

## HEIDEGGER AND THEOLOGY

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### I. Introduction

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger uses theological terms such as "fallenness" and "temptation" to discuss Dasein's everyday existence. At the conclusion of his discussion, however, he is careful to qualify that his analysis is not a theological one. From the standpoint of his interpretation, he is unable to make judgements about the moral state of Dasein (e.g. whether man is "drunk with sin"), because, he claims, his interpretation of Dasein is "*prior* to any assertion about corruption or incorruption" (224). Heidegger goes on to claim that "in so far as any faith or 'world view,' makes any such assertions . . . it must come back to the existential structures which we have set forth, provided that its assertions are to make a claim to conceptual understanding" (224).

According to Heidegger, if theology wishes to lay claim to conceptual understanding, it must in some sense be grounded in philosophy. In this paper, I will analyze what Heidegger means by this claim. I will argue, however, that theology, even in the narrow definition ascribed to it by Heidegger, is unable to ground its understanding in pre-theological interpretations.

### II. Heidegger on Theology

In his introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes his own project, that of formulating the question of being, from the concerns of the sciences of the various domains of being. He classifies theology as being one of these "positive" or "ontical" sciences (30-31). Real progress or movement in such a science does not come from the storing away of facts or results into manuals, but rather from the science's "inquiring into the ways in which each particular area is basically constituted" (29). That is, real progress takes place when the science concerns itself with ontology—with understanding what it is that constitutes the "being" of its specific area of research.

According to Heidegger, "the level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in its basic concepts" (29, Heidegger's emphasis). To illustrate this, he indicates several sciences which, at the time of Heidegger's writing, were undergoing crises in their basic concepts. One of these sciences is theology. Theology, he claims, is seeking to interpret more primordially "man's Being towards God" (30). This more primordial interpretation is demanded by the meaning of faith

and must remain within faith. Theology is beginning to realize that the foundations on which it has based its systems of dogma have "not arisen from an inquiry in which faith is primary," and because of this are not only inadequate to the concerns of theology, but also cover up and distort these concerns (30).

In a lecture entitled "Phenomenology and Theology," Heidegger indicates what he means by the claim that theology is a "positive science." Science in general is the "founding disclosure, for the sake of disclosure, of the self contained regions of whatever is, or, as the case may be, of Being" (6). Science, therefore, has two basic possibilities: sciences of whatever is, i.e. ontic sciences; and the science of Being, or ontology, i.e. philosophy.

The ontic sciences thematize a given being, something that "is," which in a sense is already given prior to the scientific disclosure. Ontology, while keeping what "is" in view, attempts to look at being in general. One might say that ontology seeks to understand the sense in which the objects of the ontic sciences are already given prior to the scientific research. There is only a relative difference between two ontic sciences (e.g. theology and chemistry), based on their differing orientations towards their specific regions of being. There is, however, an absolute difference between a positive science (e.g. theology) and philosophy.

A science, then, is the "founding disclosure of whatever is already given and in some way already disclosed" (8). What is already given and in some way disclosed for theology is faith. Theology both begins with faith and has as its primary object faithful existence.

Faith is "a mode of human existence which . . . arises not from Dasein or spontaneously through Dasein, but rather from that which is revealed in and with this mode of existence" (9). Christian faith, for Heidegger, signifies something like Dasein's way of being specifically related to that which is revealed to the faithful: Christ and His crucifixion. This revelation is not simply one in which information about events is conveyed, but in which one's entire human existence is placed "as a Christian existence, i.e. one bound to the cross—before God" (10). Such faith, in accordance with Heidegger's understanding of theology, is not just the manner in which theology is properly performed, but is also the proper theme for theology. Theology is the science of faith (i.e. of both belief and of what is believed), which is both motivated and justified by faith, and of which the proper purpose is "to help cultivate faithfulness itself" (11-12).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Is this understanding of theology one which necessarily arises from theology itself? Traditionally, theology has conceived of itself in quite broad terms. Robert Cushman writes that for Augustine, insofar as any "truths" can be found outside of Christian theology (i.e. in Platonism), "gold and silver was dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad" (291). It would be up to theology, which has as its proper function to understand God's providence, to determine the truth

Heidegger specifically attempts to distinguish his own project from that of theology. In *Being and Time*, he points out that the first step towards a genuine understanding of being consists in "not telling a story" (26). He does not wish to give a mythological explanation of being which would simply trace being in general back to another being (e.g. God) which itself remains unexplained in its being. Such an explanation does not lead to any genuine understanding of being.

