

“GOD IS THE BEYOND IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES” (DIETRICH BONHOEFFER).

Considering Absentheism

Thies Münchow

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What does ‘the beyond’ (or transcendence in general) mean *in* a so-called post-modern world? What do these concepts mean *for* such a world? The concept of transcendence or the beyond shows up in myriads of perspectives and experiences, but what is its effective meaning? This also includes the question of its relevance as a concept (let alone the truth or rather truthfulness of the concept). What for instance is the purpose of man’s eschatological hope towards an otherworldly paradise, a life after death, *within* the life people actually live? Or the other way round: Does our knowledge of the possibility of aeons (what time measurement does fit here?) even before the big bang occurred not lead us to the cosmological assumption of true otherworldiness, especially when we realize that mankind’s being is but a blink of an eye on the canvas of the vast infinity of an expanding multiverse in relation to which we eventually will never have been? No matter how large a number, in comparison to infinity it is still zero. Even these two suppositions alone seem to indicate that the question for the beyond may just arise in anthropic perspective, that is within the lives and times of contingent human beings. From what other perspective should it arise though? There surely are attempts of philosophical hermeneutics that try to be non-anthropic,¹ but even here one cannot dismiss the original motive that such hermeneutics can be reasonable and provide meaning for human understanding. So is there any way for humans to get beyond being human? Probably as consequence of the final “*adieu*” of one dying individual with which the world (not a world but *the* world) comes to an end — over and over, though once and for all?² Or does going beyond that which is human mean

* Thies Münchow, thiesmuenchow@gmail.com, Europa-Universität Flensburg, University of Flensburg

1 See for instance Welsch, Wolfgang. *Homo mundanus: Jenseits der anthropischen Denkform der Moderne*. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2012; also Welsch, Wolfgang. *Mensch und Welt: Eine evolutionäre Perspektive der Philosophie*. München: C.H. Beck, 2012.

2 Cf. Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford, CA: University Press, 1999.

the hope of transcending oneself to become super human, *übermenschlich*?³ But what would this kind of transcending be? Does it mean the evolution of something that potentially lies within us as human beings? An evolution though presupposes something that is already *involute*, so how is that in any way transcendent or beyond? Instead of speaking of potentiality do we rather have to speak of virtuality, for virtuality means an open orientation towards an indefinite future?⁴ This at least moves a little closer to the realm of true transcendence. Virtuality as an artistic concept shows itself as a quite fertile mode of thought to gain access to the idea of transcendence or experiencing the beyond. Countless arts and art-styles of the 20th and 21st century show a great capability in handling the numinous or the unrepresentable (*das Undarstellbare*). Movies, music, the internet and video games are otherworldly romping places within the so called real world. In this effect the beyond seems to be a daily matter, probably all too human. The otherworld, the numinous, the beyond are utensils. But has this not been so ever since? The beyond and the transcendent (God) are useful ideas for human beings. But how are these concepts actually applied within the daily life of people? "Dear God, please make mom and dad buy me a Playstation 4, a pony and a plastic rocket...and by the way feed those in need and restore peace on earth." *Do ut des*. Who is addressed here if not a God that is supposedly capable of doing things beyond the means. But this is not just some playing with words. Let us consider one thing: is it not so that God is supposed to be *der ganz Andere*, transcendent — literally absolute, detached? How would one address something completely beyond one's comprehension? Something is either beyond, which means there is no option to ever address it or it simply is not beyond. So does a consequent concept of the beyond even make sense — epistemologically? theologically? Let us for instance take God or the eschatological kingdom of God. What concepts are we dealing with here? On the one hand Luke 17,21 speaks of the "kingdom of God" to be "within" us (Luther translates "*Das Himmelreich ist mitten unter Euch*"). On the other hand Jesus Christ himself experiences the absence of God (Matthew 27,47; Mark 15,34) let alone his emptying (kenosis) (Philippians 2,7) and even speaks of his own (Philippians 2,12): "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." The emphasis here lies on "much more in my absence". But wait, absence does not necessarily imply transcendence. Surely faith in

3 Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Kritische Studienausgabe. Vol. 4. Edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. München: DTV, 2007.

