University of Tartu
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REFLECTIONS ON NIHILISM:
THE SEARCH FOR GOD IN MODERN TIMES

Masters Thesis in Philosophy

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Introduction

In this thesis I examine Friedrich Nietzsche's concepts of nihilism and the death of God so as to contextualize the ways in which Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber respectively tried to carve philosophical paths to counteract the effects of nihilism and revive a relationship to divinity in the modern world. I aim to shed light on the question motivating this thesis topic, namely 'where is God for us today?' That is, in the modern age where 'God is dead'—where traditional notions of God increasingly lack their once great narrative force and where people are increasingly bereft of a genuine sense of sacredness amidst daily life—I wonder how we can meaningful attend to this void? In order to address where God might be for us today I analyze specific ideas from Heidegger and Buber in their respective responses to Nietzsche. In doing this I aim to examine and bring to light two pathways by which God can be approached in the modern age without recourse to a traditional religious context. Ultimately I focus on Heidegger and Buber because I believe they take Nietzsche's idea that 'God is dead' seriously and manage to provide a compelling non-traditional approach to divinity that emphasizes what I will refer to as *this-worldly transcendence,* a theme that emerged in Nietzsche's own attempts to constructively deal with the death of God.

I regard God, similar to how Heidegger regards Being, as *question worthy* (*fragwürdig*).[1] To say that God is question worthy means that God—whether *It* be considered strictly as a concept or taken as a name/symbol for something we scarcely understand but intuitively feel and perceive—directly beckons us to question *It* because *It* is mysterious. I do not mean that some cosmic personage wants this—I simply mean that, anyway you look at it, whatever the term God means and refers to is not obvious when you start to really probe at it, and this ambiguity invites questioning. I use the term 'the divine as such' to indicate the reality of divinity that cannot be ultimately explained (i.e. that great mysterious something about existence which we then try to describe as God). When I talk about the divine as such in Heidegger and Buber I mean the way their thinking deals with whatever it is we call God. The idea also stands behind whatever an individual, group, or philosophy holds as being most sacred, even if they do not think of it as divine or as an

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[1] Heidegger uses the term *das Fragwürdigste* to describe Being as that which is "the most worthy of being questioned" (though in more banal usage "the most suspicious") (GA 65, 4/CP 1, p6). I would like to thank Marko Pajevic for clarifying these German meanings I have supplied in quotations.

ultimate essence. What God is, is very often taken for granted, but the meaning/nature of God has a direct impact on our ability to live meaningfully. To this end, I hope that my work here will demonstrate, albeit indirectly, the relevance, importance, and genuine need for people to continue to philosophically engage with nihilism and the question worthiness of the divine as such.

Chapter 1 examines Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism as *the decay of the highest values of western culture* (*'God is dead'*) of roughly the past 2500 years, which results in a modern comportment that regards existence as ontologically meaningless. I focus on the origins of nihilism arising due to the notion of *other-worldly transcendence* and the will to truth that compelled people to find reality in a transcendent other world and which resulted in the collapse of this notion of transcendence. I then discuss the primary way people attempt to fill the void of nihilism; i.e. by taking refuge in various moral ideologies which offer no meaningful transcendence.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Heidegger's approach to the problem of nihilism, beginning with the way he regards Nietzsche's metaphysical ideas as culminating in a comportment to existence that reduces the meaning of Being to resources. For Heidegger it is this comportment that fills the void of nihilism rather than morality bereft of transcendence. After this I discuss Heidegger's portrait of Being called the Fourfold as the basis for delving into his thinking concerning the divine as such. I then demonstrate how his notion of the divine promotes this-worldly transcendence in that it is radically tied to the everyday world of life and *things*, and that it embraces death such that the death of God (nihilism) becomes a portal to a more intimate connection with divinity than was often at play over the past 2500 years.

In Chapter 3 I deal with Buber's approach to nihilism and the divine. I open by discussing his relationship to Nietzsche and Heidegger and compare his own analysis of the historical components that he regards as pertinent to nihilism. After this I provide an overview of his ontology (I-Thou) and his conception of the divine as such, demonstrating an emphasis on this-worldly transcendence emerging through relationships. In the final section I discuss his rethinking of nihilism as the Eclipse of God and its implications for finding God today.

In the Reflections and Conclusion to the thesis, I summarize the key points of my analysis and demonstrate some ways in which the ideas of both Heidegger and Buber on the divine can deepen one another and offer us a fuller picture than when considered alone. I also discuss the question of 'where is God for us today?' in light of having examined the thoughts of these three philosophers concerning nihilism and the divine. Given the emphasis of this-worldly transcendence that emerges in my analysis and forms a link between these three philosophers, I conclude that divinity may be most intimately and meaningfully found and encountered for us moderns today through our everyday dealings with *things* (Heidegger) and in *relationship to one another* (Buber).

I. Nietzsche's Utterance: 'God is Dead'

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him . . .
—Friedrich Nietzsche (GS 125)

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships . . .
—David Foster Wallace (2025)

Preliminary Remarks

In my analysis of Nietzsche's ideas regarding nihilism and the death of God I make frequent use of the *Nachlass* fragments that were published posthumously under the title of *The Will to Power* (WP).[2] For those (like myself) not fluent in German, this text is the main way to study Nietzsche's *Nachlass* fragments in English.[3] Heidegger also placed a great deal of emphasis on the *Nachlass* fragments in his interpretation of Nietzsche, and following him, I find them to be important and insightful, especially when it comes to Nietzsche's views on nihilism. But I do not follow Heidegger's view that they constitute the "real Nietzsche" in contrast to his published texts (Kaufmann 2002: 172-173) which then came to be regarded as only a preparation for *The Will to Power*, itself "widely held to represent Nietzsche's crowning systematic achievement" (Kaufmann 1968: xiii).[4] Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche constitutes a major influence on my understanding of nihilism and the death of God, and though I would not say that Heidegger's reading is definitive, I do regard it as profound in its capacity to help make sense of modern times, more than in making sense of Nietzsche per say. Because of this I also draw from Heidegger's essay *The Word of Nietzsche:"God Is Dead"* (WON).

Introduction: A Diagnosis for Modernity

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[2] Citations of Nietzsche's books are by aphorism number.

[3] Nietzsche's sister collected his unpublished fragments together, titled the sections herself, eventually publishing three different versions of the "text" as *The Will to Power* with the collection of fragments growing larger each time and culminating at 1,067 (Kaufmann 1968: xvii-xx).

[4] Walter Kaufmann explains that these ideas regarding *The Will to Power* come from the Nazi professor of philosophy, Alfred Bäumler (Kaufmann 1968: xiv), whom Kaufmann says was "philosophically [. . .] a nobody." Furthermore, Bäumler's "ideas about Nietzsche were accepted not only by large numbers of Germans but also by many of Nietzsche's detractors outside Germany" (ibid.), and this would include Martin Heidegger.

Nietzsche's radical diagnosis of the modern age is most poignantly and disturbingly encapsulated by his famous declaration, delivered by a proverbial *Wildman*[5] (*der tolle Mensch*), which I characterize as an *utterance* that echoes loudly to this day in the corridors of western thought (GS 125).[6] The Wildman delivers the utterance "God is dead and we have killed him" to a group of people seemingly unaware of this great deed, how it affects them, and their participation in it (ibid.). I maintain that this is not an opinion or an academic thesis, but a *diagnosis* of modernity, and one that has a twofold implication. It is the age where God is dead, which actually means that the *highest values (God) have devalued themselves* (WP 2; WON: 61), pulling both the traditional Christian concept of God (which was not merely one concept amongst others, but simply the concept of God for most Europeans) and our relationship to the divine as such, into its receding tide of dissolution. Or in other words a dual effect transpired: with the collapse of the Christian God came also a collapse of our relationship to the divine as such. On the one hand something had to step in to fill the void created by this death, and I will demonstrate how this void often gets filled by discussing Nietzsche's insights on the will to truth (I.4) and modern morality (I.5). On the other hand, with the untenability of the Christian God, the proverbial baby of the divine as such was cast out with the bath water of the Christian narrative; with the Christian God gone, all of divinity came to be widely regarded as untenable and fictional.[7]

As a diagnosis of modernity Nietzsche merely uttered what many people were already unconsciously sensing, thinking, and feeling[8]—not unlike the mysterious utterance recorded during the beginnings of Christendom regarding the death of the god Pan, which also became a symbol of such times (Von Der Luft 1984).[9] Some thinkers try to reduce

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[5] I prefer to translate *der tolle Mensch* as "the Wildman" (instead of the common translation as "madman"). My source for this translation of *tolle* as "wild" is Collins (2011): 3432.

[6] See Santianello (2017), for a discussion of the influence of the utterance on western theological thinkers in the 20th century.

[7] This may mean, for some (such as staunch atheists), that there never was any reality whatsoever to what we have called God (or divine, or sacred), while for others (believers of some sort) it could feel as though God has abandoned us (for example, as it probably felt for many Jews following the *Shoa* (Santianello 2017: 203)).

[8] Related to this, see Heidegger's discussion in WON (61-65 and throughout) regarding the nature of nihilism as the fundamental historical movement of the west.

[9] One way I interpret the death of Pan is that it marks a transition from a time where divinity was sought in the open spaces of the natural world, to the Christian era where divinity was increasingly confined to the domain of the Church (both literal church buildings and to the rulings of the clergy). The ideas of Heidegger and Buber (yet to be discussed) in many ways evoke a return to this pre-Christian comportment to divinity. The death of the Christian God may well herald the proverbial return of Pan.

Nietzsche's utterance and insights surrounding nihilism to being only a reflection of his own personal psychological struggles and nothing more (Hamilton 2007: 170); or they paint him as a thinker who was only attempting to argue away the idea of God as having outlived its usefulness where personal growth is concerned (Lackey 1999: 737). Such ideas reduce the poetic allegorical dimension of Nietzsche's utterance to being *only* a reflection of his personal life and intentions and also prevent it from being taken up for deeper reflection. But to regard it as a diagnosis[10] rather than an emotionally charged reactive opinion, is to take it as a profound observation about the times (not unlike Buddha's observation, uttered amidst a philosophical landscape that also emphasized a dichotomy of eternal truth versus illusion, that in fact there is nothing untouched by impermanence).[11] Thinkers such as Heidegger, Buber, as well as the 20th century theologians who formed the *Death of God movement* (a series of theologians who took seriously the utterance) (Santianello 2017) demonstrate a more profound approach to Nietzsche's utterance and his philosophy as a whole because they took it them seriously and engaged with their implications for the meaning of human existence in today's world. Such an approach also characterizes my own thinking on the subject.