In the *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger indicates why his own thinking must remain separate from any sort of theology. Phenomenology and philosophical research, in general, must stand against "any sort of prophetism within philosophy and against any inclination to provide guidelines for life" (80). Philosophical research, he claims, "is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself 'the arrogance of thinking'" (80). As long as philosophy understands its function, it cannot root any of its understandings or conceptions in faith, but must rather look "to the things themselves."

On the other hand, theology, which finds its roots as well as its end in faith, cannot allow itself the "arrogance of thinking." George Kovacs mentions that for Heidegger, "the believer cannot be a philosopher because through the acceptance of faith he has already answered 'the' philosophical question (Why are there beings rather than nothing?) and therefore cannot be regarded as a true questioner" (51). The significance of this point, however, may be questionable. It seems that the believer has only already answered "the philosophical question" if she has believed in a mythological account (i.e. of a being which explains the being of all other beings). It does seem to be the case that the believer, as a believer, cannot be a questioner. Yet the inference from such an observation that theology may have something to learn from the questioner (i.e. the non-believer), is far from evident.

Heidegger indicates why he believes that philosophy is prior to theology in a section of *Being and Time*, which we have looked at entitled, "The Ontological Priority of the Question of Being." Theology, as an ontic science, is concerned with a specific region of being. Genuine progress in such a science occurs when, in the course of its investigations of specific objects within its proper region of being, it becomes concerned with the adequacy of its basic concepts to that region of being. In such concern, the focus of the ontic science becomes ontology. The focus of such ontology remains, however, within the specific region of being of the concern of the science. It does not extend to a question of being in general. Such ontological inquiry, Heidegger argues, "remains itself naive and opaque if in its researches into the Being of entities it fails to discuss the meaning of

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of other intellectual endeavors. Theology, broadly conceived, functions as the corrective to all other modes of inquiry.

Being in general" (31). The question of being ("the philosophical question") is prior to any specific ontological inquiry. Because theology cannot ask this question, its own specific ontological inquiry is, in some sense, dependent on philosophy.

In what sense is theology dependent on philosophy? The ontic sciences attempt to disclose a region of being. In the case of theology, this region is "that which is revealed in and with" faithful existence ("Phenomenology and Theology" 9). Yet prior to its scientific disclosure, faithful existence is already disclosed to a certain extent. And prior to theology, faith is, to some degree, already understood. According to Heidegger, this pre-scientific understanding can be clarified by philosophy.

"Whatever *is* discloses itself only on the grounds of a preliminary . . . preconceptual understanding of what and how it is. Every ontic interpretation operates within the basic context of an ontology" (17, my emphasis). However, this ontology remains for the most part hidden. Christian existence, for example, is a mode of existence in which one's "pre-faith-ful, i.e. unbelieving, human existence is sublated (*aufgehoben*)" (18). One's pre-Christian existence is not thereby done away with, but is kept up and preserved; it is "ontologically included within faith-full existence" (18). Because theological concepts include pre-Christian meanings, "they have as their ontological determinants meanings which are pre-Christian and which *can thus be grasped purely rationally*" (18, my emphasis). Since all theological concepts occur only to Dasein, they must contain the basic understanding of being which belongs to Dasein, as being-in-the-world.

