

S. J. McGrath. *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy*. Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.¹

It is difficult to deny that Heidegger's critique of what he calls the "onto-theo-logical" structure of Western metaphysics has holes in it. Most importantly perhaps, his critique does not pertain to those philosophers and theologians of the Western tradition whose thought, decisively influenced by Neoplatonic ideas, defines goodness rather than being as the ultimate principle of reality. Following the famous passage in Book VI of the *Republic* which removes goodness from the purview of both being and knowledge, such thinkers typically combine their mē-ontology with elements of negative theology and mysticism, that is to say, with the view that the first principle is best approached through love since it radically transcends the capacities of human reasoning.

Despite its limitations, however, Heidegger's critique possesses an enduring interest. Its relevance is due to the fact that the Heideggerian "story" of the history of the Western intellectual tradition offers a compelling account of the rise and essence of global technological capitalism which is threatening the future of the human race. If *Ge-stell* has become the way in which being gives itself in the technological age, this is not due to some recent aberration, Heidegger argues, but to an inherent tendency of Western thought to arrest the dynamism of being metaphysically in static presence, a tendency which opens reality to scientific knowledge and technical mastery. Thus, onto-theo-logy, the reduction of being to a being (God) that *logos* can grasp as first cause, is both the greatness and the fall of Western thought. The answer to the challenges of technology can lie only in a fundamental reversal of Western man's attitude toward being: the masterful subject of modernity must rediscover himself as sub-ject to the givenness of being in time.

From a Christian perspective, Heidegger's critique of onto-theo-logy is highly problematic, as it appears to preclude the notion of the Christian God, conceived as Creator and first cause of all being. Indeed, the later Heidegger's talk about "the gods" indicates that he renounced his Christian roots, moving toward some kind of neo-paganism. A considerable body of literature has been devoted to the problem of the possibility of post-Heideggerian Christian thought. Yet S. J. McGrath's new book adds an important piece to the puzzle by carefully documenting Heidegger's roots in Catholic Scholasticism, the reasons for his move toward Lutheranism in the crucial years preceding the publication of *Being and Time*, and finally his (at least theoretical) abandonment of the Christian tradition—"at least theoretical" because Heidegger did

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ask for a Christian burial. Apart from its precious documentation of the young Heidegger's sources, McGrath's book introduces an important thesis into the discussion: the phenomenology of *Being and Time*, it claims, is far from theologically neutral; rather, "Heidegger has deliberately designed a philosophy symbiotic with Lutheran theology" (168). If this thesis is correct, it would have far-reaching implications for any attempt to address post-Heideggerian philosophical concerns through a recovery of the intellectual resources of medieval philosophy, especially Scholasticism. Such an attempt would have to take a much more critical attitude to the very foundations of the Heideggerian project. But is McGrath's central thesis correct? Let us examine his argument.

After a presentation of his approach in chapter one, McGrath's book is divided into eight further chapters. Chapter two contains an overview of the early Heidegger's "religious-philosophical *itinerarium*," while chapters three through seven are devoted to a discussion of his sources: principally phenomenology and Aristotelian Scholasticism (chap. 3), Scotus (chap. 4), medieval mysticism (chap. 5), Luther (chap. 6), and early Christianity (chap. 7). Chapters eight and nine explore the possibilities of a revival of Scholastic thought after Heidegger.

Although he spent several years in minor and major seminaries before having to renounce the priesthood for "health reasons," the young Heidegger's reading did not consist of the typical neo-Scholastic literature. On the contrary, a negative review that he published in 1912 of Joseph Gredt's *Elementa philosophiae aristotelico-thomisticae*, a standard manual of neo-Scholastic philosophy, testifies to a rejection of this type of *philosophia perennis* even during his Catholic years. In high school, Heidegger became fascinated with Brentano's *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles*, a book that triggered his interest in the question of being, which he pursued in independent studies of Aristotle and Husserl, Brentano's pupil (in particular, he immersed himself in the *Logische Untersuchungen*). While he was a student at the diocesan seminary in Freiburg, from 1909 to 1911, he came under the influence of the theologian Carl Braig, who was not a typical neo-Scholastic either. Braig's *Vom Sein. Abriß der Ontologie* develops its ideas in dialogue with Plato, Aristotle, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Suárez but is also "critically informed by Kant, Hegel, and German idealism" (31). As McGrath points out, the first page of *Vom Sein* contains a long quotation from Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, a passage that foreshadows Heidegger's later thoughts on the dialectic of concealment and unconcealment. Bonaventure writes of the mind's eye, which, "concentrating on particular and universal being, does not advert to being itself" (quoted on 33 n. 19). At around the same time, Heidegger familiarized himself with Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Rilke, Trakl, and Dilthey. It is not surprising, then, that his 1916

