

## To Speak Meaningfully About God

A Conversation With Ingolf U. Dalferth<sup>1</sup>

1. I have the impression, to paraphrase Shakespeare, that something is rotten in the discipline of philosophy or in contemporary philosophical discourse. Closed societies of academics publishing journals, people quoting each other and evaluating the number of quotations as a measure of scholarship and competence in the subject of philosophy. Do you see any possibility of successful therapy for this current state of the conception of philosophy?

Citation cartels are instruments of power susceptible to abuse and counts of mentions are an unsuitable tool for career management in philosophy. No one in their right mind denies that. And yet many go along with it. The academic struggle for survival is no better today than it was in the past, only it uses different means. But these come from non-philosophical disciplines, and that's the trouble. In philosophy, there is no accepted standard of progress or agreement on problems, questions, or methods. Likes and dislikes do not lead to better insight, and accepted opinion is not the standard from which everyone must proceed. Unlike scientific research, philosophising is not about data collection, theory building, or explanatory models. Philosophers are not meta-scientists. They are not explainers of reality, but explorers of possibilities and defenders of reason. They question what others take for granted. They look for the hidden in the obvious, for the possible in the actual, for the improbable in the probable. And they judge for themselves, not by following public opinion or political agendas. At least that's what I expect from them. By turning their critical acumen against themselves, questioning their presuppositions, and problematising their convictions, philosophers are agents of enlightenment. That is what they should

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want to be. Philosophy, as I would like to understand it, is an activity, a practice of critical discernment and self-critical judgment that questions the given and explores the possible. To advance in philosophy, therefore, requires critical self-thinking and independence of mind, not the imitation of masterminds and the serving of zeitgeist agendas. If the academy does not allow for this anymore, we must create occasions for it with like-minded fellow philosophers but we must not allow ourselves to be driven into the dead end of competing for research funds that force agendas on us defined by politics and public opinion. Philosophers swim against the current and are not the vanguard of the zeitgeist. They are more like Minerva's owl, which, as we know, does not begin its flight until dusk.

2. You have constantly tried to connect the heritage of classical German philosophy with the achievements of argumentation in analytical philosophy. Do you think that philosophical hermeneutics (Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricœur) can fruitfully exchange ideas with analytical philosophy and vice versa?

Are you asking if I chased a dream for decades? Of course, the exchange is, or can be, fruitful for both sides. They emphasise different issues and have different areas of interest, but in many ways, they also address similar problems using different methods. The methodological and stylistic differences between analytic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological approaches should not be elevated to fundamental differences between philosophical schools. Nor should they be confused with metaphysical, epistemic, or moral positions. The analytic/continental divide is a pretty useless oversimplification, and so are those between naturalism and historicism, subjectivism and objectivism, realism and idealism. All -isms are in danger of slipping from critical philosophising into positional ideology. With an open mind, we can always learn from others in positive and negative ways. As a philosopher, one needs an almost anthropological curiosity to get to know the foreign, the other, the unfamiliar, to let oneself be questioned by it. Without conscious self-questioning, it is not possible to break open entrenched views and familiar distinctions, and without this, one cannot get anywhere in philosophy.

3. I was very impressed by your lecture on Hegel, "Das Vernünftige ist das Wirkliche", at the Hegel Congress in Sarajevo in 2008 because

you convincingly demonstrated that there is still much to learn from Hegel in today's philosophical discourse. Similarly, Wilfrid Sellars has done this with his explication of the "Myth of the Given". Similarly, Arthur Danto has spoken of the short-sightedness of the analytic discussion of representationalism, metaphorically illustrated as fighting in the valley, but the goal of philosophising is snowy peaks in the background, described as Hegel's realm of spirit. Is it even possible anymore to interpret our life-world in a reasonable way, let alone to shape it?