4 Cf. Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Der Anfang der Philosophie*. Translated by Joachim Schulte. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996, 22.

the Christian God shows this perfectly when one considers that there is a divine revelation through Christ. But since Christ is truly human do we not encounter the same problem here? How can something or someone refer to something truly beyond or even be the reference itself? It but seems that the problem lies not in our understanding of the concept of a god, at least not in a religious sense for Christ is believed to be both God and man, but in absolute concepts like transcendence or the beyond. A famous quote of Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that "God is the beyond in the midst of our lives"⁵. In stating this he comes to the understanding that "God's 'beyond' is not what is beyond our cognition [*Erkenntnisvermögen*]! Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God's transcendence"⁶. Let us borrow this impulse to reconsider the concept of the beyond in a philosophical and ultimately in a theological way. As a hypothesis I will consider the Christian God to be truly God simply because of his complete absence; and furthermore I will show that absence is the one reasonable and meaningful depiction of divine transcendence.

For a start we need to look for the reason why there actually is a concept of the transcendent although something truly transcendent would be completely incomprehensible. When a concept is actually comprehensible there must be a condition of its possibility that makes its appearance plausible. Since we are discussing God's beyond "in the midst of our lives" I will suggest to investigate the epistemological and anthropological condition due to which the concept of transcendence may eventually make sense and occur. Thinking of the initial questions and statements presented one can clearly see that there exists a certain problem: in either way, whether one wants to see transcendence or transcending as a supporting concept for origination (like in the divine creation) or progression (of the human nature), it is always a mere abstract utensil for such and such purpose. In this manner it is but substantial in a hermeneutical sense, for such different concepts constitute or justify one's understanding of the world.⁷ That on the one hand means they are intentionally installed. On the other hand this again means they subvert their own substantiality. Since we are searching for the condition of the possibility of transcendence we now must dismiss such an idea of substantiality, for it is indeed a derived one. It simply comes from 'outside'⁸

5 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 8 (=DBWE 8). Edited by J. W. de Gruchy. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 367.

6 Ibid.

7 Cf. Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany, NY: State University Press, 2007, 57ff.

8 Cf. Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Atheism and Monotheism." In *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, by Jean-Luc Nancy, translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith, 14–28. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008.

to support already existing concepts of the world, humanity and even God. It rather functions as a *Deus ex machina* or "stop-gap [Lückenbüßer]"⁹. So there must be another substantial (that is: underlying) cause for the idea of the beyond or transcendence. Gérard Granel for instance provides an obvious but also intriguing point concerning what sub-stance truly means. "That which stands beneath' — literally the meaning of the term *sub-stance* — is, in effect, nothing other than the thetic profanation of the most banal of evidences, that of the presence of the real."¹⁰ The "presence of the real", as banal as it may be, is the very first assumption we have to assume and adopt to be able to consider the beyond. But simply stating that the assumption of a certain presence generates that which is not present can hardly be a veritable thought. So let us have a closer look at what 'presence' actually means. "The word says it itself: *prae-ens, pre(s)ent* is that which 'is there before' — and before what if not me? And this 'me' is, consequently, already there, as absolute reference of the real that is present. But the inverse is likewise inevitable: a 'real' is already necessary in order that a me take[s] *[sic!]* place, present to itself among the things present. There is, here, a sort of bad schism *[schize]* or cleft, an original denial of the original affirmation. In this way, the beginning begins only by beginning anew, or again: presence presents itself only representatively."¹¹ This means that the real always "disappears" though it actually is the condition of the possibility of the me that is required to represent (1) the real as the world it inhabits and (2) even the real that is indeed itself. Being a "me" that constitutes the "I think" that in Kantian terms must accompany any perception it makes¹² is but not enough to get to the core of the problem here. As Granel states it already takes a "real" that is "me" before I can even be aware of myself. It needs a present "me" for me to represent myself in what is simply called (self-)consciousness or self-awareness. There is actually no other way to handle the knowledge of oneself as long as we want to avoid the so called aporia of the self *[Selbstbewusstseinsaporie]* as prominently shown by Dieter Henrich and some of his successors. But in order to come closer towards the idea of the beyond the base for any sort of representation, that — as we just saw — is the "me" or "I", should be our next subject to investigate. So let us dig deeper into the relation of the self *[Selbstverhältnis]*. As shown by Henrich one simply cannot comprehend the concept of the "I", for referring

