

FROM PHALLO-SOPHY TO HOSPITALITY
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We began our journey in the service of Philosophy (we didn't know it at the time, but we were really practicing Phallo-sophy). That is, we tried to be rational and logical, looking from the outside, with a critical eye, at this business called "religion" (even though Paul Tillich had warned us that philosophy of religion destroys either its object or itself). We did our best to play the game of "onto-theology" as we analyzed the ontological argument, trying to show that the being than which nothing greater can be conceived must necessarily exist, indeed, that its (his? hers?) non-existence is logically impossible, yea, even unthinkable (take that, fool). But then Kant taught us that existence is not a predicate so that the being than which nothing greater can be conceived doesn't necessarily exist after all. Malcolm tried to argue that necessary existence may be a proper predicate, but the damage had already been done.

Our heads still spinning, we turned to cosmological arguments trying to show that we must have a first cause and that cause is God. But must there be a first cause, or are we stuck with the infinite regress of "turtles all the way down"? And Hume showed us that even if we allow the legitimacy of an argument from design based on analogy, we are forced to admit the possibility of a whole committee of deities or an early botched attempt at world-making.

Undaunted by the disappointing results of our first forays into onto-theology, we plunged into an analysis of God's properties, where again our logical inquiry confronted us with such awkward questions as whether divine omnipotence is constrained by what is logically possible and whether divine omniscience eliminates human freedom or whether God knows counterfactuals. We also stumbled over the problem of evil in this the best of all possible worlds.

We then turned to the big questions. Is religious belief rational? Can we know anything about God? What evidence do we have? Do we need evidence? Clifford convinced us that we have no right to any of our beliefs, while Malcolm told us not to worry because all of our beliefs are groundless. Plantinga bashed the evidentialists, arguing that religious beliefs may be properly basic, thus requiring no evidence or argument, provided that our cognitive faculties are working properly in a proper environment (unlike that of the poor deluded Pumpkinite) and that our *sensus divinitatis* has not been tarnished beyond recognition. While Plantinga was achieving the status of Protestantism's Aquinas, an unheard of philosopher in transition from Platonism to

Postmodernism (having been enlightened by Richard Rorty) challenged Plantinga's dismissal of the Great Pumpkin Objection, and was accused by the same of relativism, skepticism, and foundationalism. But while influenced by Rorty, this philosopher was still playing the game of onto-theology, awaiting a future liberation inspired by Jack Caputo.

We continued to struggle with other issues. Are religious utterances to be taken as propositions. If so, they fail according to Flew, because believers admit no possibility of falsification. Or are they best taken as "bliks"—Hare's non-propositional way of seeing?

We begin to see some cracks in the project of onto-theology in such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the later Wittgenstein. Kierkegaard rejects the arguments for the existence of God and rejects what has been called "philosophy's grand project—the complete system. Kierkegaard calls us back from the absentmindedness of the "system" to reflection on our individual existence with all of its angst, dread, fear, and trembling. He reminds us that truth is subjectivity and that faith involves risk, passion, and a leap.

While Nietzsche appears to be a devastating critic of religion and faith, he contributes to a liberation from Platonically inspired onto-theology with his insistence that values are created not discovered and that the rational unbalanced with the Dionysian leads to decadence.

And Wittgenstein invites us to see religious beliefs not as propositions awaiting verification or falsification, but as complex forms of life that he calls language games. If we would understand the form of life that is religion, we must go and observe the language games that are being played because the meaning is in the use, not first of all in verification. While Wittgenstein delivers us from the clutches of the logical positivists, his deliverance inevitably makes some of the faithful nervous, especially the Platonists. Plato urges us to get out of the cave in order to have a vision of the truth, whereas Wittgenstein sees no way out of the various caves of language games. To say God-talk is meaningful in this or that language game gives us no access to what is "really true."

As an exercise in getting into religious language games, we took a break from formal philosophy and turned to literature. Tony in "Father Joe" reminded us that all human stories begin with sex. Little Owen Meany showed us that one's awareness of an appointment with destiny need not deter us from the appreciation and evaluation of the breasts of the mothers. And the Testament's Rachel provides clear evidence that serving as a missionary in Brazil is more

dangerous than service to onto-theology in the ivory towers of American university philosophy departments.

