In the conception presented in this book, this primordial something-or-other is first designated as absolutely necessary being. “God” becomes a subject matter for the book only when

philosophical explication of absolutely necessary being reaches the point at which it reveals a connection to religion. At that point, however, it is not anything that is first or highest in any of the traditional senses.

It is indispensable to emphasize the precise sense of the briefly described specific goal of this book in order that the analyses and considerations presented in the book not be misunderstood from the beginning. This strictly limited goal is made more precise by the introduction of the two most important aspects of the *comprehensive* question of God.

The first aspect is contentual: the comprehensive question asks *all* the theoretical questions that can be raised about God. These extend from such expansive questions as that of what would have to be for there to be God, and whether—and if so, how—God’s being (or, to use the traditional term, existence) could be proved, to quite specific questions—often the only kinds of questions about God treated in analytic philosophy—like that of the compatibility of the affirmation of God with the undeniable existence of evil in the world. This immense and extremely manifold subject matter is not the subject matter of this book. It is devoted to only one question, the one that for philosophy is the absolutely first and most essential question within the extraordinarily complex domain of the comprehensive question of God. This is the question of *whether, and if so, how*, philosophical theorization can reach the point at which it is reasonable or perhaps requisite to introduce the word “God,” which comes from the history of religions, into that theorization.

As briefly indicated above, this book answers its whether question with “yes” and its how question by showing how. It does so by developing the following central thesis: the asked-about point can be reached only within the framework of a comprehensive conception of actuality or, in the systematic terminology of this book, of being as such and as pervasive. “Within the framework” does not here articulate a restriction, nor does it require anything like (pre)conditions and above all nothing like any sort of pregiven space or horizon within which “God” would be nothing other than one item among others; if it did articulate or require anything of any of these sorts, it could appear to be vulnerable to the charges postmodernists repeatedly raise against what they call metaphysics. Quite to the contrary, “within this framework” indicates the dimension that, fully determined and fully explicated, is appropriately designated as God. God is the end point of the structural-systematic philosophy as a philosophical theory of everything, the fully unfolded conception of being. This is nothing like the kind of superficial or abstract identification of “being” and “God” that many postmodernist philosophers speak of. If it is appropriate at all to introduce “identifications”—and introducing them at all is highly problematic—then the resulting formulations might include the following: God is being-in-the-complete-sense, or being-in-its-entire-fullness.

The second aspect of the comprehensively understood question of God, as it is formulated and often treated at present, is practical and methodological. This means the following: the extraordinarily numerous ways of treating the question of God are oriented, most typically, around perspectives that concern the contentual questions about God (if at all) only secondarily; they are primarily (and often exclusively) guided by

considerations and criteria that are drawn from concrete or practical factors. Among these are the following: apologetics, which seeks to convince people that they ought to accept or affirm “God”; consideration of the concrete situation of the people to whom the treatment of the question of God is directed; the questions people find interesting, people’s attitudes towards questions about God, etc.; and the rhetorical-argumentative means, acquired through exchanges with everyday people, whose use is deemed likely to persuade them, etc.

This book wholly ignores all of these practical-methodic considerations, and thus the entire second aspect of current treatments of the question of God. It does not aim to convince anyone to embrace faith in God (or anything of the sort). It takes absolutely no consideration of factors of any sort that have to do with the so-called concrete situation of human beings. The book treats its subject matter strictly and exclusively on the purely philosophical-theoretical level. “Philosophical-theoretical” is, in the author’s view, pleonastic. Pointing this out, however, is neither unreasonable nor redundant, because more than a few philosophers (and theologians) do not view philosophy (or theology) as a strictly theoretical endeavor. And although all of the questions included within the first aspect of the comprehensive question of God *can* be raised within this book’s strictly philosophical-theoretical framework, most are *not* raised within this book itself.²

² A work that treats nearly all aspects of the question of God and nearly all currently defended positions relating to that question is A. Kreiner’s *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes—oder was wir meinen, wenn wir Gott sagen* [*The True Face of God—Or What We Mean*

At this point it is appropriate to explain a peculiarity of this book: its *critical* aspect. It is of course not exclusively critical. Chapter 3 presents a *systematic-philosophical* treatment of the question of God, but only as an approach. Because the systematic philosophy within which this treatment is situated is presented in extensive detail in *Structure and Being*, sufficient for the purposes of this book is a brief account of those aspects of that systematic philosophy that are required by the treatment of the question of God. But with this systematic account alone, the book could not achieve the specific goal introduced above, because that requires it to subject to penetrating critical analysis the currently most important counterpositions to its own systematic conception.

The book presupposes—it does not argue—that the counterpositions most important at present come neither from the domain of the empirical sciences nor from the tradition of critiques of metaphysics starting (especially) with Kant, particularly logical empiricism or positivism, but instead, surprisingly, from Jewish and Christian authors. For far and away the most part, these authors engage in what is called postmodernist philosophy (and/or theology). Postmodernism, taken as a whole, would be difficult to characterize; it appears to be a hodgepodge an author's inclusion in which requires, most fundamentally, the radical and total rejection of “metaphysics.” What is meant by “metaphysics,” however, is so superficial and distorted that countering the

When We Say “God”] (2006). Kreiner's bibliography is comprehensive (it is 29 pages long). Revealingly, Kreiner does not consider the line of questioning pursued in this book (*Being and God*).

rejections of all who are included within the hodgepodge appears to be unreasonable because it appears to be impossible.