Habilitationsschrift, his “first mature philosophical work” (43), was unconventional in its approach. In Heidegger’s own words, his interpretation of Thomas of Erfurt’s *Grammatica speculativa* (which was then still believed to be a work by Duns Scotus) was an attempt to read “medieval logic and psychology in the light of modern phenomenology” (quoted on 42). For McGrath, the *Habilitationsschrift* marks “the beginning of Heidegger’s way” (91), not least because it is in this work that we first find the philosopher practicing his typical interpretive violence: he is not interested in historical accuracy, in what an author actually said, but rather in what “he thought was struggling to come to light through it” (103)—this is perhaps what Heidegger would later designate as *das im Sagen Ungesagte*. But what did Heidegger take away from Thomas of Erfurt, interpreted against the background of Scotus?

Most importantly, McGrath suggests, the notion of *univocatio entis*. Against Aquinas’s theory of the analogy of being, Heidegger decides with Scotus that being is univocal. In 1927, *Being and Time* therefore starts from the assumption that there must be a single meaning of being. That Heidegger regards Scotus’s concept of *ens logicum* as a precursor of the phenomenological insight according to which all intentionality takes place within the horizon of a life-world of meaning—that is no doubt already the product of a “violent” reading. Similarly, Heidegger finds in Scotus’s notion of *haecceitas* a recognition not only of the primacy of the singular over the universal, but also of temporality over mere presence: “the horizon of the primordially understandable is time” (117). Finally, from his study of the *Grammatica speculativa* Heidegger learned that “concealed ontological form can be decrypted by a careful analysis of semantic structure” (105) since for Thomas of Erfurt, the *modi significandi* that are inherent in grammatical forms are ultimately expressions of *modi essendi*. Thus, Heidegger’s later etymologizing style of philosophizing may well have its roots in medieval speculative grammar. Nonetheless, McGrath recognizes the limits of the parallels between Scotus and Heidegger; it is striking that even in his *Habilitationsschrift* Heidegger ignores the theological implications of Scotus’s thought: “Heidegger wants a Scotus whose *univocatio entis* has no infinite mode” (117).

Between the submission of the work to the philosophy department at Freiburg in 1915 and its publication in 1916, Heidegger added a final chapter to his *Habilitationsschrift*. This *Schlußkapitel* bespeaks his developing interest in mysticism, which at that time he viewed as “the living heart of medieval Scholasticism” (quoted on 120). The inspiration that Heidegger drew from the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart is clearest, however, in notes that he took between 1917 and

1919.² Heidegger was attracted to the subversion of (modern) conceptions of subjectivity that occur in notions such as *Gelassenheit*, *Abgeschiedenheit*, and *Hingabe*: rather than of an acting human subject, these words speak of a “sub-ject” that lets God act in it. The distinction between human agency and passivity, between calculative and meditative thinking is, McGrath submits, “the essence of Heidegger’s critique of technology” (135). Furthermore, when Eckhart discusses the *Gottesgeburt* that occurs in the soul of the mystic or when St. Bernard writes, “*Hodie legimus in libro experientiae*,” Heidegger senses the importance of the specific historical dimension of mystical experience. Unlike Scholasticism with its privileging of the universal and abstract, mysticism emphasizes the individual and concrete, the historical. Thus, whereas in his *Habilitationsschrift* Heidegger still presented mysticism as the complement of medieval Scholasticism—the other side of the same coin, as it were—from 1917 onward the two become opposites for him: “After 1917, Heidegger began to regard Scholasticism as the site of the hegemony of theoretical speculative-aesthetic concepts in Christianity and the consequent forgetting of factual Christian life” (151). At this point, Luther and Lutheran authors such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey became formative influences. In 1919, Heidegger announced in a letter to his friend Father Engelbert Krebs that he no longer considered himself Catholic: “Epistemological insights reaching to the theory of historical knowledge have made the system of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable to me” (quoted on 45). It is clear from this formulation that Heidegger’s “break with Catholicism . . . was precipitated by issues in the philosophy of history” (44).