Life-world is not a descriptive term, but a critical boundary term. We have always already left the life-world and speak of it from elsewhere. But the contrast is important and draws attention to something crucial. In the life-world, everything is taken as if it were exactly as it is taken. One perceives what one perceives, feels what one feels, and does what one does, because it seems that it cannot be any different from what one perceives, feels, and does. That this is not so, one notices only when one has left the life-world. Then, what one takes for granted loses its self-evidence and becomes intelligible in its contingency. This does not change the world, but the way in which one lives in it. The life-world is not a world alongside other worlds, but a special way of living in the world—a way in which it is not clear that it is a special way, different from others, because one lives as one lives without being aware of the possibility of other ways of living. The world we live in when we have left the life-world always has more possibilities than we perceive or pay attention to. It is richer, more diverse, different, and stranger than we often think. That is what must be brought out in philosophising. This can lead to an even greater appreciation of the familiar, or to discovering new things by paying attention to possibilities that were previously ignored.

4. Many philosophers believe that Christianity has several Achilles' heels, among which the first one is the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin, which does not exist in this form in Judaism or Islam, has tyrannised people for centuries, as Herbert Schnädelbach noted. Did the apostle Paul, as an apostate Rabin, in this respect exaggerate with the Epistle to the Romans?

No, that's an old misunderstanding. The word 'sin' is not a descriptive moral term, but a theological category used to judge certain

states and behaviours of people that separate them from God and that close them off from perceiving and orienting their lives to God's presence. In theology, however, one cannot speak of sin without speaking of the overcoming of sin, not by us, but by God. The category can only be used retrospectively, and never without thematising yourself. Take the Apostles' Creed. It does not speak of sin, but of the forgiveness of sin, and in this retrospective way, those who join the Creed also speak of their own sin. In a similar way, original sin is not a descriptive term but a theological category. It expresses the theological judgement that we all live far below our potential as humans because we are all, in our different ways, blind to the presence of God. This wouldn't have to be that way. Humans could, should, ought to be better than they are – better in the sense of being more human, not in the sense of being something other than human. The really challenging question is not the much-discussed problem of the difference between human and animal, but the difference between a human and an inhuman life, that is, the search for a truly human way of living as a human being. This includes, but is not limited to, recasting their relationship with other animals. Humans also behave in inhuman ways towards other humans and towards themselves. They are more dangerous than they think, and the task of becoming a humane human being is harder than is often seen to be.

The insight of the Christian tradition is that ultimately we become truly human not by what we do or can do ourselves, but by what happens to us and re-orientates our lives. The crucial thing for a truly human life is to become aware of how God is at work in it – 'God' meaning here simply the one without whom neither we nor anything else would be possible. The term is used here to refer to the reality that is the source of all possibility. Before we are, we become, and we become not because we have the capacity to do so, but because we are made to make ourselves. A deep passivity rules our lives and precedes and underlies all our activities. To ignore this is to misjudge the possibilities played into our lives as our own doings or as a mere given. But possibilities are always possibilities *of* something or *for* someone. They do not exist in the void but are grounded in some actuality, in the last resort in what Kierkegaard calls "the reality of the possible".

Seen in this light, sin is not a moral deficit, but a sign of hope: We are made to make ourselves, but we did not make ourselves to make ourselves, and there is more going on in our lives than what we do and achieve or fail to achieve ourselves. We live from possibilities that we do not create ourselves, but that happen to us and befall us, often quite surprisingly and unexpectedly, because we would not have dreamed of such a thing. This surplus of possibilities far exceeds anything we can acquire or procure for ourselves. It is a fact of life that we have to live with, whether we suffer it as a burden we must bear (if it is an evil) or as a gift for which we can be grateful (if it is something good). Not to hope for the possibility of good in everything that happens to us is to sin; to hope for it and place one's trust in God is to overcome sin. To be able to hope is a gift that one cannot give oneself. But without it, life is bleak.

5. In addition to the doctrine of original sin, another weakness of Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity, according to which the monotheism of the Christian religion is endangered. Wouldn't the Arians have found a better alternative with their formulation Jesus was God "homoiusios"? Do you think that in the future a simple monotheism, i.e. unitarism, as the mainstream of Christianity is possible? Do you think that many Christians do not believe in Trinitarian doctrine, as was the case with the philosopher John Locke and the physicist Isaac Newton, who held Unitarian beliefs while remaining members of the English state church?