9 DBWE 8, 381.

10 Granel, Gérard. *Far From the Substance: Whither and to What Point? (Essay on the Ontological Kenosis of Thought since Kant)*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, 1. http://www.gerardgranel.com/txt_pdf/Tren-far_from_substance.pdf [25.11.2015]

11 Ibid., 2.

12 Cf. Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Werke in 10 Bänden. Edited by Wilhelm Weischedel. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983, §16.

to oneself as "I" already presumes a real I that can never be understood as "me" or "myself" when in that way obtained via reflexive thought. "Because 'reflection' can only mean that a knowledge already present is specifically seized and by that expressed."¹³ This results in two conclusions: (1) Self-consciousness cannot be the result of a reflection, for this would mean that the resulting I would be something different from the initial I, which means there will never be a chance of a coherent I=I; (2) the reflecting I must know the initial I to be absolutely identical with itself, so there must be an initial I before any reflection may even take place. So the search for this curious initial I is a mere *petitio principii* which is determined to be an empty perception.¹⁴ To conclude this step let us formulate this phenomenon in different terms. The initial I that is the condition of the possibility of an individual that can relate to itself and its environment is an inscrutable real beyond our comprehension. But what is it that is really obscured here? It is not the self-consciousness but rather a more existential point of connection or link to ourselves as what we are — humane? delivered? ephemeral? unique? But this is essentially the point. How might we ever be able to know who or what we — as a *we* or even an *I* — really are when every anthropological concept, whether it be scientific, cultural, or religious is a mere deduction. If the idea derived from one or several of these options it always comes hand in hand with its own abolishment for it brings with it the same contingency it ultimately was born from. Henrich thus suggests another option. As long as the individual wants to illuminate its own being it needs, as a consequence, to transcend its thinking to a numinous cause ("Grund" or "*Lebensgrund*") of itself as a self-aware being.¹⁵ *Lebensgrund* now can either mean the 'base' for one's individual life or the 'reason' for one's individual life — or rather path of life. As both ideas, merged together in this *Lebensgrund*, it brings us back to Granel's concept of the substance. As we saw he states that the substance does actually mark the present, the real. We also realized that the present is strictly beyond our comprehension, for it is only grasped representatively. But what is grasped in this representation? It is the real not in any categorical (that is as a first category of Relation in Kant's Critique)¹⁶ or phenomenological sense but as something that is filled with meaning. This is what leads Granel to the reevaluation of the traditional concept of substance. For him

13 Henrich, Dieter. "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht." In *Subjektivität und Metaphysik. Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer*, edited by Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner, 188–232, 193. Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1966. Translation T.M.

14 Ibid., 195.

15 Cf. for instance Henrich, Dieter. "Subjektivität als Prinzip." In *Bewusstes Leben*, by Dieter Henrich, 49–72, 64. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999, though the term is found throughout Henrich's oeuvre.

16 Granel, *Far From the Substance*, 1.

now substance "is a matter of the meaning of Being itself"¹⁷. I am aware of something or even of myself because this representation can make sense. We have to distinguish here though between basic non-intentional perception and an intentional ascription. A non-intentional perception of the things in the world for instance would be "that with which' ... the painter finds himself confronted"¹⁸ — pure form without purpose or intention. But our awareness of the world does not stop there. We do not simply perceive the things in a categorical sense but rather discover them within a dense tangle of their relevance and meaning. For example: The perception of a brown cylinder with a rough texture, some smaller, thin cylinders emerging from its top, crowned with green excrescence is far away from recognizing a tree. But in knowing that this thing over there can provide wood for the campfire, wood that can float on water, wood one can carve into, wood to make tools with which one can craft furniture from wood again etc. makes the tree a tree for us in a meaningful way. This listing can go on and on and on forever. The substance, the meaning of Being itself — whether it be attributed to an inanimate object or a living entity — is found within our human lives that themselves are entangled in this clew of meaning.¹⁹

But what about the intentional ascription? What if meaning is not allowed to develop itself in this 'ensnarled' way, but is simply installed? What if meaning would simply be ascribed as one sees fit, from 'outside', *ex machina*? For sure one would do no harm to the world when from now on one decides to call the tree 'etre' ('être?') for this would not extract the perceived thing from its (hi)stories and relations within the world. As it was put before, the meaning of the tree (of Being) is discovered within the clew of references. And now the *Gretchenfrage*. What about the self-conscious subject? Where does it need to start? It does not simply discover its own meaning let alone purpose. Sure, there is the possibility to label each human being in a biological, psychological, anthropological, geographical and what not sense to describe it representatively, but there is no chance in really getting to know the meaning of one's individuality.²⁰ Not even the individual itself can manage to find this out. And now we are, again, back at considering

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 5.

