

**Lorenz Bruno Puntel, *Sein und Gott. Ein systematischer Ansatz in Auseinandersetzung mit M. Heidegger, E. Levinas und J.-L. Marion* (Philosophische Untersuchungen 26) Tübingen 2010.**

In view of the countless remarks and publications—including contemporary ones—that treat the question of God on a very low theoretical level, this book by the well-known Munich philosopher fills a pressing need. On the basis of his comprehensive systematic work *Struktur und Sein* (2006), he here further develops what he calls comprehensive systematics, which treats the domain that relates to the entirety of our being and thus also, essentially, to the question of God. In so doing, he makes two points clear from the outset: he makes no attempt to develop a complete theory of God (1), nor does he have any practical intention such as persuading anyone to believe in God or anything of that sort (3). The “specific goal” of his book is, instead, “the clarification of the philosophical framework for such a theory” of God (1).

The structure of the book is surprising. Only the third chapter (around 150 of roughly 450 pages) is devoted to the task as narrowly described. The first chapter introduces, explains, and categorizes, in a thoroughly convincing manner, an array of approaches to the issue of God that are insufficient, some (those of Pascal, Küng, and Plantiga) because they are “unsystematic,” some (those of Thomas Aquinas, Spaemann, and Swinburne) because they are “partially systematic,” one (Wittgenstein’s) that is “anti-systematic,” and one (Thomas Nagel’s) that completely fails. The second chapter discusses Martin Heidegger’s “thinking of being,” “which renews and powerfully poses the question of being in the context of its two-thousand-year history, but fails to achieve a breakthrough in dealing with it” (145). To the contrary, Heidegger’s thinking is a “fundamentally deficient and confused form of ‘thinking’” (135). The concluding fourth chapter is devoted to two postmodern philosophers (Lévinas and Marion) who likewise treat the issue of God in inadequate manners.

Within the context of these detailed and convincingly developed critical accounts, in his third chapter Puntel develops his own “approach to a structural-systematic theory of being and God” (145), whose initial thesis is “that it is possible and sensible to develop an adequate conception of God only within the framework of a coherent, comprehensive theory of being as such and as pervasive” (145). The chapter’s opening section recapitulates the important systematic context thoroughly developed in the above-mentioned *Struktur und Sein*. At its center are the most important aspects and components of what Puntel calls the theoretical framework of the structural-systematic philosophy, that philosophy’s theory of truth, and the well-supported and quite comprehensible demonstration that although truth has, for centuries, been understood to be connected to ontological import, this fact is as a rule not articulated or considered in conjunction with concrete claims concerning truth.

The second section shows that addressing the question of God requires considering the totality of being as a totality, the universe of discourse as such or—in traditional terms—

the being of beings and thus (actual and potential) being itself. Human beings are related to being from the outset in that “the human mind can start by considering individual beings, gradually expand its scope by considering additional beings in increasingly complex configurations, and ultimately thematize the configuration of all configurations, i.e., the dimension of being itself” (191). More precisely, Puntel speaks of “primordial being,” which encompasses the the comprehensive universe of discourse and the fact that it is conceived of by the human mind, and is thus a “universal configuration” or “configuration of configurations” (196) beyond which nothing more is “imaginable, conceivable, thematizable” (197). The being of the comprehensive universe of discourse is traditionally termed “existence.” For its relatedness to the human mind, or for the comprehensive configuration of the universe of discourse along with the conceptualization of human beings, the term “being” is used. This comprehensive dimension of being has, on closer consideration, the following characteristics: it is itself intelligible, i.e., “accessible to thinking/mind and language,” without it being the case “that we as finite knowers are in any position to articulate it completely” (220). It is a universal, structured configuration that is expressible/articulatable and, from the perspective of the will, is good.

The dimension of being is next articulated in terms of its modality, and this includes a “demonstration” that there is “a necessary dimension of being” (234). The demonstration has the following form: “If everything (being as such and as pervasive) were contingent, then absolute nothingness (*nihilum absolutum*) would be possible; absolute nothingness is however not possible, so it is not the case that everything is contingent” (234). Decisive for the validity of this demonstration is the minor premise, “absolute nothingness is not possible.” This premise is based decisively on the thesis that it is simply unthinkable that the entities that there are or being itself emerged from absolute nothingness. Because such a transition is impossible, there must be necessary being, which can also be designated “a necessary dimension of being” (236). Absolutely necessary being must be understood as minded, as creator of contingent being (‘the world’ as a whole), because it “requires a free decision of absolute being to originate the contingent dimension of being, out of nothingness, within being” (244). Attempts—common in the tradition and still today—to clarify this relation of creation between absolutely necessary being and contingent being by means of the thought of causality familiar in the contingent world have however served more to obscure than to clarify; such attempts remain the most significant source of misunderstandings of the thought of creation, one of the “most magnificent thoughts that the human mind can have” (245).

The transcendence of God (= of absolutely necessary being) “in relation to contingent being occurs within God, occurs from the freedom of God.” In that “God creatively originates contingent being within being, God creates within God the distinction that we call transcendence” (270). Because however contingent beings remain always related to absolutely necessary being, indeed are contained within it, there is only a relative, not an absolute transcendence.

On the whole, with this account there is, for the first time, a convincing, philosophically developed basis for a conception of God that incorporates the metaphysical tradition and is both natural and theological. The most interesting question this account opens is that of whether and how the thought of an incarnation of God as man could be added to it.

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<http://www.theologie-systematisch.de/gotteslehre/1/puntel.htm> (accessed 5 May 2010)

Translated by Alan White