In what follows I focus on outlining some of the salient features of modern nihilism that we find in Nietzsche's writing in order to contextualize both the question of 'where God might be for us today' and the respective thoughts of Heidegger and Buber explored in Chapters 2 and 3. The structure of this chapter proceeds thusly: section I.1 briefly discusses the origins of nihilism according to Nietzsche, so as to contrast his thinking on modern nihilism discussed in I.2. Section I.3 elaborates on the nature of modern nihilism by exploring three fundamental aspects of pre-modern meaning making. Sections I.4 and I.5 deal, respectively, with Nietzsche's claim that the will to truth is a major cause of modern nihilism, and that morality for its own sake is primarily what fills the void that the Christian God once occupied.

I.1 The Beginnings of Nihilism

[10] See Sedgwick (2001: 258-259) in support of this view.

[11] See Siderits (2022) for a discussion of Buddhist teachings.

Broadly speaking, Nietzsche regards nihilism as a devaluation of empirical existence to the point where it seems to be ontologically meaningless (WP 36).[12] As Heidegger illustrates, this devaluation begins with Platonic metaphysics' declaration that what is truly real eternally endures (WON: 61). For Nietzsche, this idea degrades the reality of existence because that reality is one of dynamic becoming, not static being (WP 12.A). Since nothing we observe is without change, Nietzsche surmises that the unchangeable has only ever been a fabrication (ibid.). He sees Platonic metaphysics, wherein existence is likened to a series of shadows that we mistake for reality, as the formal beginning of an error in judgement concerning what is real (PN: 485-486).[13] These shadows are merely imperfect copies of their perfect blueprints (the *Idea*) which are eternal, undecaying, and beyond this world, or as Heidegger characterizes them, *suprasensuous* (WON: 61). The morality of an eternal struggle between good and evil (Persia's Zoroaster/Zarathustra), coupled with the suprasensuous form of the Good (Plato's *Idea*) filtered into European Christendom, culminating in a degradation of this world—the sensuous world, the world of appearances (Ashouri 2003). Thus metaphysics, for Nietzsche, was already nihilistic in that it evaluated the empirical world as an imperfect copy of the ultimately real suprasensuous, perpetually beyond our reach (though it initially *seemed* reachable).

According to Thomson's reading of Nietzsche, the nihilistic devaluation of the world at work in such philosophical and religious idealism lies in the problem of otherworldly transcendence (2011a: 149-150). Thomson, in clarifying Heidegger's insights, regards human subjectivity as only "allegedly self-enclosed" but that it "in fact already opens out beyond the subject itself" (op.cit.: 147). Transcendence, thought of as an implicit ontological quality of beings to *open out (or connect) beyond themselves* is **not essentially otherworldly**. The problem with Platonic-Christian idealism lies in its emphasis on *otherworldly* transcendence. For Nietzsche "the unfulfillable desire for the other-worldly generates a false sense of the meaninglessness of this world" (op.cit.: 149). This means that insofar as we cannot reach the Platonic Good or the Christian God as the ultimate reality beyond this world, our life must always be evaluated as less than the real. Thus Nietzsche declares Christianity to be "Platonism for the masses" (quoted in op.cit.: 150) because it

[12] See Burch (2014) for an analysis of the different aspects of nihilism within Nietzsche's *Nachlass*.

[13] I refer here to Nietzsche's "History of an Error" from his *Twighlight of the Idols*, which traces, in almost one page, the history of western metaphysics beginning with Plato up to the 19th century.

bequeathed to the masses this initially esoteric idea of otherworldly transcendence. The beginnings of nihilism, for Nietzsche, lie in this problem of otherworldly transcendence that creates an artificial divide between truth (*esse*) and lived existence.

I.2 Modern Nihilism

Modern nihilism is specifically the *decay* of European Christian narratives concerning God and His creation; nihilism, writes Nietzsche, constitutes the devaluation of the *highest values* (WP 2). Regarding values he notes: "all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture" (WP 259). This means that values only take shape in light of perspectival standpoints for the purpose of preservation, and as Heidegger points out, this implies a visual component (i.e. aim, view, looking) (WON: 72). To view something implies being oriented towards it in a particular way, and both view and orientation further imply boundaries and determinacy.[14] Therefore our orientation, individually and collectively, is always determinative for how values arise and play out for us. For example, cultures that endure a dark and cold winter may place *great value* on the return of the light following the winter solstice in contrast to cultures that have moderate winters (or no winters at all). Values are measurements relative to a scale that is necessitated by where we stand (as beings who aim to endure) in relationship to the context we find ourselves in and, out of this, what captures our gaze. Social values in particular are narrative abstractions of existence that meet the psychological needs of a community (WP 12.A).[15]

The highest values—the ones that devalue themselves—are more specifically social-ethical values "erected over man to strengthen their voice as if they were commands of God, as "reality," as the "true" world, as a hope and *future* world" (WP 7). These values ontologically determine the ultimate meaning and aim of existence for a community. I refer to these highest values, the so called true world (WP 12.A), as *veritas aeterna* ("eternal verity/truth"). The devaluing of the highest values that Nietzsche refers to is then

[14] I draw here from Heidegger's comments regarding boundaries (see for example in QCT: 26).

[15] See also Heidegger's discussion of values (WON: 72-75).

specifically the decay of the *veritas aeterna* which is also the death of the Christian God, as Heidegger illustrates (WON: 61).[16]

The decay of the *veritas aeterna* means that the *esse* (being) of the *veritas* (truth) is revealed to be false, untruth, a lie, a mere tale (WP 32). According to Nietzsche there is, in fact, no such true world (WP 12.A), and no world of mere appearances (shadows) imperfectly reflecting that truth either (PN: 485-486). The narrative of a true world juxtaposed against a world of appearance was only ever an artificial dichotomy of existence, and Nietzsche places more reality, more value, in what were formerly labeled as only *appearances* of truth, and this ultimately means in empirical sensuous existence.[17]

I.3 The Not-So-Holy Trinity

In light of modern nihilism appearances cannot be denigrated because they can no longer be conceived as a fleeting unreal appearance of a transcendental reality (as in Platonic-Christian nihilism). Having discovered the ideal of the *veritas aeterna* to be a fiction (i.e. constructed to meet psychological needs), it can no longer offer us any kind of redemption or meaningful transcendence, and so, even though appearances cannot be denigrated in the same manner, they do not yet, according to Nietzsche, offer us a meaningful replacement for the previous Platonic-Christian narrative. To this effect he writes:

> But as soon as man finds out how **that world** [i.e. the *veritas aeterna—LP*] is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, **forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities**—but *cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it* (WP 12.A, ebm).[18]

One cannot endure this world of *becoming*, but not wanting to deny it—*not being able to bring oneself to deny it*—one defaults to evaluating it as meaningless. This in fact constitutes the very same devaluing of existence that Nietzsche observed at play in the Platonic-Christian models of existence, with the important difference that this modern evaluation is without a theological grounding ("forbids oneself […] afterworlds and false divinities"), and thus without meaningful transcendence. Properly understood, the

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[16] Nietzsche uses the term *aeterna veritas* throughout his book *Human, All-Too-Human* virtually the same way I employ it here (Sedgewick 2001: 69/71).

[17] See his discussion of appearance in BGE 54 and his comments towards the end of *The History of an Error* (PN: 485-486).

[18] Note: 'ebm' stands for 'emphasis in bold mine.'

theological context which afforded existence some value (albeit a diminished one because it is still nihilistic according to Nietzsche) is still present, but it can no longer be taken seriously in the way it once was and so it is either engaged with superficially or outright opposed/denied. Therefore, existence appears in an increasingly valueless light until it seems ontologically meaningless. The next segment of this passage clarifies the situation:

> The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may **not** be interpreted by means of the concept of "aim," the concept of "unity," or the concept of "truth." Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not "true," [but] is false […] so the world **looks** valueless (ibid., ebm).

The world only "looks" valueless, but is not definitively valueless. Modern nihilism casts a smokescreen upon existence; the value-decay promotes a flight back into the arms of an evaluative gaze which paints existence as fundamentally meaningless (i.e. an inversion of Platonic-Christian narratives). Nietzsche's point here is that this ethos of meaninglessness arises because the three primary categories traditionally used to evaluate the world—namely *aim*, *unity*, and *being/truth*—no longer suffice to offer a meaningful narrative. Nietzsche is hinting that this not-so-holy trinity constitutes the nature of the *veritas aeterna* in the history of western thought.[19]

My thoughts on this are as follows: Without a universal long term aim that infuses everyday life with meaning, our sense of time (especially the future) becomes fragmented with the result being a decrease of patience amidst a rising sense that there is never enough time for anything.[20] The lack of an ultimate aim strips our short term aims of meaningfulness. As Seneca wrote nearly 2000 years ago: "Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind" (Seneca 1925: LXXI). Such words ring even more true today; amidst nihilism our harbors are more obscured than ever before; our sails are blown around by fleeting aims stripped of the possibility to facilitate meaningful transcendence—aims which demand immediate results because uprooted from a meaningful connection with the future that permits for a healthy attitude to the passage of time. Aims allow for the unification of our

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[19] Could this formulation indeed be a parody or satire of the Christian trinity of father, son, and holy ghost?

[20] An aim is the metaphorical light that guides the way forward into the future, and is therefore temporal. In *Being & Time* Heidegger claims that the basis of human existence is time, and that time is predominantly futural because we are always, in a variety of ways, ahead of ourselves (looking ahead, wishing/hoping, moving ahead— to name a few) (BT: 457-58). The dissolution of aim that Nietzsche mentions entails a fragmentation of our temporality which, pace Heidegger's insights, is our ontological core. With only a fragmented sense of aim and time comes a fragmented relationship to both traditional values and to the formation of new values intended to fill the void.

being, or pace Nietzsche, a unification of the various streams of willing that comprise our being (*will to power*) (WP 1067) (see also II.1). The highest aim or value we can conceive, whether it be the Christian God (or some soteriological ideal like Buddhist Nirvana) causes existence (and ourselves) to appear unified in an ontological manner. Finally aim and unity culminate in being/truth, which makes the trinitarian nature of the *veritas aeterna* appear to have real depth, like a solid ground, that can never fail us because it can never die. The 'truth' of the *veritas aeterna* makes it seem that the unifying aim it affords characterizes everything for all time, and so we can always lean on it. In a religious sense, one might say that God is always there as both the ultimate aim of existence and that which unites all beings as their common origin.

Without this trinity, Nietzsche illustrates how our perspectival ground is fragmented so as to seem as though existence ontologically lacks value. Thus we are at a loss for how to live meaningfully in the landscape of modern nihilism: "Now that the shabby origin of these values [*veritas aeterna—LP*] is becoming clear, the universe seems to have lost value, seems "meaningless"—but that is only a transitional stage" (WP 7); amidst the decay of the highest values "we are lost for a while" (WP 30), but not forever, for nihilism is *transitional,* not permanent. In spite of the *lack* of any eternal verity, Nietzsche does not regard existence as ontologically meaningless:

> […] **the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe**; we must see through the naivete of our ideals, and while we thought that we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value (WP 32, ebm).