As an example, Heidegger points to the concept of sin. Since sin is a phenomenon of existence, its proper conceptual understanding demands a return to the concept of "guilt" which is itself "an original ontological determination of Dasein" (19). Inasmuch as theology understands appropriately the basic constitution of human existence, it will demand a return to the ontological origins of the concept of guilt, which are only found through Heidegger's asking of the question of being. Such pre-Christian concepts will not, of course, become the primary factors in determining theological concepts, but function "only as a corrective to the ontic, and in particular pre-Christian, meanings of basic theological concepts" (19).

Finally, Heidegger insists that the demand that his pre-Christian ontology serve as a corrective to theology is not his own demand, but is demanded by theology itself, "insofar as it understands itself to be a science" (20). It is not part of the essence of philosophy to serve a corrective function for theology. It takes on this function when the theologian, deliberating on the problems which correspond to her own ontic area, "comes upon the basic traditional concepts and, furthermore, questions their suitability" for the theme of her own science (21). When this

occurs, she can look back for the "original ontological constitution" of these concepts within philosophy.

### III. The Corruption of Man

Heidegger states:

Insofar as any faith or 'worldview,' makes any such assertions [regarding the corruption or incorruption of man] . . . it must come back to the existential structures which we have set forth, provided that its assertions are to make a claim to *conceptual* understanding. (*Being and Time* 224)

If indeed "conceptual understanding" is a proper aim for theology, what would constitute an assertion about the corruption of man which could lay claim to such understanding?

All interpretation, according to Heidegger must be "founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception" (191). In order to interpret at all, that which is interpreted must be "had" in some way in advance. Interpretation is also grounded in what and how the object is seen prior to interpretation. In each case, that which is "fore-had" and "fore-seen" is understood in a specific manner. This definite way of conceiving in advance constitutes the "fore-conception."

Theology, as a mode of interpretation, must both begin and end with faith. This means that that which is interpreted must be "fore-had" by way of faith, it must be "fore-seen" with the "eye of faith," and it must be "fore-conceived" in a manner which agrees with that which is revealed by faith. That theology must end in faith indicates that what has been interpreted will, in its interpretation, "remain and become *anew*" the object of faith ("Phenomenology and Theology" 21). Theology cannot accept as a foundation a "system of dogma" which "has not arisen from an inquiry in which faith is primary." Such a "foundation" is not only "inadequate for the problematic of theology, but conceals and distorts it" (*Being and Time* 30).

A theological interpretation or assertion of the "corruption or fallenness of man" must find its beginnings in faith. The meaning of faith is best found in that which is revealed in and through faithful existence. We find this revelation for the most part in scripture.

The apostle Paul speaks of the fallen state of man as follows: "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22-3).<sup>2</sup> All men have fallen

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<sup>2</sup>Biblical citations are taken from the King James' Version of the Bible.

short and, therefore, cannot be righteous except by the faith of Jesus Christ. This scripture does not yet show why man is corrupt, yet does indicate that such corruption involves "falling short" of some sort of standard. A thorough analysis of the question of the corruption of man would attempt to understand (through scripture) what it is that constitutes the standard from which all men fall short. This analysis would attempt to determine why man has fallen and in what manner his redemption might take place.

The analysis of corruption must, according to Heidegger, in the end come back to the grounds for the possibility of such corruption: Dasein as being-in-the-world. If this analysis wishes to lay claim to conceptual clarity, it must go back to Heidegger's analysis of "everyday Being-in-the-world" in which he discovers both the authentic and inauthentic modes of existence in Dasein's "thrownness" and in its "falling" (224).

One of these modes of existence is Dasein's essential character of Being-guilty. Heidegger claims that "this essential Being-guilty is, equiprimordially, the existential condition for the possibility of the 'morally' good and for that of the 'morally' evil—that is, for morality in general and for the possible forms which this may take factually" (*Being and Time* 332). In order to understand what Heidegger means by the claim that morality in general presupposes what he describes as the essential "Being-guilty" of Dasein, we will briefly note the major points of his analysis of guilt.