You ask me very theological questions; but again, it's the other way around. For me, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theoretical construct about the inner life of God, but the practical foundation of the possibility of a radical form of life of freedom and love. In the sciences, we no longer think in terms of natures and hypostases, substances, attributes, and energies, but in terms of events, states, positions, time processes, relations, and transformations. Philosophy and theology should leave their traditional worlds of thought and do that too, otherwise the communication between science, philosophy, and theology will break down. This is also true in this case. Christian thought efforts on topics such as the Trinity, Christology, sin, or justification interest me not for their historical significance or intellectual acumen, but as contributions to the controversial debate

over the idea of the humanity of human beings. Trinitarian monotheism is not a questionable form of objectifying theism couched in terms of an outdated Neo-Platonist and Aristotelian metaphysics. It is not a theory about God or a conceptual specification of a unitarian view of God shared with other theistic traditions, but the concise formula of a truly human life lived in the presence of God that is turned from ignoring God to being open to the self-disclosing presence of God and re-oriented towards it.

Now philosophers have a certain sceptical reluctance to speak of God. God is not encountered anywhere directly in experience. Whatever we can experience is not God. But without God - or the reality to which theology refers with the term "God" - there would be nothing that could be experienced and no one who could experience anything. Therefore, when we search for God, we must not search for him in the world of experiential objects, but start from the place where we find ourselves. God is not an object that we can perceive, but if one wants to find God, one must search at the blind spot from which we perceive what we can perceive. Whoever does not start from God will also not arrive at God, indeed there would be nothing to start from, no one to start from anything and nothing to which one could refer. But to start from God means to start from the place where we are, and the first and decisive step is to recognise this place not only as our blind spot but as the presence to which God is present.

This dynamic reality unfolds a radical Trinitarian monotheism. It is not a confused theory about God, but the concise formula of a life in the presence of God, in which the divine presence is disclosed as the actuality of all possibilities to concrete people through God's self-communication in such a way that they can re-orient their lives to it. In short, Trinitarian theology is not a Trinitarian account of God, but of a humane form of human life in, with, and through God that is made possible by God, determined as a life of love and freedom by God, and realised through the presence of God. You don't have to acknowledge this, but if it's true, you're missing out on something important if you don't.

6. Do you consider the close connection of Christianity with the doctrine of Platonism in the course of history as a distance from the original Christian kerygma? Clement of Alexandria, Origen,

Ambrose, Augustine, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Pope Benedict XVI were Great Christian Platonists. The Logos idea is the central idea of the Gospel of John, Logos is the immortal in our mortal body. Nietzsche has said something apt with his assertion that Christianity is Platonism for the masses. Through Platonism also came the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in Christian theology. Christian theologians have also integrated Plato's doctrine of the four cardinal virtues into Christian ethics. Was Platonism an enrichment or an impoverishment of the Christian religion?

It is undeniable that Platonism had a tremendous influence on Christian theology. Presumably, there would be no Christian theology at all if it had not been formed in the confrontation with Neo-Platonism. But Platonism comes in many forms, and not all have had a positive impact on Christian theology. What Nietzsche calls Platonism for the people is the turning away from the reality of the world of experience and the turning towards a transcendent beyond, in which everything is supposed to be better. He rightly rejects that. Christianity speaks of this world and no other (as does Plato, who wasn't a Platonist). It differs from the re-mythising speculations of neo-Platonists like Iamblichus by being realistic, concrete, and practical. Christianity demythologises, while Neo-Platonism re-mythologises. All central Christian doctrines (Trinity, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology) are about this world, not a transcendent world beyond. The doctrine of the Trinity is a critique of Platonism, and so is the broad stream of Logos Christology. It can therefore be said with even greater justification that Christian theology emerged from the critical transformation and realist reconstruction of Platonism. It offered a better alternative to the re-mythising speculations of late Neo-Platonism. In this sense, it is not Platonism for the people, but help and guidance for the people not to fall into Neo-Platonist traps.