Clearly there stands the possibility of weaving new narratives, new values. This is one of the things that Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* bequeaths to his followers (PN: 189), and may well be precisely where Heidegger and Buber take their respective cues regarding their own ideas about God and meaningfulness (Chapters II & III). In light of the above, modern nihilism is revealed to be an ontological decontextualization of the human condition, a loss of the ground and horizon out of which we had forthwith navigated the stormy seas of life. Put another way, without God, what do we strive for and what motivates our striving?

I.4 Truthfulness

Belief in the *veritas aeternas* which unified all beings to strive towards it, drove inquisitive minds to develop methods to shed light upon it so as to draw near to it (WP 3/5/12.B)

(theological and philosophical exegesis for example). Nietzsche further describes this drive to discover it as *the will to truth* (Sedgwick 2001: 259). Generally speaking, the will to truth took form in Christianity through confession practices, in which the believer counteracted their own guilt by being truthful about their misdeeds (*sins*). After such sins were bathed in the light of said truth, the believer believed themselves to be nearer to God, and in some cases they probably vividly felt this too.

Yet the will to truth does not merely concern truth alone. Reasoning towards 'the truth' emerges from the desire to be morally good: "Consequently, "will to truth" does not mean "I will not allow myself to be deceived" but […] "I will not deceive, not even myself"; *and with that* ***we stand on moral ground***" (GS 344, ebm). Finding the *truth* (whether scientific or traditional) always stems from a desire for moral elevation (WP 5). In the endeavor to solve the mystery of the *veritas aeterna* for the purpose of moral elevation, we eventually discovered features of existence that invalidated both Church doctrines and the *veritas aeterna* itself.[21] Permitting no place for deception, the will to truth dissolved our faith in the three categories of reason (*aim-unity-being*) and played a decisive role in God's death; *truth devoured itself*. In spite of this, as I see it, faith in reason has only strengthened, culminating in the great emphasis we (religious believers, agnostics, and atheists alike) collectively place on the modern scientific method as the ultimate standard for discerning what is real.

In Nietzsche's estimation, the will to truth is the last moral (*die letzte Moral*) remaining after the decay of the *veritas aeterna*, albeit primarily through the institutions of modern science:[22]

> […] it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests—that even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine (GS 344).

Here Nietzsche is explicitly calling attention to the fact that the faith in science (*scientism*) is merely one more attempt to fill the void left by nihilism. The modern scientific quest for truth still stems from a moral imperative; the ideal of a fundamental truth is still worshipped as though it were divine. But the will to truth of the modern sciences is bereft of the potential for meaningful transcendence, which makes it much more extreme than

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[21] See also Sedwick 2001: Ch.2 as a whole and especially section 2.1.

[22] See Sooväli (2020) for an in depth discussion of the last moral.

traditional philosophical or religious morality because it avoids untruth at all costs—*including the cost of human life*. Think about the horrible experiments of Nazi scientists (in addition to the death camps, which could be seen as one large experiment to rid the world of those the Nazi's deemed as an error), the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan (in part, I believe, to test its effects on human subjects). The will to truth is in fact a veiled "will to death" because it rejects the stumbling errancy that Nietzsche observes as characteristic of life itself (GS 344). As I see it, in nihilism the Platonic-Christian rejection of the world is taken a step further by replacing transcendence with a dehumanizing life-rejecting faith in the scientific method as a means to subjugate and manipulate existence and existents.[23]

Returning now to the proverbial scene of the crime (GS 125), the people to whom the Wildman delivers his sermon are clearly unaware of this collective faith in modern science motivated by the will to truth that they also participate in, for they have no idea that God has died nor that they took part in his murder. The rapid decay of the narrative force of the *veritas aeterna* is directly linked to the scientific revolution (Sedgwick 2001: 258) and the genesis of modern thinking with its emphasis on calculation, individualism, and subjectivity.[24] As I see it, the Copernican revolution that displaced the earth as the center of the cosmos, and ensuing astronomical ideas like that of Giordano Bruno proposing that the stars were in fact other suns, are historical examples of major blows to the narrative force of the *veritas aeterna.*[25] This is what the Wildman refers to as the unchaining of the earth from the sun that now has us straying towards an infinite nothing (GS 125). The simple world picture that the Church carried over from the ancient world in which the earth was at the center of nine spheres (the five planets, sun-moon, the stars, and the 9th sphere of God (the Empyrean)) collapsed.[26] The cosmos came to be gradually reimagined as being composed of a near infinite number of atoms in constant interaction and flux at the micro level, and at the macro level, a near infinite number of stars in eternal dynamic flux. In light of such discoveries, as Nietzsche maintains, reality began to seem utterly meaningless (WP

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[23] This is not to rule out the manifold good that modern science has also afforded us.

[24] See a treatment of Heidegger's view of this in Thomson (2011b: Ch.2.3.).

[25] See Knox (2024) regarding Giordano Bruno.

[26] See Grant (1997) for a in depth description of the medieval cosmos.

32) because the unifying thread of meaning collapsed. Along with this loss of simple narrative all quests for enduring truth today constantly threaten to collapse in on themselves because they also took their nourishment from the narrative force of the *veritas aeterna*; today truth has no narrative safeguards to keep it from devouring itself, and so people resist its collapse more radically than before (see I.5).

As God's 'murderers,' we are now tasked with becoming "gods merely to appear worthy" of such proverbial bloodshed (GS 125). I understand this thusly: Our eyes being opened, we can no longer use the Christian God (or any *veritas aeterna)* including the apotheosization of science as *scientism*, as a convenient device to explain away the paradox, mystery, horror, and madness of the world that confronts us. Therefore we must become 'godlike' to compensate, i.e. develop the maturity to engage with the terrors and mysteries of existence without falling back on another version of the *veritas aeterna*. In Nietzsche's terms we must engage (rather than bemoan) our oft strange fate (*amor fati*) (PN: 680), an idea which culminates in the idea of *eternal recurrence*, which calls us to so radically affirm our fate that we would embrace the totality of all glories and all sorrows that have accompanied our existence (GS 341)—including the death of God, and all traumatic losses of meaning. We must become the Overman so as to: "Lead back to the earth **the virtue that flew away** [*i.e. the possibility of transcendence*—LP] […] back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning" (PN: 188, ebm). By grounding meaning in these earthy-worldly elements, *transcendence*—which had flown away from the earth in Platonic-Christian narrative—may again become earthy, or *this-worldly*. Via nihilism the opportunity is present to redefine the ideal of transcendence so that it becomes life affirming, instead of heaven bound and life denying. In this way the collapse into meaninglessness would indeed only be, as Nietzsche puts it, a transitional stage where we are "lost for a while" rather than a new ontological ground, an inverse *veritas aeterna*.

I.5 Filling the Void—the Apotheosis of Morality

There are in fact multiple things attempting to fill the void of nihilism, as Heidegger mentions: "the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, civilization" (WON: 65). We can add: scientism, socio-political idealism

(communism, neoliberalism, fascism, liberalism and conservatism, etc.), social power/ influence, philosophical ideologies (such as the Enlightenment values of liberty and egalitarianism, feminism) and so on. All of these appear to offer people a solid ground of morality (and thus meaning) in the landscape of nihilism.

As we have seen, the loss of the theological context for meaning making and the emphasis on the scientific worldview have created a dire situation where existence is even more condemned than it was under Platonic-Christian metaphysics. Amidst the modern landscape loss of faith in God created a vacuum in the religious dimension of the human experience that needed to be filled for the simple reason that, as the epigraph to this chapter communicates, *no one is truly without religion of some kind, we all worship something*—we all ontologically open out beyond ourselves (transcendence).[27] We moderns, for whom the narrative force of the *veritas aeterna* has ceased to truly guide us ("we godless anti-metaphysicians" (GS 344)), have to be aware that we are still guided by the will to truth and 'worship' reason (scientific reason most of all) as the ultimate means to finding said truth. But there is no truth according to Nietzsche, there is only "lie and appearance" (WP 328) (the perspectives, the evaluations at play), *errancy*. There is no escaping such lies, and therefore some narrative-lie always steps in (though ultimately always fails) to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the *veritas aeterna.*

Instead of God, Nietzsche implies that *we worship morality itself*: "The authority of *conscience* now steps up front (the more emancipated one is from theology, the more **imperativistic** morality becomes) to compensate for the loss of a *personal* authority" (WP 20, ebm). With the loss of God, and the theological context for morality, such morality becomes apotheosized (WP 18 & 20), i.e. *morality for its own sake*. "Those who have abandoned God cling that much more firmly to the faith in morality" (WP 18). Nietzsche may primarily mean the Christian God, but his comments here apply equally well to abandoning any possibility of relationship to the divine as such. With the outright denial of divinity of any kind at play for many people today (or with only a hollow belief in God), there is a tendency to fall back on morality in order to escape the smoke screen of meaninglessness. Modern religious extremism is also a case of this, because it is often a

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[27] See Thomson's discussion of Heidegger's statement that "no human being is without religion" (2011a: 140) and its relationship to transcendence. See also Becker (1973: 175, and chapter 8 as a whole) where he discusses Otto Rank's insight that man is a theological being more than a rational one.

reaction to the increasingly secular trends of the modern world, not a meaningful return to tradition. But whether we speak of political ideology or zealous religiosity, what people are searching for is a way to resist the terrifying decay of meaning that is nihilism. Unable to believe in God, or believe in God the way our ancestors did, they actually seek a moral ground where there is little to no possibility for meaningful transcendence. Yet this merely covers nihilism with more nihilism for: "Moral value judgments are ways of passing sentence, negations; morality is a way of turning one's back on the will to existence" (WP 11). Moral value judgements (both traditional and modern) always diminish existence in some manner because they arrest the reality of becoming.

Modern morality is far more "imperitavistic" than traditional religious morality. The theological ground of the latter brought with it a sacrificial component that aimed to lead one out beyond ethical practices and to the divine as such. Even though Nietzsche criticizes traditional religious morality as being born of *ressentiment* and promoting slavery (Sedgwick 2001: 256), and ultimately devaluing existence, he acknowledges that it offered genuine guidance (BGE 61).[28] According to Nietzsche we must always weave a narrative ("the necessity of lies" (WP 15)) but we need not do so blindly, and this is why his Zarathustra sounds the call for new values rather than abandoning values entirely (PN: 189). By and large, the narratives woven in the landscape of modern nihilism are spun from the tapestry of the old values stripped of their theological context, not new life affirming values like Nietzsche evokes, for how could they emerge when existence is condemned as even more meaningless than it was when the narrative force of the *veritas aeterna* informed the collective perspectives of Europe.