Luther’s critique of Scholastic theology resonated with Heidegger in particular because, unlike the *theologia gloriae*, which presumes that the human being has access to God through rational analysis of the structures of the created order, the *theologia crucis* stresses the radical finitude of the human being after the Fall and, consequently, the need for faith in the crucified and hidden God. Heidegger felt that, “with this denial of the theology of presence, Luther retrieve[d] the relational and enactment senses of primordial Christianity” (159). In other words, Luther rediscovered the dynamic temporal structure of the Christian faith. In his 1920 lecture course, “*Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*,” Heidegger claimed that “Christian religiosity lives temporality as such” (quoted on 187). The true Christian lives in a present that constitutes itself dynamically at the intersection of an appropriation of the past (the Christ-event) and an expectation of the yet-to-come (the

² A selection of these notes appears in vol. 60 of the *Gesamtausgabe*, under the title “Die philosophischen Grundlagen der mittelalterlichen Mystik.”

eschaton). The de-temporalized ontology of Scholasticism, by contrast, severs Christianity from historical life, emphasizing theory over lived commitment.

McGrath believes that several central themes of *Being and Time* betoken Luther's influence: "Heidegger's doctrines of *Destruktion*, fallenness, guilt, being-unto-death, and conscience have clear Lutheran parallels" (169). Most crucially, however, Heidegger's "celebration of finitude" (168) in *Being and Time* constitutes "a hermeneutical complement to Luther, in a sense, a Lutheran phenomenology of *Dasein*" (12). By formalizing Christian eschatology phenomenologically, that is to say, by substituting death for Christ as the "toward-which" of human life, Heidegger constructs a "phenomenology for the Godforsaken"—thus the subtitle of McGrath's book.³ The Godforsakenness of *Dasein* according to *Being and Time* is not tantamount to atheism, that is to say, a denial of the existence of God. Rather, such Godforsakenness prepares the ground for a "radical theology of revelation" of the Lutheran type (12), a theology that denies any *analogia entis* or continuity between nature and grace.

Heidegger's problematic relationship with his Christian roots did not end in *Being and Time*. As McGrath explains, during the time of the Nazi regime, the philosopher developed an increasing hostility toward Christianity, even preventing Christian colleagues (such as Max Müller) from obtaining academic appointments—in the interest of the "radical new order" (quoted on 56). Later, he returned to religious issues, even though with neo-pagan overtones. Famously, he declared that *Herkunft bleibt stets Zukunft*, "coming-from always remains going-toward." It is worth noting that Heidegger never formally left the Catholic Church (which in Germany involves a legal act to inform state authorities that one no longer wishes to pay Church taxes).

Having debunked the alleged theological neutrality of *Being and Time*, in the final two chapters of *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy* McGrath sketches a response to the challenge of Heidegger's Lutheran phenomenology. First, he introduces an insightful distinction between two versions of Heidegger's critique of onto-theo-logy: a "thick" and a "thin" one. The thick version, which belongs to the Heidegger of the 1920s and early 1930s, rejects any kind of reference to God within philosophy. It is thus that the 1935 lectures, "Einführung in die Metaphysik," regard Christians as incapable of asking the fundamental philosophical question, "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?" The later Heidegger, on the other hand, holds a "thinner" version of the critique of onto-theo-logy, which functions not as "a

³ Although initially, McGrath carefully distinguishes Godforsakenness from Godlessness (11), this distinction unfortunately becomes blurred in the course of the book (on 21 and 205, for example). This confusion does not indicate, it seems to me, that McGrath has changed the gist of his thesis.

moratorium on God-talk but [as] a rejection of totalizing discourses that use a concept of God as a foundation for an a priori system” (219). Several post-Heideggerian Christian thinkers have taken the thin definition of onto-theo-logy as a window of opportunity to demonstrate that Scholasticism, and Thomas Aquinas in particular, are unjustly regarded as having reduced God to the summit of a system that presumes to master the totality of being. McGrath briefly discusses attempts to rethink Thomism by John D. Caputo, Gustav Siewerth, Karl Rahner, and Jean-Luc Marion. Ultimately, however, these attempts leave him dissatisfied. It is undeniable, he believes, that Aquinas de-temporalizes being, simply because he “would reject Heidegger’s privileging of absence over presence, possibility over actuality, as irrational and atheistic” (228). “No argument is possible here,” McGrath concludes. “Heidegger and Aquinas speak out of diametrically opposed horizons” (ibid.). Furthermore, McGrath considers it mistaken to concede the Heideggerian attitude of a kind of “agnostic piety,” which “has dangerous repercussions for human culture, namely theocracy, Biblical fundamentalism, and irrationality” (223).