7. Your favourite subject, it seems to me, is evil, or malum. There was a lot of it in history and the guilt of Christians is not negligible. Do we need a new Mephistopheles nowadays, who can proudly talk

about his Wirkungsgeschichte, so that we could turn to the good in our practice?

The reality of evil is omnipresent, and if anyone outside theology is still interested in Christian thought today, it is almost always about this topic. My interest has focused, among other things, on how evil has been and is spoken of in the Christian tradition. One must distinguish at least three different approaches: the idea of evil as privation (*privatio boni*), as evil-doing (*malefacere* or *malefactum*), and as non-faith or unfaith. Each of these ideas is interwoven with a cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology from which it cannot be detached. And these three ideas cannot be combined without contradiction, even if this is tried again and again. This makes the Christian debate about problems of evil a contradictory project. If evil is understood as *malefactum*, one can imagine a world without evil. If it is understood as *privatio boni*, there is no world in which there would be no evil in this sense. In discussions about theodicy, however, it is impossible to move from one understanding to another without becoming entangled in equivocations and ambiguities. Problems of evil are therefore not only an unending existential challenge in life but also an unsolvable problem in thought if one does not pay attention to making the right distinctions.

8. The common characteristic of theology and philosophy is that theoretical teaching cannot be strictly separated from the practice of life. How did you manage to be a believing philosopher and a practising Christian who is also a good person? Do you have a recipe for the rest of us?

I am a good person? You must ask others if that is true. I am sure you will get very different answers. No one is good all the time, everywhere, and for everyone in every way. Even those who try to be good have no control over the evil consequences of their good intentions and actions. We can and should want good. But even if we knew what that would be in a specific case, we should not succumb to the delusion that we can achieve it. That is why we would do well not to take ourselves too seriously and not to overestimate the importance of our own ideas, insights, and actions. Those who want to make the world a better place often leave it even worse than it already is. Overestimating ourselves is at least as dangerous as underestimating

others. We should make every effort to recognise the good in each case and to do the good that is possible for us. But we should not fall prey to the delusion that we are the only ones who see correctly what is good in a given situation or can achieve it ourselves in a sufficient way. Others will see and want to do something different. And maybe they are right. Therefore, we must do what we can do. But we must also hope that more happens in life than we do. Otherwise, there is no reasonable hope for the possibility of goodness in human life. On this point, Heidegger is surely right: Only a God can save us. We can't.

9. Do you also believe in a “Restitutio ad Integrum”? Is this doctrine still relevant for theology and is it justifiable philosophically?

No, not in the way suggested. Neither in the medical nor in the legal nor in the theological sense is it a matter of restoring an initial state. Such a state does not exist and has never existed. It is about an undisturbed relationship of the creature to the Creator, and this is always to be achieved first and never already given. We all begin in a state of God-blindness, and most people remain in that state all their lives. But even if there had been such a *status integritatis*, the restoration of the *status quo ante* would not be sufficient. Rather, the result must be better than the initial state. Back to square one would only mean that we are ready for the process to start all over again. But that is not good enough to live as a human being in a truly human way and thus in the right relationship with God.

However, the Augustinian view that we have fallen from a state of possible perfection to a state of actual imperfection, with the hope of returning to ultimate perfection, is not the only way to understand the hoped-for change from a life ignoring God to a life centred on God. I think it is much more appropriate to work with the difference between human and divine activity. Where humans are involved or even the only actors, the outcome will only be something more or less good. Something truly good and final salvation can be hoped for only from God alone. The Protestant reformers, therefore, insisted that only a *solus deo*, and not a collaboration of God and humans, can solve the problem of reorientation and redirection of human life. No one has brought themselves into existence, no one can work their way out of their blindness to God, and no one can