If this de-theologized modern morality only offers a facade of moral perfection, then in order for this facade to avoid caving in on its own lack of reality, morality for its own sake must necessarily promote the lie of moral superiority. In the absence of being able to draw near to God, or to the divine as such, or to viscerally feel life affirming exaltation in the course of pursuing similar ideals, one tries to find some other path towards *transcendence*. Today this means moral elevation *above* others and the sense of superiority that comes from this (i.e. a feeling of power); but this only engenders opposition, enmity,

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[28] "Perhaps nothing in Christianity or Buddhism is as venerable as their art of teaching even the lowliest how to place themselves through piety in an illusory higher order of things and thus to maintain their contentment with the real order, in which their life is hard enough—and precisely this hardness is necessary" (ibid.).

and fragmentation.[29] Modern morality condemns life (i.e."Hatred against the order of rank" (WP 37)), because, similar to the will to truth, it also rejects the stumbling errancy characteristic of life that implies hierarchy,[30] in that it wants things to be neatly explainable via right and wrong. Rejection of the hierarchies of life is at work in Enlightenment ideals with the emphasis on freedom and equality, which were not spared Nietzsche's critical gaze (Garrard 2008: 601). Simply put, if all are equally free, and if equality and freedom are elevated to the rank of *veritas aeterna*, then, from Nietzsche's perspective, this would be merely one more denial of life.

Because of this condemnation of life, both modern morality and the morality motivating the will to truth replace the Christian concept of *sin* with their own versions of *untruth*, which they then condemn and avoid more vehemently and rigorously than the religious believer struggling with sin. The revulsion against errancy constitutes a value judgement that offers no place for error and untruth because they no longer hold *any* redeeming qualities. Regarding all of this Nietzsche writes: "At this point nihilism is reached: all one has left are the values that pass judgment—nothing else" (WP 37). Precisely this character of "nothing else" (i.e. lack of transcendence, of meaning) is the place that was filled by the otherworldly-transcendence of the *veritas aeterna*. Its flaws aside, it did more than only pass judgement.

According to Nietzsche morality reduces individuals to herd animals who evaluate themselves in terms of their functional capacity to preserve the group narrative (GS 116). This reduction to functionality is even more at work in the landscape of modern nihilism, for if there is no possibility of transcendence accompanying modern morality then it can only "pass judgement—and nothing else," and it must do so on the basis of self proclaimed superiority over those it designates as morally inferior. Modern moralists reductively evaluate self and other on a meaning-impoverished spectrum of functional-dysfunctional. Since these values have nothing else, such morality (like truth collapsing itself (I.4)) must eventually devour itself, leaving its adherents emptier than ever.

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[29] Nietzsche illustrates this moral elevation through the example of the modern scholarly free-thinking type that looks down on religious belief (BGE 58). The extreme of what I have described regarding enmity and fragmentation is well exemplified by religious fanatics who are so rampantly anti-abortion (because anti-death, though claiming to be pro-life), that they then proceed to violently attack abortion clinics and murder doctors.

[30] This errancy could then be regarded as ontological, which is precisely what Heidegger claims in *On the Essence of Truth* (BW 133).

The Wildman's admonition about becoming gods has also a dark side: '*gods* who pass judgement and offer nothing else.' These judgements are based on the old values (the old gods who, like God, are also declared dead (PN: 191)). In so far as 'becoming gods' gets diminished to apotheosizing these moral values (the old gods) it is as though we are worshipping decaying flesh—as the Wildman alludes to when he chillingly says: "Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose" (GS 125). Ultimately these morally and ideologically motivated modern solutions do not provide a meaningful way to attend to the death of God. They do not deal with the reality of value decay, the loss of meaningful transcendence, nor with Nietzsche's insight that what we call truth can only every be lies and appearance and so also subject to decay. As Heidegger points out, such solutions mistake the *effects* of nihilism for its causes (WON: 65-66). He gives as examples "technology" and the "revolt of the masses" (ibid.) and I would add to this the most popular scapegoat of the more liberal demographic, capitalism and patriarchy, and the conservative scapegoats such as gay marriage and immigrants (these narratives are especially at play in the United States).

Dealing with nihilism requires acknowledging that 'God is dead' and pondering precisely what this means for us today. This, as I will show, is precisely what Heidegger and Buber attend to in their own respective (though complementary) ways. We should add that perhaps Nietzsche himself would not approve of their efforts. It is possible that he would say that their ideas of the divine are examples of what he discusses elsewhere (in GS 108): namely that their musings on the divine are just conceptual shadows of the idea of God that stubbornly persist for millennia after God's death—shadows which he claims also need to be banished. But in spite of such of such rhetoric Nietzsche has written elsewhere: "I would believe only in a god who could dance" (PN: 153). While space limitations prevent me from analyzing the possible link between this 'dancing god' and the ideas of Heidegger and Buber on the divine as such, it would be good to keep in mind the possibility that their reflections may also take a cue from this 'dancing god' thereby constituting an attempt to 'dance' with divinity. Dancing implies an embrace of the body, which once again hearkens to the theme of this-worldly transcendence.

II. The Sacred World of Things: Nihilism and Divinity in Heidegger

Almost two thousand years-and not a single new god!
—Friedrich Nietzsche (PN: 586)

Only another God can save us.[31]
—Martin Heidegger

Introduction

There is no doubt that Heidegger took Nietzsche's insights regarding nihilism and the death of God exceedingly seriously, so much so that it can seem like the latter half of his career is all footnotes to Nietzsche (rather than Plato).[32] Heidegger would remark regarding the effect that Nietzsche's thought had upon his own in saying "people have no idea how difficult it is truly to lose that thought again" and, quite bluntly, "Nietzsche ruined me" (Thomson 2011b: 171 fn. #5). Losing this thought evidently meant finding a way out of the smokescreen of meaninglessness. In contrast to Nietzsche's emphasis on human evaluations of existence as sowing the seeds for nihilism, Heidegger reimagines the death of God and nihilism as emerging from the way Being essentially conceals itself; that it both discloses itself as something (for example the Christian God), and simultaneously conceals other potential disclosures.[33] For Heidegger 'God is dead' refers to the Christian God and this means essentially the suprasensuous world (Platonic *Idea*; *veritas aeterna*) (WON: 60-61). God's death and thus nihilism, for Heidegger, are then primarily the result of Being withdrawing the dualistic metaphysical presentation of itself (*veritas aeterna*) so as to disclose itself anew.

As he puts things in his 1936 text *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*: "With the death of this God, all theisms wither away" (CP 326).[34] The withering away of theisms (the void of nihilism) exposes us more forcibly to Being's constant withdrawal, and yet, according to Heidegger, the question of the meaning of Being (*Seinsfrage*) still remains forgotten (*Seinsvergessenheit*) (BT: 59). The modern plight of nihilism has culminated in us

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[31] Quoted in Thomson 2011b: 186.

[32] In addition to WON, see for example his discussions of Nietzsche in *What is Called Thinking*? (WCT) and his Nietzsche lectures (1936-1939) published as *Gesamtausgabe 6.1* (Polt 2025).

[33] For Heidegger's treatment of the concealing nature of Being see for example: WON, WCT, and *On the Essence of Truth* (in BW).

[34] Citations for *Contributions* refer to the section number, rather than the page number, unless specifically indicated. Citations of the German edition explicitly provide page numbers.

forgetting such forgetfulness itself (CP 55).[35] As such, Heidegger muses, our real plight is the lack of awareness concerning the plight of nihilism, rather than *nihilism itself* (the withdrawal)—which *Contributions* describes as the abandonment of beings by Being (*Seinsverlassenheit*) (GA 65: 110/CP 52). Being's abandonment is explicitly linked with "the death of the moral, Christian God […]" (CP 56) and also described as the "absconding of the gods" (ibid.). As we will see, Heidegger's treatment of the divine reveals that for him, gods are an integral part of Being such that their absconding or death is neither final nor antithetical to the ontological nature of divinity.

In this chapter I will elucidate the salient features of Heidegger's approach to the divine as such as it relates to 'God is dead' (nihilism). I aim to show that Heidegger interprets the divine as such so as to prioritize the meaningfulness of the world, thereby continuing and refining Nietzsche's own vision of a this-worldly transcendence, where whatever could be called divine would be life affirming instead of otherworldly. In II.1 I elucidate Heidegger's view that nihilism culminates in what he calls enframing, which goes to an even greater extreme than the apotheosization of morality. In II.2 I discuss Heidegger's mature portrait of Being—the Fourfold—as his answer to the dangers of enframing and nihilism. In II.3 I focus on explicating his understanding of the divine as such (the gods of the Fourfold) via four interrelated concepts throughout his later writings to demonstrate how his understanding is geared towards offering a philosophical antidote to nihilism.

II.1 From Functionaries to Standing-Reserve (*Bestand*): Modern Nihilism as the Metaphysics of Will-To-Will

Heidegger regards Nietzsche's thinking as constituting the end of the Western metaphysical tradition (Thomson 2005: 21), and yet because he sees Nietzsche's attempt to overcome metaphysics as remaining bound by said metaphysics, he charges Nietzsche's thinking with becoming the very monster it sought to break free of (ibid.); in other words—in what

[35] "*The forgottenness of being* does not know anything of itself" (ibid.).

amounts to a very idiosyncratic view unique to Heidegger's reading[36]—Nietzsche's thinking created its own metaphysics. This ties in with Heidegger's notion of the history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*), wherein different metaphysically based comportments to reality inform our understanding of Being during a given epoch (Thomson 2005: Ch.1), with our current metaphysical epoch being rooted in the metaphysics of Nietzsche (ibid.). Accordingly, this metaphysics is structurally the *will to power* that *eternally recurs* ("will-to-will") (Thomson 2005; 16/55-56), and Heidegger sees it as deeply nihilistic in that it actually grounds modern nihilism (op.cit.: 21).[37] Nietzsche's charge that morality makes individuals into *mere functionaries* of the herd gets taken a step further by Heidegger's reading. In this picture, individuals, along with literally everything else that exists, become functionaries, not of the herd, but of *the will to will*. The self (of individuals and things) is deconstructed so as to become only these ceaselessly (*eternally*) dynamic forces (*will*) that constantly (*eternally*) strive towards self augmentation (*to power*)—and nothing else (op.cit.: 55-56). People become functionaries, not of the herd, *but of functionality itself*. A major way this plays out is in how much of an emphasis there is in the modern world on earning more and more money. Everything (and everyone) gets evaluated (gets 'counted') in terms of how it can be used for generating money. *Being* is reduced to a monetary value, and even further to a mere number, for money, especially in the digital age, is mainly understood and expressed through number.