For this reason, this book proceeds otherwise. Instead of globally considering all of postmodernism and all of the many authors who qualify as postmodernist, it subjects to penetrating and thorough critical analysis only the most important and most influential opponents of the central thesis of the book (introduced above). The author is convinced that at present and in the recent past, the two postmodernists who most radically oppose attempts to articulate a positive relation between philosophies (or thinkings) of being and conceptions of God—in a word, any positive relation whatsoever between being and God—are two French authors, the Jewish Émmanuel Lévinas and the Christian Jean-Luc Marion. It is for this reason that Chapter 4 of this book thoroughly examines and critically evaluates the works of these authors most centrally relevant to the issue of being and God.

Postmodernism comes to be largely due to the influence of some of the major thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially (although there are others) Hegel, Nietzsche, and Husserl. But the thinker who, with respect to the specific subject matter of this book, has exerted far and away the most decisive influence on Lévinas and Marion is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's significance, moreover, is in no way exhausted by the influence he has had and continues to have on postmodernism. All of Chapter 2 is devoted to Heidegger. The reason is that Heidegger is an absolutely central figure as far as the subject matter and goal of this book are concerned. He is central for two reasons.

First, Heidegger is the philosopher who, more than any other, both retrieved from near oblivion and sought to reformulate the most central question of philosophy, the question of being. Heidegger made this absolutely epochal achievement in the 1920s and 1930s. To be sure, Heidegger's later development followed paths that, philosophically, are not only problematic but are indeed unacceptable. His radical rejection of formal logic and of everything characteristic of clear and rigorous philosophizing is emphatically and uncompromisingly rejected by the author of this book. It remains the case, however, that his work on the question of being provides extraordinarily important stimuli for rigorously philosophical work on this question. In addition, the publication of his complete works has made available posthumously published writings that are particularly relevant to the subject matter of this book. Subjecting to detailed and meticulous analysis his critique of metaphysics, his attempted "retrieval [*Wiederholung*]" of the question of being (*BT* §1, 21ff.), and his wrestling with the problem of the relation between being and God require the devotion to him of an entire chapter.

Second: as indicated above, Heidegger is the philosopher to whom especially postmodernists chiefly appeal in their radical rejections of metaphysics and of any and every conception of the entirety of actuality, of being as such and as pervasive. To be sure, their appeals to Heidegger are as a rule extraordinarily superficial ones. These authors come nowhere near to providing adequate interpretations of or appropriations from Heidegger. To the contrary, the Heidegger who is the major source of postmodern thinking is (so to speak) a Heidegger *à la française*, but this distorted Heidegger has come to have a significant influence also on thinkers in other countries.

That the postmodernists rely on a distorted Heidegger—indeed, a caricature of Heidegger—is shown in this book chiefly in two ways. First, what the postmodernists appropriate from Heidegger is limited to a few aspects of his misinterpretation of Western metaphysics, and indeed usually on the basis of nothing more than a few catch-phrases, especially the one according to which Western metaphysics is onto-theology. No doubt, superficial reading of few of Heidegger's works could give rise to this practice, but Heidegger's thinking as a whole is far more complex and nuanced than any such reading could reveal. The postmodernists have however in their own way extended their one-sidedly and distortedly appropriated version of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics in so radical—and, again, so superficial—a manner to the entire philosophical-theological tradition of Western metaphysics that what they do can scarcely be traced to Heidegger. Second, the postmodernists' reception of Heidegger is strikingly naïve and uncritical. This is particularly the case with the slogan introduced above, which has become something like a *dogma postmodernisticum antimetaphysicum*. Chapter 4 of this book contains revealing examples and thereby evidence of this naïve and uncritical procedure.

The state of affairs just described led the author thoroughly to consider this entire problematic. That required subjecting Heidegger's thinking to an exhaustive analysis and evaluation. Because however the author's own systematic approach to the question of being and God is likewise influenced by Heidegger—although in a manner wholly different from that in which the postmodernists are influenced by him—the treatment of Heidegger's thinking is best placed before the presentation of the author's systematic conception.

From the preceding considerations emerged the architectonic in accordance with which this book is divided—as indicated by its subtitle—into its four chapters. That the three authors named in the subtitle—Heidegger, Lévinas, and Marion—appear in the book’s architectonic where they do is explained by the ways in which they are relevant to the book’s subject matter. Heidegger comes first, because although he does not develop an identifiable and positive conception of God, he does engage in a “thinking of being” that is of central significance to this book’s subject matter. The systematic approach sketched in Chapter 3 is significantly inspired by Heidegger’s thinking; that approach is also more intelligible when preceded by the treatment of Heidegger. Lévinas and Marion, on the other hand, are authors who present idiosyncratic conceptions of God on the basis of absolutely radical rejections of any and every comprehensive conception of being. The critical analyses of their thought is therefore most appropriately placed after the treatment of Heidegger and the presentation of the positive systematic approach.

This Introduction must introduce and explain one additional factor. In order for the philosophical consequentiality of the central theses of this book to be accurately assessed, they should—the author concluded—be presented, explained, and defended in contrast to positions other than postmodernist ones. For this reason, Chapter 1—which is in some ways introductory—treats a number of examples of *inadequate* approaches to the question of God, some direct and unsystematic, some indirect and partially systematic, and some antisystematic. To be emphasized is that it treats *only* a few particularly striking *examples* of such positions. Presenting even a partial critical presentation of *all* positions currently taken on the question of God is a task far beyond the scope of this

book. Also to be emphasized, however, is that the examples that are considered vary enormously from one another in terms both of substance and of historical influence. Among them, the thinking of Thomas Aquinas is of outstanding significance. For this reason, his thinking is not only subjected to thoroughgoing critical analysis in Chapter 1, but also referred to again and again in the other chapters in the book.^a

^a As becomes clear especially in Chapters 2, Chapter 1's demonstration that Aquinas's metaphysics is *not* an onto-theology is centrally important to the argument undermining Heidegger's thesis that *all* of Western metaphysics is onto-theo-logy.