fix their relationship with God on their own. Even though no one can live without being active, one's own activity is not the reason for being there. One feeds on a given for which one is not responsible and which the Christian tradition rightly ascribes to God. I cannot meaningfully say, "I do not exist" (in the usual sense of "exist"), and I cannot meaningfully say, "I brought myself into existence." The issue is not a semantic but an existential self-contradiction. Even if it were true that for every activity we perform, we must possess a capacity to perform it, we can possess capacities only if we exist, and we cannot construe our existence as an activity that results from practising a capacity that makes our existence possible. I may not be able to hear you without the capacity of hearing, but I do not need a capacity of existing in order to be able to come into existence. The modal distinction between *possibility* ("it is possible to  $\phi$ ") and *capacity* or *potentiality* ("it is possible for me to  $\phi$ ") does not translate to the deep passivity of coming into existence. If I exist, it is possible that I exist, but I do not have a capacity or potential to exist before I actually do. But then, the possibility of my existence is based on a reality other than my own. From here, it is still a long way to an argument for the reality of God. But any argument for God will have to include that I owe my existence not to myself but to God. No one is excluded from this insight; all people can live differently with regard to God than they actually do; no one can make this change on their own; everyone is dependent on God opening their eyes to it; and all have the right to hope for it. Whoever lives in this way is on the best way to what used to be called, in a different intellectual environment, *restitutio in integrum*.

10. Okay. I will ask you this old, complex question through a modern rephrasing: how do you see the possibilities of overcoming contingency (*Kontingenzbewältigung*; Hermann Lübbe) today: Is there a modern principle of hope? We have seen that Marx's and Freud's predictions of the demise and illusion of religion have not been confirmed. Could the same be said for current naturalistic-biologicistic explanatory paradigms about the human being and its interpretandum?

Contingency is something other than mere possibility, as Leibniz made clear. What is contingent is not only possible but actual, and

it is actual in such a way that it could also not be or something else could be in its place. It has a beginning and an end, it begins to exist, and it ceases to exist, it is something finite. This does not show up in immediate perception, but only in thinking. In perception, everything is constantly changing, but that everything that becomes and passes away is contingent, that not only this or that, but the whole world is contingent, that does not impose itself sensually, but only in thinking, which questions everything. What is, could also not be. Or it could be different. Or something else could be in its place. Applying these considerations to oneself can lead to a deep sense of existential insecurity. This is not eliminated by “coping” with contingency. The question is rather how, in the face of the contingency of the world and one’s own life, one can gain something like reliability in everyday life and confidence in the future, i.e., how one can overcome existential uncertainty rather than contingency.

Naturalistic approaches cannot do that. They are limited to attempts to explain the world of fact, where they have their justification and form the basis for the technological successes of our culture. However, we live not only in a world of facts, but always at the same time in a world of meaning, and we cannot trace one back to the other without getting into pointless arguments. The current debates about sex and gender are an example of this. Biological facts (sex) are something different from cultural artefacts (gender), but we only ever know facts in the horizon of cultural constructions of meaning, and constructions of meaning would not exist without facts to make them possible. For us, the world is never just the totality of facts, but always also the totality of its possibilities. What exists is not only there, but what is there has a culturally shaped meaning, a sense shared with others, an experiential significance for us that enables us to live in it in a more or less meaningful way. We not only live in the world, but we experience how we live in it, and in doing so we not only experience it as it is but also discover how it could be, how it might have been, how it would be better, and how it should be, so that a good human life together is possible.

If we pay attention to these dimensions of possibility, the world is not only characterised by contingency, but it is the place where we can live a meaningful life worth living, at least for a certain time. One must pay attention to this if one does not want to get stuck in

the existential uncertainty that comes from discovering contingency. To live with existential confidence, one must gain a positive relationship to one's own finitude. There is a crucial difference between never having been and the fact that it will always have been true that one has lived. Whoever dies has lived, and whoever lives has experienced the meaning of the possible in the real. Only in this horizon, there is not only being but ought, not only facts but meaning, not only the perishable but the possibility of the imperishable, not only the reality of evil but the possibility of good, not only living beings but creatures, not only the world but God.

The question of God arises in a life that has become aware of its contingency, but it arises only in the world of meaning and not in the world of facts, and it arises not as a question of another contingent reality that passes away, but as a question of the reality of the possible, without which there would be no becoming and no passing away, nothing possible and nothing real of anything other than God. God is not something real among the real, but also not something possible among the possible, but the one without whom there would be nothing possible nor real.