Will-to-will is the basis for what Heidegger calls *enframing* (*Ge-Stell*), or his term for the essence of modern technology (op.cit.: 53/55-56). Enframing *frames* Being and beings so as to be evaluated ("calculated") towards usability ("in advance"). "Only what is **calculable in advance** counts as being" (quoted in op.cit.: 56, ebm), and it is our relationship with modern technology which primarily facilitates this. Heidegger calls this

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[36] Many scholars are critical of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche's metaphysics (Thomson 2005: 148, fn. #4). I tend to follow Thomson in justifying Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche through the valuable philosophical insights it offers us regarding the modern nihilistic landscape. In this section I draw primarily from Iain Thomson's analysis of Heidegger's ideas on the connection between Nietzschean metaphysics and the modern technological age in *Heidegger on Ontotheology* (2005), as this text offers a very thorough treatment of these topics.

[37] Thomson seems to read Heidegger as charging Nietzsche's thinking as constituting an overturning of metaphysics that causes ("inaugurates") modern nihilism (2005; 21-22). I am inclined to disagree with this position (generally speaking) in that I understand Nietzsche as quasi-prophetically *diagnosing* modernity by giving voice to the decay of Western metaphysics. From my perspective, Nietzsche's thinking reveals what was already occurring, and by identifying it he also provided the groundwork to think through it. Giving it a name does not hasten or inaugurate it; it allows us to see where we stand in contrast to it, and I do not see how such naming could be ontologically causal.

reduction to resources standing-reserve (*Bestand*) (QCT: 17), which means that whatever properly 'is' stands by waiting to be put to use.

Through the essence of modern technology the subject-object comportment is pushed to such an extreme that both subject and object appear to dissolve: "Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve [*Bestand*] no longer stands over against us as object" (QCT 17). What formerly appeared as subjects or objects are now *only* standing-reserve and are only as valuable as they are usable. This comportment subtly reduces everything to a ceaseless multiplicity of forces endlessly vying to overcome one another in a bid for power. Therefore enframing seems to annihilate the self along with the world of things. To drive the eeriness of this home, Heidegger refers to a lesser known meaning of the word *Gestell* as 'skeleton' (*Knochengerippe*) (GA 7: 20/QCT: 20). This skeletal notion suggests that we may still be physically alive, but we are largely numb ('dead') to the world, to life, to one another and to ourselves (*a mere skeleton*). 'Skeletalizing' everything reduces death and breakage to mere casualties of force against force. When, due to mass production, a given thing can be replaced by a near identical copy it makes it seem like its breakage (or 'death') is only a temporary inconvenience. The same goes for 'breakages' in people. For example, depression is often reduced to an inconvenience that disrupts our ability to get ahead in life. Rather than see depression as an opportunity to meaningfully take care of important aspects of our lives we have neglected, we attempt to numb the pain so we can get back to 'normal' (or get back to treating ourselves and others as standing-reserve).

The danger posed by the essence of modern technology that reduces everything to standing-reserve, is that we become numb to the possibility of entering into a primal-intimate relationship with Being (QCT: 28). This means that we could become stuck in the rut-like comportment bequeathed to us by the nihilistic metaphysics of will-to-will, endlessly spiraling down the path whereby "only what is calculable in advance counts as being." As with Nietzsche's insights regarding modern morality, here the possibility of meaningful transcendence and a meaningful relationship to time are greatly occulted in the comportment engendered by enframing. Resources generate more resources, and there is no *opening beyond* (transcendence) in sight; existence becomes a mere shell (a *skeleton*) of its former self.

Yet this disfiguration of the dichotomous subject-object comportment of human beings approaching the world as an object to be manipulated is precisely where Heidegger sees the possibility that a deeper relationship to Being (including our own) could emerge (Kisiel 2021: 714-716). As Heidegger points out through his appropriation of the poet Hölderlin: "*But where danger is, grows /The saving power also*" (QCT: 28). This danger of modern technology challenges us into meaningful reflection (*Besinnung*) on just what is occurring through enframing (Kisiel 2021: 714), and through this there lies the possibility of a return to the safe harbor of our own essence. In *Contributions* this essence is alluded to in caretaking: the human being is described as the steward of Being (CP 123). Humans facilitate a space for the grounding of the truth of Being (ibid.) which Heidegger calls *Ereignis* (event).

II.2 The Fourfold (*Geviert*)

The Fourfold appears to have come out of Heidegger's work in *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936) as a way to map and evoke *Ereignis* (CP 190).[38] He uses this term to evoke the dynamic and polysemic character of the meaning of Being[39] (or, as written in *Contributions*: *Beyng*).[40] The truth of Beyng (*Wahrheit des Seyns*) occurs as *Ereignis* which is further described as a paradoxical interplay of *clearing* for *self-concealing* (CP 9/211). *Ereignis* (Beyng) happens in a non-repeatable, unique, and finite manner (CP 10/123 and p304) and bears the character of the German *eigen,* meaning 'own' (Schürmann 1983: 33) which gives it an 'appropriating' (*ereignende*) character as well (which will become clear as I unpack the Fourfold).[41] Truth, thought in this way, is akin to a vibrancy of unique occurrences in which beings are both cleared and concealed in a paradoxical simultaneity. The term Beyng comes to evoke bringing-into-ownership-occurrences (*Ereignis*) whereby beings are appropriated (*ereignende*) into their *own* (*eigen*) via a contrasting discovery of

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[38] *Ereignis* is variously translatable as "event," "enowning," "occurrence," "appropriation," "adaptation." See Wrathall (2021a) for insight into the multiple ways in which this term can be translated reflecting its own ontological plurality. I prefer to leave it untranslated to evoke such plurality.

[39] I follow Thomson (2011b) who characterizes Heidegger's understanding of Being as polysemic and inexhaustible throughout his text.

[40] Heidegger employs the archaic spelling Beyng (*Seyn*) (also rendered Be-ing) throughout *Contributions* to convey that Being is here thought from itself instead of on the basis of beings as it was in *Being & Time* (Vallega-Neu 2003: 7/24-29).

[41] "To appropriate" has similar connotations to the German *eigen* in that it means taking possession (*sich aneignen*) of, or ownership (*Eigentum*) of something for use or for a given purpose (Oxford University Press (a)).

what they are not. In English we have the colloquial saying that a person 'comes into their own,' and we generally mean by this that they found a way of living that is appropriate to their nature. But none of this happens in a vacuum. Instead Beyng occurs most essentially as historical movements that bring about a *time and space* where an interplay of beings occur (CP 12/239).[42] This interplay of Beyng as *Ereignis* would eventually bear the formal title of Fourfold.[43]

The Fourfold is a "*non-metaphysical* account of the Being of entities" (Wrathall 2021: 335); i.e. it is not dualistic as its element of transcendence is not primarily otherworldly (as we will see). It names the gathering of earth, sky, divinities (gods), and mortals (PLT: 171)—the four components that *always* imply each other (PLT: 147-148). These four interwoven elements of life facilitate the intelligible *world* (PLT: 177), wherein beings, humans, and things interact and the stories of life unfold:

> Out of the fourfold, the simple onefold of the four is ventured. This appropriating [*ereignende*] mirror-play [*Spiegel-Spiel*] of the simple onefold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals, we call the world. The world presences by worlding. That means: the world's worlding cannot be explained by anything else nor can it be fathomed through anything else (GA 7: 181/PLT 177).

The four constituents of the Fourfold, through their *mirror-play* (their reflective way of relating to one another) make up the world.[44] The appropriating (*ereignende*) action of the mirror-play takes possession of the four so as to bring them into relationship with one another all the while preserving them in themselves. As Heidegger puts it "[…] the appropriating event [*das Er-eignis*] is indeed this relating […] which first brings the relata to themselves" (CP 267). Put otherwise it reveals them to one another (clearing) by virtue of holding some part of them back (self-concealing) so that they also stand firm in their own respective natures. They are ontologically *one* ("onefold"), though not identical, and this oneness is evoked through the worlding of the world, whereby the wholeness of the

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[42] See also Wrathall (2021c) for an in depth overview of the history of Being/Beyng and how Heidegger sees our comportment to Being as changing overtime.

[43] The prototype of the Fourfold in the *Contributions* (CP 190) is different in that the term "world" is used where the term "sky" would later stand. Mitchell argues that this earlier diagram of the Fourfold is not synonymous with the later, formal Fourfold (2015: 117-119). He does not see sky as being synonymous with world and highlights that this earlier fourfold is not gathered around the *thing*. Important differences not withstanding, I do think that the sky embodies the fundamental aspects of what was formerly called world, namely the phenomenological clearing through bringing things to light via the sun, moon, and stars (all denizens of the sky).

[44] Notice that the German for mirror-play—*Spiegel-Spiel*—already features a mirroring at play of four components in that both words begin with the four letters 'spie' and so mirror one another (additionally they also both end in 'l'). Thought in this way, mirroring (*Spiegel*) is intrinsically playful (*Spiel*) and vice versa.

interconnectivity that unites the four is greater than the sum of these four parts taken in isolation.[45]

The Fourfold is fundamentally a *gathering*—it's components are gathered together around, or in, a "thing" (Mitchell 2015: 3/13), which in fact means gathering: "Our language denotes what a gathering *is* by an ancient word. That word is: thing" (PLT: 171). In Heidegger's example of a jug, the thingness of the jug begins with the drink it holds and dispenses (specifically *wine*) (PLT: 170). In the wine, which the jug both holds and pours forth as gift, is gathered the mixture of earth (the fruit of the grape, the soil it grew in, the streams that nourished it) and sky (the air, the sunlight, and the alternation of day and night that makes its growth possible) (ibid.). The wine is poured for the enjoyment and celebration of mortals and simultaneously as an offering (libation) for the immortal gods (ibid.). A *thing* is essentially a gathering, not necessarily an entity that we could otherwise confuse as an object (PLT: 151). The gathering of the Icelandic communities during the middle ages to read and revise the laws of the land was called the *Althing* (*Alþing*) (Karlsson 2005: 509). So too a wedding, a concert, a party, a meeting of like minded people is as much a *thing* as a jug.

The gift of the outpouring-activity constitutes the *thinging* (*dingen*) of the jug-thing, and by this it gathers the Fourfold: "What is gathered in the gift gathers itself in appropriately staying the fourfold. This manifold-simple gathering is the jug's presencing" (PLT: 171, ebm). For Heidegger, *presencing* (*Anwesen*) is the way anything shows itself for a time, and he uses this term to convey that essence (*Wesen*) is dynamic or verbal (Capiobanco 2021: 603). "Staying" the Fourfold means that the dynamic *thinging* of a thing opens a site (or world) for the four components to be integrally themselves as they also come to one another. The thing *things*, or *presences*, as the staying of the Fourfold. In the case of the jug this means that the jug is properly a thing when it is appropriated to pour out the gift of a libation that gathers together—in one place and time—earth, sky, gods, and mortals.