McGrath’s own response to Heidegger’s “phenomenology for the Godforsaken” is that it fails precisely as phenomenology. It does not do justice to “an essential dimension of being-in-the-world” (21) because there exists “a factual experience of God ‘natural’ to Dasein” (13). There is a “mystical dimension to historical life” (148) that Heidegger has chosen to ignore. It is true, McGrath admits, that man is “the being for whom God is future,” who “must suffer the absence of God” (251). But that is not all. The fullness for which we are longing is not that of an alien All-Other but is inscribed in our being as our very own possibility. This fact we experience in “rare and ecstatic moments” (251). McGrath speaks of a “being-before-God” to capture this “dynamic interplay between absence (anticipating) and presence (enjoying)” (252). Again, the weakness of Heidegger’s phenomenology in *Being and Time* consists precisely in the fact that the philosopher allowed himself to be unduly influenced by Lutheran assumptions concerning the radical fallenness of human nature; as a consequence, his phenomenology, supposed to be theologically neutral, renders a more Catholic and Scholastic vision of human existence impossible.

Professor McGrath has written a powerful and thought-provoking book, which opens a number of avenues for further reflection. His main thesis, on the Lutheran structures of the phenomenology of *Being and Time*, is argued compellingly, although McGrath probably exaggerates Luther’s influence somewhat. The method of *Destruktion*, for example, is unlikely to have its roots in Luther’s critique of Scholasticism, even if Luther occasionally employs the word *destruere* (which is not rare in Latin). The “de-struction” of the history of philosophy which *Being and Time* calls for is much more likely to have Nietzsche’s genealogy as its principal inspiration.

It is no doubt due to the focus of his book that McGrath attributes Heidegger's discovery of the importance of history almost exclusively to his reading of Christian sources (although there is a discussion of Hegel on 125–7, in the context of the *Habilitationsschrift*); this focus is legitimate. In a broader discussion, one would want to point out that the connection between truth, being, and time emerged as the central theme of philosophical discussion in Hegel. Regarding history as the medium of decline rather than progress, Nietzsche then reversed Hegel's thesis on the progressive unfolding of Spirit. These themes have dominated Continental philosophy ever since.

Concerning McGrath's phenomenological critique of the theological implications of *Being and Time*, I think that one has to await further development of his argument, which requires elaboration and clarification. For instance, is "being-before-God" a structure of all Dasein (as McGrath seems to suggest in his remarks on the mysticism of everyday life), or is it characteristic only of the life of the believer (this appears to be the position McGrath takes in his final chapter)? If the latter is the case, McGrath would not be able to substantiate his claim that "a factual experience of God [is] 'natural' to Dasein" (13), for such an experience would belong to the domain of grace rather than nature.

Finally, if the "Scholasticism *after* Heidegger" of which McGrath speaks (x) wants to be taken seriously it must, in my opinion, address the question of historicity, that is to say, of the connection between being and time. The metaphysics of presence is dead, and not just for theoretical reasons. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their postmodern followers are right in maintaining that it has produced dangerous consequences. I agree with McGrath when he points out that Scholasticism at its best, for example in Thomas Aquinas, does not represent a *simple* metaphysics of presence but contains a crucial "negative element" (220). However, beyond the necessary and important emphasis on the role of negative theology in the tradition, could one go further within Christian thought, Catholic thought, and even Scholasticism in attempting to overcome the metaphysics of presence? Perhaps there are certain disadvantages in the fact that so much of the discussion of this issue has centered on Thomas Aquinas. One does not have to deny Aquinas's genius to regret the widespread tendency to reduce Scholasticism to his thought. There are precious conceptual resources in other Scholastic thinkers that are lacking in Aquinas. The issue of historicity is, in fact, a prime example.

Leading up to the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger, who is of course now Pope Benedict XVI, published a fascinating book which is recognized as a classic among medievalists but deserves wider attention: *The Theology of History*

of *St. Bonaventure*.⁴ In the preface, Ratzinger explicitly situated the work in the debate of Catholic Scholasticism with the Protestant emphasis on the historical dimension of Christianity. The work—Ratzinger’s *Habilitationsschrift*—was so controversial that only half of the original manuscript appeared in print. In it, the current Pope presented Bonaventure as a theologian who, in dialogue with the ideas of Joachim of Fiore, developed a theology with a future, as it were: a theology which recognized that truth is present not only in the past and the tradition but unfolds dynamically in history. Bonaventure regarded history as a medium of truth. There is, it seems to me, considerable potential in these ideas. It would be an irony if Christianity—a religion which confesses that God, having become man, has lived among us at a particular time and in a particular place, in a particular culture, speaking a particular historical language—it would be an irony of this religion were incapable of incorporating the insight that being, truth, and time are inextricably connected.

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⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History of St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971). Originally published in 1959 as *Die Geschichtstheologie des hl. Bonaventura*.