Heidegger begins his analysis by examining the "everyday understanding" of the concept of guilt. Guilt is typically thought of in terms of the objects in the world with which we busy ourselves and the persons with whom we find ourselves. One might be guilty in the sense of "having debts" or "owing." Such guilt is primarily related to "that with which one can concern oneself" (327). One might also be guilty in the sense of "being responsible for." Heidegger describes this type of guilt as, "Being-the-basis for a lack of something in the Dasein of an Other, and in such a manner that this very Being-the-basis determines itself as 'lacking in some way' in terms of that for which it is the basis" (328). In other words, one takes upon oneself the responsibility for the failure to satisfy a requirement which corresponds to one's involvement with other persons.

These ordinary ways of understanding guilt are not satisfactory explanations of the essential "Being-guilty" which belongs to all Dasein. Each of these accounts of guilt describes specific behaviors which can be attributed to Dasein (which is, as such, guilty) but cannot explain the meaning of guilt as "a kind of Being which belongs to Dasein" (328). "The phenomenon of guilt," states Heidegger, "can be clarified only if we first inquire in principle into Dasein's *Being-guilty*" (328).

In the idea of guilt, Heidegger says, "lies the character of the 'not'" (329). Guilt indicates a lack, or a nullity. Heidegger finds this nullity in the essential character of Dasein as thrown projection (i.e. as being-ahead-of-

itself). Dasein, in its existence as "thrown" (i.e. always already existing in a world), always *is* one possibility as opposed to others. However, it is always projected towards other possibilities which it has not yet become. Because of this, Dasein "as projection is essentially *null*" (331). This nullity which permeates Dasein indicates that "Dasein as such is guilty" (331). It is guilty of not being its potential.

As I have noted, for Heidegger this essential "Being-guilty" is prior to moral guilt. In Dasein's having definite possibilities, which it does not have and can no longer choose, lies its essential guilt. Yet Dasein can only be morally guilty because of its having possibilities and not choosing those which would constitute the "moral choice."

In order to make the idea of the "corruption of man" "conceptually understandable" we would have to come back, through an analysis which begins in faith and ends in faith to Heidegger's analysis of Dasein as "falling Being in the world" (224), and as essentially (and in a primordial sense) "guilty" (331). We must recall, however, Heidegger's admonition that a foundation in which faith is not primary is "inadequate for the problematic of theology" (30). Does faith remain primary in a study which begins in faith yet seeks, for its ontological guide, an explicitly non-faithful analysis?

Heidegger's analysis of guilt provides a clue that perhaps faith does not remain primary. Heidegger would claim that his analysis of Dasein's "essential Being-guilty" is prior to anything like "man's being guilty before God." Yet by starting out with Heidegger's analysis, how could one later speak of the One who through faith is revealed as essentially non-guilty, that is, Christ? It is not immediately obvious whether an understanding of the meaning of guilt in the face of a God whose attributes are discoverable principally in and through faith<sup>3</sup> is allowed for by Heidegger's analysis. If man's guilt before God is not accounted for through the "existential structures" which Heidegger has set forth, then theology, in its necessary devotion to faith, cannot use them. Theology, whose beginning and end is faith, must remain within faith.

#### IV. Faith Seeking Understanding

What I have indicated so far is the possibility that theology, in using Heidegger's analysis as its ontological corrective, may lose its necessary

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<sup>3</sup>I emphasize that God is discoverable only in and through faith in order to argue, in particular, against the attempt to discover God by a dialectical analysis of what has been said about Him (cf., for example, John Macquarrie). Such an analysis may indeed discover a "God" which is essentially compatible with Heideggerian pre-ontology, but this would not resolve the problem I am attempting to point out, since such an analysis does not arise and maintain itself in and through faith.

relation to faith. Heidegger himself might disagree by pointing out that theology is only using philosophy as a guide. He writes: "Ontology functions only as a corrective to the ontic, and in particular pre-Christian, meanings of basic theological concepts" ("Phenomenology and Theology" 19). In taking philosophy as its guide, theology is not "being led on the leash by philosophy," but rather philosophy simply clarifies that "region of Being to which the concept of sin as a *concept of existence* must necessarily adhere" (19).