19 Granel himself in his text does not write out this whole hermeneutical ontology. To show this kind of hermeneutical ontology though Granel uses the term "that with which" from the above quote synonymously with Heidegger's "Zeug" (Ibid., 4). Another analogy can be found in Wilhelm Schapp's "Wozuding" (cf. Schapp, Wilhelm. *In Geschichten verstrickt: Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding*. Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004.) though Granel does not give any direct hint towards Schapp, since his works are only scarcely recognized. Comparing those concepts would however be an interesting task.

20 For a critical discussion of representational and analytical concepts of self-consciousness and identity see Frank, Manfred. *Ansichten der Subjektivität*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012 or Frank,

the crooked state of self-consciousness. To manage one's contingency there now might actually arise the idea to simply ascribe a meaning to one's life in an intentional way. Considering what Granel states about the representative character of the real and also considering Henrich's point of self-consciousness going astray when explaining itself from within this idea of an intentional ascription seems to be a hopeless task when it comes to its existential worth. That means that clutching the numinous cause [*Lebensgrund*] cannot be intentional if it arises under the condition of subjectivity; otherwise it would simply be an excuse for an individual to live its life in such and such way it sees fit — a mere principle for viewing its world. As a philosophical concept the numinous cause might just drift off too easily in that direction. This is why Henrich avoids to speak of the numinous cause in a theological sense for it would be too easy to abuse the term for onto-theological concepts of a represented substance from which then an absolute idea of humanity and the world might be deduced. The idea of the numinous cause rather undermines the idea of absolute representation since it goes together with the preconditions subjectivity provides, and that is the impossibility of an apodictic judgment about the condition of humanity, the world or God. The "principle of subjectivity" Henrich speaks of relinquishes any idea of principiality [*Prinzipialität*] for itself as a principle cannot be an absolute principle or provide an absolute principle from which then absolute judgments may derive. In this mode of thought it is impossible to install the numinous cause in one's life intentionally to reassure a judgement already made. This would simply result in an analogue aporia as the self-consciousness's self-explanation. The idea would infinitely reassure itself. So there is no way for onto-theology to capture the numinous cause. But if we take the numinous cause to be God to that one individual in a subjective way like in a religious experience the idea of an intentional ascription cannot (righteously) occur; for faith — in religious terms — is a gift received and not a decision made. This means that the numinous cause cannot be seen in any way as a principle derived from this or that contingent (profane?) concept, but as a base and a reason for life that transcends human understanding though it has an existential impact on the life of the individual. Thus the numinous cause, God, needs to be truly beyond the individuals comprehension as a self-conscious human being but still be there as a subject of meaning within its life. Only within the drastic contingency that is human life, at the boundaries of mere reason, the idea of a numinous cause that may be God to one can be taken seriously. Faith essentially arises against all odds or — as

Manfred. *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität. Reflexionen über Subjekt, Person und Individuum aus Anlaß ihrer 'postmodernen' Toterklärung.* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1986.

Søren Kierkegaard once put it — “by the virtue of the absurd”²¹. Faith that forms itself within the realm of reason and knowledge would always arouse suspicion to be the accreditation of a preferred way of life that one ascribes to oneself in a literally mundane way. But this has nothing to do with faith or believe in God, for God’s “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18, 36) but “within” (Luke 17, 21) us.