By now we have become (or should have become) suspicious that the God of traditional philosophy of religion is not the God before whom one can sing and dance, but only immutable, eternal Being or perhaps the Ground of Being. So we turn to Postmodernism and Deconstruction, specifically to Richard Rorty and Jack Caputo (and Derrida mediated by Caputo).

In spite of his rather cavalier and somewhat hostile rejection of religion (his cognitive faculties were not working properly? Or was it the environment? Has his “sensus divinitatis” left him?), Rorty provides several important insights and prepares us for the coming of Caputo (as John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus?). From Rorty we learn the difficulty of harmonizing private irony with public solidarity. We are led to doubt that our minds are mirrors of reality, and pace Wittgenstein, we come to understand that we cannot transcend the limits of our vocabularies in order to touch the Absolute, that Plato’s dream (the dream at the heart of philosophy) of an exit from the cave is not possible for us historically situated finite creatures. More importantly, Rorty teaches us that what often passes for the discovery of new truth is actually a matter of “re-description”, that re-description opens us to new ways of seeing what is before us, but that re-description often angers and even humiliates. Re-description is deconstructive. (In my view, the most deconstructive re-description is to be found in Caputo’s turning “philosophy” into phallo-sophy in his “Against Ethics”). Finally, Rorty points out the importance of self-creation as opposed to self-discovery, and to the priority of “sensitivity” to “principles” in morality. His talk about expanding the range of “us” so as to shrink the domain of those who are only “them” anticipates the priority of concern for the “Other” (l’autre) so central in deconstruction.

Moving on to deconstruction, we see that Rorty has already anticipated what one may think of as its first central feature, namely, “openness to the other.” It is evident in Caputo’s “obligation happens” in direct proportion to the powerlessness of the suffering; in Levinas’ “le visage”—the face of the other; and in Derrida’s “hospitality”—the openness to the unanticipated and perhaps even unwanted guest whom I must host, and who thereby holds me hostage.

Another feature of deconstruction is what has been called de-centering and re-centering. This is another way of thinking about the “other”. The “text” represents power structures and dominant interpretations—those who are “in”—that must be de-centered in order to make a space for those in the margins, for those who are “out”. In spite of the bad press that deconstruction

usually receives from the religious (and philosophical) establishment, Caputo observes that one may properly see Jesus as a paradigmatic deconstructionist. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who are “out”—widows, orphans, lepers, and those of no account, those who cannot even get a hearing before the law.

Finally, a third important feature of deconstruction is its critique of onto-theology, the stuff we did for the first half of the course. The rejection of onto-theology is a rejection of Greek philosophy’s hijacking of religion, of the God who plays the roles of “Being” and “Truth” in Western metaphysics. Overcoming onto-theology involves the awareness that we are too late for the beginning and too early for the end. The grand meta-narrative escapes us. We are left with a “passion for the impossible.” Hermeneutics replaces epistemology and passion replaces speculation. We wait in vain for a call from “Being.” We come to see the safety that our ethical systems provided as an illusion. We are faced with a swarm of obligations that make “ethics blush.” Life is risky. Ethics can’t help us there; but the passion for the impossible keeps us going.

I conclude with some quotations from Caputo’s book “On Religion” and a couple questions of my own for Caputo.

“We cannot, by science, philosophy, or religion, situate ourselves safely in some privileged spot above the moral fray below having gained the high ground of a Privileged Access to the Way Things Are. . . . By confessing up front that we don’t know who we are, that we are cut off from The Secret, we find ourselves forced constantly to traffic in ‘interpretations’. . . . The skies do not open up and drop The Truth into our laps.”

But what if the skies do open up and drop (some tiny morsels of?) Truth? Are we really as cut off from Being, Truth, or Divinity as the deconstructionists seem to think? What if? What if God has indeed spoken? What if the Word has become flesh? What if there is only one way?