

“God and the Philosophers: A Reply to Nichols and Jones”

Eric Michael Dale, PhD
eric_dale@emerson.edu

I. “The God of the Existentialist Philosophers: Fate, Freedom, and Mystery”

I always enjoy reading David Nichol’s work on Heidegger, if for no other reason than that I usually find myself agreeing with him, or rather, that he more or less agrees with me. Since I cannot try to address all of his cogent points, let me use his discussion of Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre to say a few words about transcendence, givenness, and the atheist-theist divide. Sartre makes the fundamental mistake that Heidegger rightly avoided, and in fact characterizes a crucial difference between French and German existentialisms: for Heidegger, human *Dasein* is always already a concerned *Mitdasein*; to-be is to-be-with or to-be-alongside-of. Hence in Sartre’s play *Huis Clos*, there are no mirrors in hell. The hell for the solipsistic (*solus ipse*) Sartre is that *Dasein* can only be partially defined by what it is not. It is not, in fact, never has been, and never will be free in the radically Sartrean sense – which is more Cartesian than Descartes. Impossible as it may seem for the triumphalist Sartrean, we are not and could never be alone in the universe: we always have each other, at least. Others are the means of human self-transcendence. Whitehead was right, “The transcendence of God is not peculiar to him. Every actual entity, in virtue of its novelty, transcends its universe, God included” (*Process and Reality* 1976:94). Of course, when believers start speaking of transcendence, atheists start rolling their eyes because they know that some slight of hand is going on. And more often than not, they are right, and believers must make common cause with atheists to root out stupid theological language. However, Rahner reminds us that there are many senses in which we can speak of transcendence, and in the divine-human relationship, not all of those are valid. “If we have understood what is meant by the absolutely unlimited transcendence of the human spirit, then we can say that the alternative of such a radical distinction between a statement about “God in himself” and “God for us” is not even legitimate” (*Foundations of Christian Faith* 1985:54-55). Note that here, Rahner privileges human transcendence, and for me this gives yet another level of meaning to Nichols’s claim that “at the root of existentialism is a mystery of Being that runs deeper than conventional categories of theism, atheism,” etc. Existentialism was always first and foremost about human *Dasein*, human being-in-the-world. The situated, related existence of humanity displays a fundamental need, an emptiness, which drives us to transcend our finite givenness and reach out to each other. It is part of the tragedy and beauty of human *Dasein* that it is always incomplete. The fact that *l'enfer, c'est les autres* is Sartre’s problem (an ethical problem before it is a metaphysical problem, as Levinas would rightly point out), not mine. This lack of ethical content in Sartre’s heroic self-assertion, a lack of nuance for otherness, is also, I think, at least partly the reason why in post-war France philosophers moved away from existentialism and towards phenomenology, particularly the phenomenology of givenness that is exemplified in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. That Marion is also a profound theological thinker is also not a

coincidence (Marion denied to Derrida that he was a theologian, at the same conference in which Derrida, who “rightly passes for an atheist,” declared his affinity for the theological). To the extent that Marion’s work exemplifies the move from existentialism to phenomenology, and towards what has been called with some alarm(ism) the “theological turn” in French phenomenology, his work on phenomenological givenness bears some relevance to Nichols’s paper. For I note that Nichols uses St. Paul’s celebration of the “unspeakable gift” in 2 Cor 9:15 as its superscription. Marion notes, and Heidegger must agree, that to give is also to be given. The event of the gift is an instance of givenness, of a giving of my self to that which is not myself, be the gift a necktie for my father, or my heart to my wife. To give is to be vulnerable, to risk the chance that the gift as it is given will be rejected. Sartrean atheism is an attempt to avoid ontological rejection by reinscribing the ontotheological norm that “the deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it” (*Identity and Difference* 1969: 56) in an self-assertional humanity. Sartrean atheism is a form of hubris that makes ontotheology into an ontohumanistic error, equally pernicious. To say that being = God and God = being is an error of which atheists as well as theists fall afoul. As Marion insists, “To the thought that is attached to thinking Being as Being, outside of metaphysics, in the definite confrontation with ontological difference mediated as such, the question of the ‘existence of God’ inevitably will appear misplaced, hasty, and imprecise. Imprecise, for what does it mean *to exist*, and is this term suitable to something like ‘God?’” (*God Without Being* 1991: 41) Vulnerability and tragedy are impossible to find in a worldview which knows that it knows what it knows, and knows that you do *not* know that you know that you know. And again, atheism as well as many forms of theism (but not all, mark you) are guilty of this. Do we even need to point this out any more? Apparently we do. And with this, let me turn to Kile Jones’s defense of atheistic existentialism.