The gods are an intimate part of Heidegger's mature portrait of Beyng as the Fourfold, and therefore his treatment of the divine needs to be understood in connection with it. The gods represent transcendence in the sense that there is always more to what

[45] So too, following Heidegger's logic about the world, each of the components of the Fourfold must then also be greater than the sum of their respective parts.

meets the eye, that *the wholeness* of the world as a onefold is greater than the sum of its parts. But Heidegger's transcendence is not otherworldly Platonic-Christian: "There is no separation between beyng and beings […] and thus no transcendence in the Platonic sense" (Mitchell 2015: 121). The way the thing gathers the Fourfold already reveals something closer to a Nietzschean this-worldly transcendence. As the divinities are a part of the Fourfold, there is a sense of finding the sacredness of the world at play in Heidegger's thinking here.

II.3. The Gods in light of Godhood, the Holy, & the Hale

Through the Fourfold we can begin to understand something of Heidegger's approach to divinity and its relationship to nihilism. Heidegger's conception of divinity affords an essential place to the quality of deathlike absence as the way to commune authentically with the divine and the meaning of Beyng. The death of God here becomes and invitation towards a more intimate relationship to the divine as such than the *veritas aeterna*. My analysis focuses on the relationship between Gods, Godhood, the Holy, and the Hale in Heidegger's writings, and follows from Andrew Mitchell's analysis in *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (2015). In his exploration of the gods of the Fourfold Mitchell draws primarily upon Heidegger's essays *What are Poets For?* (in PLT), *Letter on Humanism* (GA 9), and Heidegger's readings of Hölderlin's poems (GA 4/EHP; GA 39/ HH). I prioritize Mitchell because his analysis of Heidegger's gods offers the most complete one I have found thus far.

a. Gods (*die Götter*)

The wholeness of the world at play in the Fourfold speaks to an element of transcendence. The world is always more than it appears to be (opens beyond itself) because, as with Beyng, it presences *through* self-concealing. What is concealed has the character of what is beyond the immediate context. It is the divinities (gods) that refer most directly to this element of transcendence in the Fourfold, because they hint (*winken*) at the wholeness of the world by evoking *meaning* (Mitchell 2015: 204). They are fundamentally *hinting* (*winkenden*) *messengers* (*die Boten*) of *Godhood* (*Gottheit*) (GA 7: 180/PLT: 176). Such meaning is ontological (op.cit.: 183) and inextricably bound up with the *thinging* of *things*

(the gathering of the Fourfold) (op.cit.: 201-204). Thus meaning, for Heidegger, is not artificially layered atop existence, but co-arises with it, just as the components of the *Fourfold* all co-arise. Meaning emerges through what is concealed—what is *apparently* beyond the immediate context. As Mitchell puts it: "The divinities allow the medium [*Beyng/Ereignis*—LP] to show "surpassing." What is beyond us is not beyond us, but is now appearing to us as beyond. This is what the divinities bring, the invitation to participate in this beyond" (op.cit.: 207). In meeting the gods, we meet with a phenomenological quality of *beyondness* rather than a particular being or substance that lies concealed in an otherworldly beyond.

This beyondness has the character of this-worldly transcendence because it only appears to us as otherworldly, but is actually an integral this-worldly component, unlike the *veritas aeterna*. This means that the gathering of the Fourfold (the world) is ontologically meaningful, and such meaning arises through our relationship to Beyng's withdrawal. This beyondness is most palpably felt in the context of the messages of meaning (hints) delivered by the gods, for in the giving of these messages something of them is simultaneously withheld/concealed (ibid.: 184). In other words, meaning is never one dimensional and direct, but opaque and multidimensional; the withholding invites a diversity of meaning (instead of a static truth) and evokes a palpable quality of beyondness.

Within the Fourfold, just as sky and earth form a polarity, so too do mortals and gods. In *Contributions*, the humans and gods are referred to as the "en-countering ones" (GA 65: 479/CP 268, p377) and "Beyng essentially occurs as the appropriation [*Er-eignung*] of the gods and hu-mans to their en-counter [*Ent-gegnung*]" (GA 65: 477/CP 268). Recall that the essential occurrence of Beyng is the truth of its clearing for self-concealing (*Ereignis*), which is like the opening of a space where Beyng can rest in its own concealment. The en-counter helps to facilitate this open concealment (*truth*), and the ontological meaning attending it. Ergo the *meaning of Beyng* arises *through the contrasting relationship between mortals and gods*. Just as mortals appear to be enduring and continuous (and yet are actually always dying), so the gods by contrast appear to be fleeting and non-enduring (though immortal) in that they verbally presence (*Anwesen*) as *passing by*: "[…] passing by [*Vorbeigang*] is precisely the kind of presence belonging to the gods: the fleeting character of a scarcely graspable beckoning that, in the flash of its passing over,

can indicate all bliss and all terror" (HH: 101). In passing us by, the gods presence from absence, and thereby have a death-like quality, which hearkens to the mortality of mortals. By highlighting the mortal nature of humans, Heidegger draws attention to death as an essential part of what constitutes being human in that we are constantly invited by the withdrawing nature of Beyng and the absent presence of the gods to *remember* our death (*momento mori*).

The gods, as fleeting hints that pass by amidst our everyday existence, escape our immediate grasp, and thereby settle opaquely into the halls of our memory. From there, they metaphorically speak to us: "Pondering long and retaining in memory are the manner in which the proximity of the gods is, so to speak, unfolded" (HH: 102). We can only remember whatever has passed on (what has 'died') and so the communion with Heidegger's gods bears an intimate relationship to facing our death, as Joseph Fell has observed: "I am then near to the gods only when I acknowledge their radical and mysterious transcendence, their "absent presence." Meditation on death, then, is a precondition for the coming, the presencing, of the gods" (1985: 32). Dwelling upon these meaningful hints evokes absence-concealing-beyondness which brings us into contact with our own mortality, and this confrontation with death draws us closer to the gods, and thus to meaningfulness. Mortals are truly mortal in that they are "capable of death as death," meaning they have the potential to face their mortality and its implications in such a way "so that there may be a good death" (PLT: 148). Thus Heidegger's mortals are essentially determined towards wresting life affirming meaning from the uncanny paradox that death is an intimate part of life (i.e. a "good death" is a meaningful death). The gods do not do this, do not deal with mortality this way, and so can be understood as *a-mortal* (immortal). Their deathlike hinting and passing-by nature that equates to presencing from absence is not itself death, but it re-calls us to our mortality in that it hints through withdrawing. Though deathlike, the meaningfulness of the gods (of Beyng itself) never actually dies, even if it appears to as it does with the death of God.

Elsewhere, in *What is Called Thinking?* (WCT), Heidegger describes memory as "the gathering of thought […] of what holds us" (WCT: 3), and what holds us is again Beyng as *Ereignis*. Here memory, thought of as an intimate dwelling upon what has passed on, allows us to commune with what is absent (or what withdraws from direct perception)

and it is this withdrawing-concealing nature of Beyng that Heidegger proclaims to have the greatest pull on us, not unlike the ocean's riptide: "The event [*das Ereignis*] of withdrawal could be what is most present in all our present, and so infinitely exceed the actuality of everything actual" (GA 8: 11/WCT: 9). Beyng compels us to think about it through its withdrawing quality; the death of God, for Heidegger, draws our attention to precisely this primal deathlike quality. We draw near to the gods by dwelling upon this withdrawing-deathlike quality of Beyng. What is absent speaks most loudly of all; what has *died* (colloquially what has 'passed on') *gathers* us (like a *thing*) toward thinking about the mystery of Beyng, and to come to this mystery is *blissful*. The bliss of the gods (HH: 101) is made clear when Heidegger qualifies that the meaning they bear is *joyous* (Mitchell 2015: 175/202). Due to withdrawing as they are simultaneously given, the messages of the gods tune us into the mysterious phenomenological concealing of Beyng which imbues the meaning of these messages with a diversity and polysemy that is joyous; to find meaning in the world is fundamentally celebratory, blissful, or joyous. This celebratory dynamism is reminiscent of a dance—perhaps of Nietzsche's 'dancing god.'

The immortal gods, call us mortals towards the corridors of meaning. The meaning that they bear can only be approached by recalling or remembering (and to re-call is to 'call again,' to 'come to again'). Through memory we commune with the death-like withdrawing absence of Beyng, and simultaneously with the meaning of Beyng, something we are, according to Heidegger, already intimately familiar with. This becomes more significant when we realize that Heidegger's gods are *none-other than the messages of meaning they appear to bear* (Mitchell 2015: 167). The gods are inextricably bound up with the meaning of Beyng—they are an appearance of the ontological meaningfulness inherent in the worlding of the world. To understand the gods further let us turn our attention to *Godhood* (aka *Godhead*).

b. Godhood (*Gottheit*)

Heidegger conceives of Godhood as the *gathering* of the gods. He writes: "the ether wherein alone the gods are gods, is their godhood." (PLT: 92; Mitchell 2015: 190). Godhood is like a medium of inchoate divinity, a gathering of the gods but not a supreme deity. All gods, including the Christian God, emerge from and withdraw into Godhood

(PLT: 148), which implies that, for Heidegger, 'God is dead' only means 'a god' rather than the divine as such. Self-concealing Beyng is ontologically meaningful and so gods (meaningful hints) come and go.

As the gods are messengers of meaning, their gathering implies that Godhood is full of meaning, or in my estimation, that it *is* the medium of *meaning making itself,* that which *mediates* meaning. The messages the gods bear are not isolated meanings, but a portal to *meaningfulness itself* which emerges through connections between *things*. By withholding some part of themselves, the gods remain connected to this medium which implies that whenever we glimpse ontological meaning, we are thereby also connected to Godhood. Such meaningfulness is not an eternally hypostatic form (*veritas aeterna*) hovering beyond the world, but is right here in our midst between the elements of the Fourfold. But Godhood, like the gods, presences primarily from absence, draws us near to it through memory, and must therefore, even more than the fleeting gods themselves, seem to be a deathlike nothing at all.[46] Both the gods and Godhood can only be brought into their own (*en-owned* (*er-eignet*)) through their relationship to mortals as the ones who receive (by re-calling) the meaningfulness they presage.

Just as the gods are described as joyous, so too Godhood, thought of as meaningfulness itself, must be fundamentally joyous: "Gaiety [*die Heitere*] is the **essential ground** [*Wesensgrund*] of the greeting [i.e *messages*] […] in which the very being of the gods consists (EHP: 39, ebm; Mitchell 2015: 202). Godhood is the *essential ground* of the gods—a joyful-meaningful ground. With this emphasis on bliss and gaiety, ontological meaning is not fundamentally intellectual, calculative or conceptual. Instead it is a plenitude of dynamic being that brings us more *intimately* in touch with life, with the world, with each other, and with things. With intimacy in mind let us turn to Heidegger's notion of the Holy.

c. The Holy (*das Heilige*)

From this space of Godhood, in which every connection and interaction must be teeming with joyous meaning, the gods draw us still further into what Heidegger calls the Holy. Interpreting Hölderlin, Heidegger writes: "In its origin, the holy is the "firm law," that

[46] In an age where we often demand that anything real be reducible to calculation, experimentation, or conceptual explanation, Godhood so described, must seem like an utter fiction to most.