Heidegger has been very careful not to limit theology in what he considers to be its essential function (i.e. the disclosure of the meaning of faith, in and through faith). What he wishes to point out is that theology *qua* theology cannot account for existence (and therefore cannot lay claim to "conceptual understanding"). The problem which I have hinted at, and wish to clarify further, is that Heidegger's ontology cannot account for *faithful existence*.<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger acknowledges that from the theological point of view, philosophy is mere foolishness. Philosophy does not, and cannot, involve itself in matters of faith. Theology, on the other hand, *must* start out in faith. If we take faith as our guide, what can be said about existence? Heidegger would claim that theology can say nothing, for in its starting out with faith, it has already answered "the" question of existence (why are there beings rather than nothing?). Yet, as I have noted earlier, this point only applies if faith involves the unquestioning acceptance of a mythological account. What if such an acceptance does not constitute faith? What if faith does not involve an immediate answer to the question of being? In such a case, the possibility remains that the faithful one might question, while still remaining entirely within faith.

One of Heidegger's main concerns is that traditional theology, in attempting to give an account of man, has taken as its point of departure both holy writ (i.e. "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Genesis 1:26) and Greek ontology. Because of this point of departure, Christian dogmatics "can hardly be said to have made an ontological problem of man's Being" (*Being and Time* 74). According to Kovacs, this remark is not a direct attack on theology as such so much as it is an attack on the pretended philosophical foundation of Christian theology. Heidegger's remark "claims only that the so-called ontological foundation of theology is a misleading foundation, because it is based on an interpretation of Being that comes from Greek ontology" (51). Though Heidegger shows that theology traditionally has not gone back to the problematic of man's being, he still does not indicate why, in principle,

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<sup>4</sup>By "faithful existence" I mean an understanding of existence as it is revealed principally in and through faith. Faithful existence is therefore the only "type" of existence with which theology can concern itself.

theology could not, while remaining in faith, perform such a task.

What, then, might theology say about human existence which cannot be accounted for by philosophy? In connection with the problematic of guilt, I have indicated one such possibility—man's guilt before God. Scripture hints at other possibilities. John writes:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. (John 1:1-4)

In this passage, we read of the Word (Christ) as the creator. Yet to believe in this account is not to have answered the question of being (i.e. that Christ created all that is does not indicate what it means to be). We also read of the Word as the source of life and light. What is indicated is a necessary connection of the existence of the Word and of man. However, as Heidegger makes clear, this passage does *not* indicate directly the meaning of "existence" or the idea that existence must mean the same thing in both the case of the creator and the created. Philosophy, which "is and remains atheism" (*History* 80) cannot even explore the possible implications of John's words.

If scripture does indicate the necessary connection between the existence of the Word and man, it would seem that the most primordial<sup>5</sup> interpretation of existence from the standpoint of theology would necessarily include such a possibility. If Dasein is "Being-in-the-world as alongside things and with-others" (cf. *Being and Time* 207 and 220) then should not a more primordial interpretation, from the standpoint of theology, include something like "through-Christ"?

So far I have only hinted at the possibility of a theological interpretation which might, while remaining within faith, lay claim to conceptual understanding. The realization of such a project, as well as its justification are beyond the scope of this paper. What remains to be asked, however, is whether, given Heidegger's critique, the proper aim of theology *is* conceptual understanding. Is conceptual understanding compatible with faith? If not, what is the relevance of Heidegger's analysis

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<sup>5</sup>Here I am using "primordial" to indicate an interpretation which "not only demands that in general the hermeneutical situation [the "fore-having," "fore-sight," and "fore-conception"] shall be one which has been made secure in conformity with the phenomena; it also requires explicit assurance that the *whole* of the entity which it has taken as its theme has been brought into the fore-having" (*Being and Time* 275). A primordial interpretation is one which, from the start, allows the whole of the phenomena to come into view.

of theology?

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