II. “All the Consequences of This: Why Atheistic Existentialism is more Consistent than Religious Existentialism”

I am grateful to Jones for writing an engaging paper that allows me the chance to say a few words on some subjects near and dear to my own work, and my own heart. Without even pretending to engage with every aspect of the paper, let me confine myself to two primary remarks. The first arises from something that Jones says in his paper: “Existential angst does not entail ontological mystery.” But of course, it does, because part of what makes angst dreadful is a numinous not-knowing, a life lived in the fact of a larger mystery. And here I mean no recourse to some transcendental signifier whom we name as “mystery” with a wink and a nod. To be sure, religious mystery is all too often a warm blanket rather than a mute wall, from which echo our prayers. Faith means *not* knowing – really not knowing. In the face of Hegel’s absolute God, and Heidegger’s last God, we must always take with fundamental seriousness Hölderlin’s absent God. For surely this absence brings together

both the atheist and the believer. We do not see, and like Thomas, we will not believe if we do not see. And this is, of course, appropriate. As St. Paul says, this is the difference between knowledge and hope: and hope vanishes when knowledge is complete. The security-blanket theism which Jones via Sartre and others is rejects is rightly rejected; but misunderstandings and caricatures are easy to scrap (or, alas, ought to be). To deny the mystery is to dissolve the angst, to accomplish a *deus ex machina* in which the not-knowing is dubiously dissolved into a heroic self-assertion which tacitly claims to know. It is hard to know what to do with an appeal to unending angst that also denies a life lived in the face of existential ignorance. Of course, an appeal to mystery in *prima facie* an acceptance of the ineluctable tension of mystery, with all that that entails. One of the reasons Carl Sagan refused to name himself an atheist was that such an exalted titled claimed to know too much, and of course Sagan was right, terminologically speaking. Sartre, with his heroic self-assertion and his ontotheological gloss of the free human subject as the stalking horse for transcendent Being (as David Nichols rightly adduces), is never so sure of himself as when he insists on what cannot be the case. It is too easy to call this hubris; again, as Nichols points out, it is little more than an ontological mistake about foundations. Sartrean atheism commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, and makes an idol of its certain uncertainty. To be sure, the straw-man fundamentalism and generic theism that Sartre and others condemn stands rightly condemned, as far as that goes. But it was never a very interesting target to begin with.

This raises another interesting point, particularly Jones's brave rejoicing at Nietzschean power. Without attempting an alternative reading of Nietzsche as a truly tragic figure whose ethics of beauty is the polar opposite of the self-assertive Sartrean free self, instead I want to note that it is exactly in certain sorts of philosophically sophisticated forms of Christian theology that such power is relativised in terms of divine weakness. St. Paul writes that God's power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), surely a rebuke to Constantinian theologies of power which have all too often held sway within religious life. But one need not ask Paul to bear all the weight of this divine weakness. Hegel knew it well; Moltmann thematized it in all his theology of the crucified God; Altizer and the whole tradition of death of God theologies find divine weakness and indeterminacy as the starting point for a so-called "new theology" (which was never very new, but lost nothing in its force for all its reliance upon older, paradoxically orthodox, models); and most recently Richard Kearney's hermeneutics of the possible God, that is a God which is *posse* rather than *esse*, and Jack Caputo's theology of the event (*Ereignis* read through Derridean playfulness, prayers, and tears). If the *skandalon* of the cross (1 Co 1:23) is that finite weakness and tragic loss are at the heart of the suffering reality which faith limpingly praises as God, who, I ask you, takes tragedy and loss more seriously – the Sartrean who revels in his meaningless (Camus's word, not mine), crypto-Cartesian, solipsistic, ontotheological freedom, or the Christian (I don't know what a "theist" is, I've never met one, and I'm not certain I'd like to) who lives in the face of the tragic reality of a God that takes a loss? By all means, let us target the *Christus victor* traditions, the pornographic

fantasies of triumphalistic theologies. They deny human ignorance and loss and tragedy as much as any Sartrean, and as such stand condemned by their own certainty. But let us also realize that ontotheological atheism from Voltaire to Sartre to Dawkins serves up the thinnest soup of generic, bloodless theism, and makes a banquet from what is rightly only field rations. A philosophical atheism that claims coherence when it targets only that form of generic theism which it is willing to recognize is hard to understand, let alone accept. If all it amounts to is a critique of the hackneyed “it’s a crutch” or “it’s a warm blanket” theories of religion, well, we must wish it well (do we even need atheists to tell us this version of human religiosity isn’t tenable?), and then continue with the serious business of coming to terms with the models of the divine with which we live. For they are our models, constructed on the cusp of the event, by which we attempt the humble task of living out the truth of human finitude, the truth that *we do not know*.

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