"strict mediatedness" in which all the relations of everything actual are mediated" (EHP: 94). The Holy emerges, prior even to meaningfulness itself, as the intimate *mediating medium* wherein the relations between beings unfold against and in concordance with one another (Mitchell 2015: 191-197). The Holy is synonymous with Beyng/*Ereignis* itself (Krummel 2022: 12); it is the "between" amidst beings (*between* the elements of the Fourfold). As the medium of beings and their relationship to one another, *betweenal*-Beyng brings "the relata to themselves" (CP 267); it mediates them. The Holy is that which accounts for the oneness (or wholeness) of the four—the worlding of the world. Heidegger brings this wholeness home when he writes:

> What is always former [*Einstige*] is the holy [*Heilige*]. It is the primordial, and it remains in itself unbroken and "whole" [*heil*]. *This* originary "wholeness" [*Heile*] gives a gift to everything that is real by virtue of its all presence: it confers the grace of its own abiding presence (GA 4: 63/EHP: 85).

This giving of the gift of wholeness hearkens back to the way the jug-poured gift of libation gathers the Fourfold. The mediation of the Holy metaphorically spills over as a gifting of its own wholeness (*Heile*). It is "former" (*Einstige*) and thus has always already withdrawn from view. This reiterates the theme of approaching the divine through memory, and connecting it with absence/death/withdrawal. Through its *former-withdrawing-concealing* quality, the Holy enduringly abides as a gifting that returns things (*enowns* them) to an intimate sense of their integral connectedness. The Holy is the holiness of *things*, of Beyng. Its ontological meaningfulness explains why Heidegger claims that we only at first encounter it as Godhood (meaningfulness itself) rather than something more:

> […] the holy, **which is first only the essential space of godhood** […] alone comes to shine when previously and with long preparation being illuminates itself and is experienced in its truth (quoted in Mitchell 2015: 192, ebm).

We *initially* come to the Holy through meaningfulness itself (Godhood), i.e. by being filled with joyous meaning about the world. But the Holy comes to shine as itself—as more than the sum of the gathering of the gods (Godhood)—only on the basis of the truth of Beyng (*Ereignis*; the clearing for self-concealing). Thus the Holy can only be approached through Beyng's deathlike withdrawal that simultaneously discloses our world. In other words, we can only truly come to the meaning of Beyng, which is holy (i.e. divine), through recalling our intimate familiarity with our mortality, and in these times that also means communing with the death of God, the plight of nihilism—that meaning (or truth) itself also dies. As the mediating wholeness that *appropriates* (*ereignet*) beings into relationship with one another

while bringing them to themselves through a preservation of their difference, the Holy, shining in its own truth, is intimately *en-countered* as the holistic interconnectivity of beings that beckons and makes possible meaningfulness itself (Godhood) and the hinting (gods) at such meaningfulness.

Now we can further get a sense of what Heidegger implies about en-countering the Holy itself. The *bliss and terror* that Heidegger mentions regarding the passing by of the gods (HH: 101) (section II.3.a) is actually a veiled reference to the Holy:

> The holy, as the unapproachable, renders every immediate intrusion of the mediated in vain. The holy confronts all experience with something to which it is unaccustomed, and so deprives it of its ground. Deranging in this way, the holy is the **awesome** [*Entsetzliche*] itself. But its awesomeness [*Entsetzlichkeit*] remains concealed in the mildness of its light embrace [i.e. *bliss—LP*] (GA 4: 63/ EHL: 85, ebm).

This "awesomeness" or "dreadfulness" (*Entsetzliche*) (Collins 2011: 1077) that deprives common everyday experiences of its ground is *terrifying*, while the light embrace that accompanies this en-counter verges on *bliss*, or joyful meaning. The terror and strangeness of the Holy naturally yields to the joyous meaning of the Godhood and gods.[47] Its terror is the terror of how intimately interconnected things (including us) are, of how they open out beyond themselves and are thereby vulnerable and impermanent. As they open out, they withdraw from themselves; i.e. they 'die.' All beings are embraced by the awesomeness of death, but it is nonetheless a mild and light embrace—an intimate embrace; the Holy is "intimacy itself" (Mitchell 2015: 193-194). Yet, in spite of this all-embracing intimacy and nearness, the Holy is also "unapproachable" in that it cannot be seized or willed to show itself—cannot be enframed and reduced to standing-reserve. The approach to the Holy lies in the *Hale* which is closely related to the messengerial nature of the gods.

d. The Hale (*das Heil*)

In *What are Poets For?* (PLT) Heidegger writes of *the Hale* as the track or trace of the Holy (PLT: 115). The Hale is the actually the appearance of the Holy (Mitchell 2015: 199)—it *traces* a path. As this appearance of holy meaning, the Hale is closely related to the hinting gods (op.cit.: 197-198), who bear holy messages and have the quality of "haleness" (PLT: 151). Heidegger describes the Holy as "whole" (*heil*) exhibiting the quality of "wholeness" (*Heile*) (GA 4: 63/EHP 85; see p30 above). The Hale is like a healing wholeness that

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[47] Elsewhere Heidegger alludes to this when he also describes the Greek god Dionysos as presaging bliss and terror (HH: 173).

metaphorically spills over from the Holy as it is glimpsed through the gods (Mitchell 2015: 198). But in the modern age of enframing, the Hale itself threatens to disappear, to be buried beneath enframing's seemingly unholy (i.e. unwholesome, diseased, numbing) machinations, and this also means the track to the Holy (the Hale) is in danger of being covered up (PLT: 115), contributing to a sense that nothing is sacred.

Yet just as Heidegger sees the death of God and enframing as arising primarily out of the withdrawing-concealing nature of Beyng, so too does the Holy threaten its own annihilation through its hinting appearances which become preserved by those *poets* who are receptive enough to receive its 'holy rays' (i.e. it's traces) (EHP: 95-96). Such reception arises out of coming into contact with the healing wholeness of the Hale. This is Heidegger's way of saying that whenever Beyng or the Holy gives itself (makes an appearance) then that appearance can, overtime, obscure its own source, in that it becomes an ossified symbolic evocation of the meaning of Beyng not unlike the *veritas aeterna.* It appears in the guise of a being, the highest being (God), and thereby gives rise to the distorted perception that the divine (the Holy) is a being that is mediated, rather than the mediation itself.

In the context of *What are Poets For?* he calls this arresting of healing wholeness the *unhale* (*Unheil*). Through exposure to the unhale, Heidegger says that we are able to recover the Hale, for unhale is also *hale* just as all concealing is simultaneously clearing (Mitchell 2015: 200):

> In the invisible of the world's inner space [i.e. *the worlding of the world*—LP] […] **the haleness** of worldly beings becomes **visible**. Holiness can **appear** only within the widest orbit of the wholesome [*Umkreis des Heilen*]. Poets who are of the more venturesome kind are under way on the track of the holy because they experience the unholy as such. […] /The unholy [*Unheil*], as unholy, traces the sound [i.e. *Hale—LP*] for us. What is sound beckons to the holy, calling it. The holy binds the divine. The divine draws the god near (GA 5: 319/PLT: 138, ebm).

That there is an ontological (w)holiness attendant upon things implies that the unhale is still a track to the Holy, not at all dissimilar to the fact that anti-venom is distilled from venom. Just like reflecting on the danger of enframing might lead us back into our essence, here Heidegger evokes the same idea through different terminology.[48] The unhale, when confronted poetically by poets who are described as more venturesome (more daring) than others, may still be a pathway towards the Holy, and so once again it is precisely by

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[48] In fact Heidegger considers enframing to be the photographic negative of *Ereignis* and in turn the Fourfold (Kisiel 2021: 714-716).

confronting and dwelling upon the danger of modernity that Heidegger thinks we might regain ourselves and re-establish a connection to the divine as such (the Holy). Put otherwise, contemplating the death of God becomes contemplation on the deathlike absence at the heart of the meaning of Beyng, which can facilitate a meaningful en-counter that reveals the *transitional* nature of nihilism. In the language of *Contributions*, only by reticently withstanding the plight of the abandonment by Being do we stand a chance of rediscovering a meaningful connection to the divine, which Heidegger speaks of there as the last or ultimate God (CP: Ch.VII; Vallega-Neu 2003: Ch.8). This rediscovery emerging through the passing by of the last God actually, according to Heidegger, ushers us out of nihilism, out of the abandonment by Being, and into a post-metaphysical age called the other beginning (op.cit.: 70-71). Put poetically, Heidegger's 'Holy communion' (occurring through communion with the unholy) leads us back to the worlding of the world and opens up a new era of history.

This is also brought out in *What are Poets For?* where the Holy itself is described as a *pathway*—a *track* to Godhood (PLT: 115). There is an essential symbiosis between them that makes for a two-way track; the mediating appropriating nature of the Holy (as Beyng, as *Ereignis*), when it shines in itself, naturally also gives way to the plenitude of joyful meaning (Godhood). Its terrifying deranging-ungrounding nature (where even God and gods seem to die) is not an end, but a prelude to a renewal of meaning—an other beginning, historically speaking. This track also connects to mortals, which emphasizes Heidegger's notion that Beyng (and thus the Holy) needs beings, especially the human being (as caretaker) so that it may occur in its truth (*Ereignis*) (CP 10, p26)—so that there may be a holiness of *things*, of the world.

In Heidegger's portrait of the Fourfold and the Holy-Godhood-Gods-Hale, each member already implies the others. To en-counter the profound interconnectivity of the world (the Holy) is simultaneously to see it full of meaning, and to be oneself filled by that same meaning. Heidegger's approach to divinity is intimately related to his questioning of Being/Beyng, and evokes this-worldly transcendence. His detailed thinking concerning divinity helps us to make additional sense of his famous posthumously published statement that "Only another God can save us" (see Ch.2 epigraph). Such a statement calls to mind and perhaps forms one of Heidegger's answers to Nietzsche's lamentation over there being

no new gods in nearly 2000 years (see Ch.2 epigraph). Whether this is more specifically the last God of *Contributions*, or the Holy as it is discussed primarily in the Hölderlin material (and these works emerged during the same time and directly reinforce one another (Vallega-Neu 2003: 75), is not all that important because divinity is in no way *a being* for Heidegger. Instead we would do better to translate this opaque statement, in light of what has been discussed above, as: only a genuine communion with the holiness at play in existence can fetch us home to our essence as caretakers, and deliver us from out of the technological numbness that is obscuring meaningfulness itself.