But where God is, there is also hope. Whoever hopes, relies on the possibility of good, even if everything seems to speak against it and one cannot do any more oneself. A life of hope is focusing on the possibility of good, which is not real, but could and should be real. One focuses on the possibility of good and is not satisfied with the reality in which one lives. Those who live this way see more in life - and live better because they live hopefully. Or as Kierkegaard put it: "If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not." (*Either/Or*; 1.41). Possibility can be found always and everywhere, and it points the way to the presence of God.

11. Many Anglo-American philosophers (e.g., W. V. O. Quine, Peter Gregory Boghossian, Daniel Dennett, Susan Haack, Peter Lipton, Alexander Rosenberg, Bertrand Russell), especially the representatives of naturalism, see no possibility for meaningful talk about God and tend to reduce philosophy to philosophy of science or even more radically to scientism. Could an atheistic naturalism be

universalised so easily? How could we oppose this in a reasonable way?

It is one of the constant tasks of philosophy to critically dismantle and correct the misorientations, one-sidedness, and prohibitions of thinking of its own past and present. The attempts of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers to declare that all talking and thinking about God is not only wrong but meaningless have all failed. One goes wrong if one wants to fight dogmatism with dogmatism and invokes secularist or scientific beliefs against religious or theological convictions. Nothing is to be taken for granted here, but everything requires critical examination and debate. Where -isms lead to prohibitions of thought, one has left the critical business of philosophy. And one underestimates the pressure of existential problems, which are bundled in the subject of God, if one brushes it all aside as meaningless. Even those who do not want to talk about God are exposed to the existential questions of human life, which cannot be dismissed as meaningless just because they think talking about God is meaningless. What is at issue here is not just the beliefs, but the life of people. Even naturalists do not live naturalistically, but in a multitude of cultural forms of life, in which questions arise about the whence and whither, good and evil, the beginning and the end, the meaning and the meaninglessness of life. One can leave all this out of one's philosophising. But one can also, like Wittgenstein, come to realise that one has not even asked the important existential questions when one has solved one's naturalist, historicist, epistemological, moral or metaphysical problems. We are. But we do not understand what is happening to us and to others in this life. And we can't just turn our backs on these issues. That is why we cannot stop talking about God and thinking about God.

12. Eleven years of joint "symphilosophie" on the basic issues of contemporary philosophy of religion in Dubrovnik. How does your Protestant soul feel in a Catholic Dubrovnik?

Protestantism has always been at odds with majority opinion. But today the majority view can no longer be identified with Catholicism, not even in Croatia. This does not mean that there are no longer denominational antagonisms. But they are no longer the driving differences through which one defines one's own identity and that

of others. In California, they have long been eclipsed by barely navigable dynamic distinctions between religious traditions that do not assign people to different groups but run right through families and individuals. People have different beliefs, follow different life orientations, live different religions, practise different styles of thought and philosophy. But often only for a time, under certain conditions, and with a tendency to change them when it seems appropriate or necessary—with new friends, new partners, new jobs. To be sure, in philosophy of religion there is a clear difference in questions pursued, styles of discussion, and strategies of argumentation in different denominational and religious traditions, even within the diverse range of Christian denominations. In the debate, however, the confessional or religious orientations of those involved are hardly an issue, but are largely ignored. This is sometimes a mistake because the differences that are not addressed often show in what is taken for granted or as normal because it should be self-evident for everyone. That this is not the case becomes apparent in foreign environments. That's why it's important for philosophers to purposefully go into other, foreign, unfamiliar contexts. As a Protestant in Croatia, however, discussing problems of philosophy of religion with Catholics and Muslims is not a step into a different world of thought. Rather, it is a home game with many familiar traits, even if what emerges in Dubrovnik is always surprising. But this is not only due to the different religious and non-religious orientations of the participants, but above all to the people with whom one philosophises. Ideas live longer than any individual person, but what is decisive is that, and how, they are represented, defended, used, and claimed. Otherwise, they are only a memory of a bygone era and pose no challenge to living and thinking in today's world.