This now leads to the final point. Sharing his thought with Kant, Jean-Luc Nancy states that faith may take its place when knowledge is set aside.²² Including the aspects discussed this means that the numinous cause, God, only makes sense for self-conscious individuals resulting in the assumption that God himself is a product or “fruit of faith, which at the same time depends only on his grace”²³. So within faith, as shown when considering Henrich’s idea, the individual discovers itself as set by God in the first place. This hermeneutical circle of understanding though cannot be broken by considering one of the two poles as the first one or even the principle. On the contrary: this assumption abandons any kind of principiality.²⁴ This but means that there is neither a necessity nor an impossibility of God to be for one certain individual. Faith may either occur or it would be subverted by an immanent principle in the first place. Such a principle though would arise within the realm of reason and knowledge and act as a mere proxy of faith, a *petitio principii*. Nancy thus adds a radical assumption. If God is found beyond reason then faith is but “the firm fidelity of reason to its own atheology”²⁵. This does not mean that faith is synonymous with the failure of reason but that faith is the “firmness with which reason confronts its own dissatisfaction”²⁶. Henrich’s point concerning subjectivity shows this *par excellence*. The point where God might as well be absolutely necessary and/or impossible is where faith originates — and this point is only reached within human life, or more precisely within the conscious life of a self-conscious subject. But the solitariness of the subject and the sudden need for a numinous cause lets one presuppose that God was not there before.

21 Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*, Kierkegaard’s Writings. Vol. 6. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong. Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1983, *passim*.

22 Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B XXX; also Nancy, *Atheism and Monotheism*, 25f.28.

23 Nancy, “Atheism and Monotheism,” 26.

24 Nancy shows the abolishment of principiality brought by a represented substance or onto-theological approaches by reconsidering the term of a *creation ex nihilo* that includes the radical idea of the devine *kenosis*. “In the first place, we might say that the *nihil* is posited. Perhaps this is the only way seriously to get out of nihilism. ‘Nihilism’ means, in effect: making a premise of nothing. But *ex nihilo* means: undoing any premise, including that of nothing. That means: to empty *nothing [rien]* (cf. *rem*, the thing) of any quality as principle. That is creation.” (Ibid., 24f.)

25 Ibid., 26.

26 Ibid.

But the God that is not there is the God of onto–theology, the God that acts as represented substance. Against this concept of God stands the concept of God Nancy shows in *Deconstruction of Christianity*. "Christianity is by itself and in itself a deconstruction and a self–deconstruction. [...] In other words, Christianity indicates, in the most active way — and the most ruinous for itself, the most nihilist in certain regards — how monotheism shelters within itself — better: more intimately within itself than itself, within or without itself — the principle of a world without God."²⁷ This means that the Christian monotheism does formulate an *atheism* since it turns itself against itself, that is against any onto–theological form of itself. Then again this "self–deconstruction" can only be achieved from "within" for the Christian monotheism is effectively an *absentheism*. The Christian God empties himself of his own divinity, and in this leaving the space for having faith in him without drifting off into the aporia of any immanent ascription of faith. In this sense monotheism and absentheism are formally indistinguishable. And it must be so to avoid drifting off into any thinking within the boundaries of an ascribed or anyhow installed principle that claims its place blanking out any other possible world–view. Reconsidering the child's prayer one can find the problem of God as principle in an innocuous way but still as a functionalised idea. This means that the concept of God may also be at risk to be abused in ideological ways. God as represented substance too easily opens up a way to justify the idea that — in paraphrasing Jean–François Lyotard — could be called the 'terror of the principle'. In short: the God of onto–theology has far less in common with the Christian God that revokes himself in the *kenosis*. Incarnating himself, becoming a contingent human being himself, this God became a God that knows what it means to be human.²⁸ God's absence can thus be seen as a part of his grace, for it truly enables an understanding of the world that is righteous in the face of the heterogeneity of the individuals and their experience of the world they live in. And where else if not within the lives lived by those individuals does God's absence ultimately make sense?

27 Nancy, Jean–Luc. "A Deconstruction of Monotheism." In *Dis–Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, by Jean–Luc Nancy, translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith, 29–41, 35. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008.

28 Cf. Pohlmeier, Markus. "IncurSIONi nella modernità: Dall'Esercizio del cristianesimo suggestioni su un Cristo postmoderno." *Il Regno* 4 (2014): 130–37.

Abstract

“GOD IS THE BEYOND IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES”

The article shows that the idea of a transcendent God that is considered to be beyond does only make sense in the realm of human lives. Based on Gérard Granel’s and Dieter Henrich’s concepts of the subject, it is shown that the concept of the beyond needs to be discussed in a hermeneutical manner rather than a metaphysical. An idea for such a hermeneutical approach can be found in Jean–Luc Nancy’s *Deconstruction of Christianity* when Nancy specifies on his term “absentheism”.

KEY WORDS: absentheism, atheology, beyond, Lebensgrund, principle, self-awareness, substance