III. The Hallowed Word of Thou: Nihilism and Divinity in Buber

Son of man, stand upon your own feet so that I may speak with you.[49]
—Ezekiel 2:1

Everything depends on the extent to which this concept of God can do justice to the reality which it denotes, do justice to it as a reality. The more abstract the concept, the more does it need to be balanced by the evidence of living experience . . .
—Martin Buber (EG: 16)

Introduction

In this chapter I will elucidate Martin Buber's thoughts on God in order to clarify the nature of his response to nihilism and modernity which he describes, not as the death of God, but as *The Eclipse of God*. In his book of the same title (EG), Buber writes: "Nietzsche's saying that God is dead, that we have slain Him, dramatically sums up the end situation of the era" (EG: 15). The text goes on to respond to various philosophical interpretations of Nietzsche's utterance, and it becomes abundantly clear that, for Buber, this death is actually properly an Eclipse where God seems dead because chillingly silent, and this is intensified by a reduction of divinity to only a phenomenon of the self and nothing more (EG: 16-17). As I will show, Buber's understanding of nihilism as Eclipse arises out of his dialogical ontology of I-Thou.

In order to bring out the contrast between Buber's ideas with the relevant ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger I will discuss Buber's relationship to them both in III.1. This section culminates in a recapitulation of the historical component of Buber's thought that is relevant to the modern context. III.2 is an overview of Buber's ontology, while III.3 discusses his conception of God. III.4 deals with Buber's thoughts on modernity as the Eclipse of God. I will compare, contrast, and synthesize Heidegger's and Buber's respective approaches to the divine in the concluding chapter of the thesis itself.

III.1 Buber's proximity to Nietzsche & Heidegger[50]

a) Buber & Nietzsche

[49] Quoted in Becker 1973: 259.

[50] For Buber's treatment of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and other major western philosophers see his essays in *Between Man and Man*, and *The Eclipse of God*. For a more complete list see Mendes-Flohr (2014: 9, fn. #39).

Buber was already an avid reader of Nietzsche when he was in his teens. Concerning the influence of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* upon himself he writes: "This book made me a disciple of Nietzsche, a sick disciple" (quoted in Mendes-Flohr 2001: 104); i.e. he had initially accepted Nietzsche's ideas avidly and uncritically (ibid.). Buber struggled here but eventually realized the great value studying Nietzsche bestowed upon his own thinking. The important takeaway for Buber lay in what he grasped as Nietzsche's "radical skepticism of all systems" and "the arduous way to truth" as Nietzsche's "true, great idealism" (ibid.). Buber would thus later conclude regarding Nietzsche: "This was my illness. I did not believe in you, but rather I believed you" (quoted in ibid.). For Buber, then, the great value of Nietzsche may lie in the distinctly *dynamic* mark he left on his own philosophical path, rather than any particular ideas (Friedman 1960: 34-35). Studying Nietzsche also likely contributed to Buber's 'heretical path' as an individual and philosopher. This is exemplified by his decision, made at a young age, to leave behind the world of his orthodox Jewish upbringing in order to cultivate and embrace a more heterodox and intimate philosophical approach to Jewish wisdom (Mendes-Flohr 2019: Ch.2). Like Nietzsche (and Heidegger), Buber's philosophy represents a radical departure from orthodox religious faith, and relative to philosophy, a departure from metaphysical thinking and system building. Buber stands amongst the ranks of those thinkers who depart from the traditional metaphysical interpretations of existence and God.

b) Buber & Heidegger

It seems abundantly clear to me that Buber was no small influence on Heidegger, despite the fact that the latter never quoted him, or acknowledged a formal influence.[51] Paul Mendes-Flohr tells us in an article on the relationship between the two thinkers that "[…] Heidegger was apparently an avid reader of Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim (Erzählungen des Chassidim)* **and other of his writings as well** [*this likely includes Buber's seminal work I & Thou (pub. 1923)—LP*]" (2014: 5, ebm). He also draws attention to Heidegger's ecstatic response (quoting an excerpt from a letter to his wife) to Buber's article *Hope for This Hour* (*Hoffnung für diese Stunde)*:

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[51] See Herskowitz (2021: 129-130) for a brief overview of the salient themes that are common to both Buber and Heidegger philosophically.

> The essay by M. Buber [in which he spoke of the exigent need of the postwar generation to reestablish existential trust] is excellent […] The diagnosis is very far-sighted and of great wisdom—but the healing must start even deeper than he [Buber] suggests. **And there remains a question of whether we mortals address our eternal Thou (B. means God) through our mortal Saying-Thou to one another, or whether we aren't brought into correspondence to one another only through God's address** (op.cit.: 22-23, ebm).[52]

I will return to Heidegger's query (highlighted above in bold) in the conclusion to this chapter. I regard the answer as a 'both-and' where these addresses co-arise and where neither takes priority over the other. Briefly though it is worth pointing out that Heidegger's thinking here may reinforce Buber's central criticism of Heidegger's philosophy as failing to address the need for authentic relation and dialogue with others despite the notion of *Mitsein* (being-with-others) in *Being & Time* (Friedman 2002: xv). That genuine dialogue is absent in *Mitsein* for Buber leads him to conclude that: "The Absolute [*God*] has its place in Heidegger's philosophy only in the sphere to which the self penetrates in its relation to itself" (MM: 213). Here Buber sees the divine as such being reduced to a self-encounter, and, according to him, precisely this reductionism is the fundamental problem facing us during the Eclipse according to Buber (see III.4). Thus Heidegger' query regarding the *address* in Buber's essay may well stem from what Buber identifies as the Christian trend to prioritize a personal relationship to divinity over a communal one (see III.1.c below) (and this very trend may well be one of the reasons for the lack of the dialogical principle in Heidegger's philosophy generally speaking (I return to this in III.4)).

Clearly Heidegger not only likely read Buber avidly, but had a profound respect for the depth and heart of his writing and thinking, even if, as Mendes-Flohr also makes apparent, Heidegger was reluctant to publicly acknowledge Buber's influence on his own thinking, and was also critical of Buber in other ways, even going so far as to write to Hannah Arendt that "Martin Buber. . . clearly knows nothing about philosophy" […] "surely he does not really need to either" (quoted in 2014: 22). We get a sense of the meaning of this latter quotation by considering something else Heidegger said regarding Buber:

> Heidegger was asked rather insistently by "a young American professor" how he regarded Buber's thought. Palpably perplexed by the question, Heidegger hesitantly replied: "Buber hardly dealt with [my] basic question [i.e. the *Seinsfrage*; the question of the meaning of Being—*LP*]," quickly adding that he "was however not sure" (op.cit.: 6).

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[52] The text in brackets was added by Mendes-Flohr for contextual purposes.

I would say that Buber did in fact deal with what it means to be, albeit from a different angle than Heidegger (see III.2). This resistance to Buber may also have something to do with the difference between their respective approaches to the history of western civilization, which I will explore below.

c) Buber's Historical Analysis

As we saw in the previous chapter, the question of Being for Heidegger revolves around understanding its concealing and historical nature. The meaning of Being had been forgotten and concealed by the history of metaphysics beginning with Plato (an idea that Heidegger develops partly through his reading of Nietzsche). For Heidegger, metaphysical thinking and the comportment that it gives rise to, cause not only the forgetting of Being but culminate in the metaphysics of Nietzsche (will-to-will)—enframing.

In contrast to this, Buber's ontological contemplations begin and end with relationship (*I-Thou*) as the heart of existence (see III.2). In Buber's estimation, Plato's philosophy did *not* obscure what it means to be, but instead tried to rescue this meaning from the sophist emphasis on man as the measure of all things, which tied values/ethics to a solipsistic emphasis on human subjectivity and individualism. Buber's Plato sought the revitalization of values that were atrophying due to this sophist perspective which displaced the cosmos as the throne of ethical standards (EG: Ch6.4). Buber's Plato was thus trying to find a way to restore the primacy that the earlier philosophical and religious thought of Oriental and Greek antiquity found through communion with nature (i.e. the cosmos) and its readily observable and repeatable phenomenon (EG: Ch6.3). By regarding the natural play of the cosmos as the Absolute they could in turn draw their ethical conduct therefrom (ibid.). Buber's Plato attempted to rescue this Absolute, not by returning to it, but by *idealizing* natural phenomenon in order to elevate it to a universal standard that would then counteract the sophist account that made the whims of man, instead of God, the measure of all things. In this way Plato tried to restore "the connection of the ethical with the Absolute and thus allow the concrete acting man to meet once again the primal ground of Being [*Urgrund des Seins*]" (EG: 89/GF: 124).

Plato's attempt, while noble, ultimately failed according to Buber (EG: 91). But this failure is not the source for the ills of our modern age. Instead, Buber sees the alienation

and fragmentation of modern peoples arising principally from the collapse of the notion of the holy community (or the holiness of community). This was exemplified by the Jewish mythos of Israel as the chosen people who, *together*, had a covenant (or dialogue) with God (EG: Ch.6.5). With the rise of Christianity, Buber sees the community element fragmenting and giving way to a more individualistic approach to divinity and the meaning of life, which brought with it a rise in alienation (EG: 93). These seeds of individualism, of a personal holiness in contrast to the holy community (ibid.), eventually culminated in the deeply alienating world of today (EG: Ch.6.6). This emphasis on community will make more sense in light of Buber's ontology explored below.

III.2 I-Thou (*Ich und Du*)

While the core of Buber's ontology is elegant and simple, the implications it opens up are quite vast.[53] The core of Buber's philosophy resides in the short volume *I & Thou* (*Ich und Du*) (IT/ID) (1923) and can be encapsulated in the brief phrase "All real living is encounter" (*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*) (IT: 11/ID: 18).[54] For Buber, human existence is fundamentally relational (*Beziehung*), and this relationality takes two forms: *I-Thou* (*Ich-Du*) and *I-It* (*Ich-Es*). This twofoldness permeates both the world and human existence: "To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude" (IT: 3). I-Thou and I-It are characterized as "primary words" (*die Grundworte*—'ground/basic/ foundational words') and they are the two poles of this twofold attitude (IT: 3/ID: 9). For human beings, there is no *I* without a *Thou* or an *It*, and vice versa:

> There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I-It.* /When a man says *I* he refers to one or other of these […] when he says *Thou* or *It*, the *I* of one of these two primary words is present. /The existence of *I* and the speaking of *I* are one and the same thing (IT: 4).

Being, for Buber, is relational through and through. There is no individuality outside of either a genuine relation (*Thou*) or a subject-object comportment that emphasizes repeatable experiencing (*Erfahrung*), using, and manipulating (*It*). Though these attitudes are presented as spoken words they are not merely so, but refer to the fundamental

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[53] I refer the reader to the comprehensive presentation of Buber's philosophy in *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* by Maurice Friedman (1960). I lean on this text because it is exceedingly well written and because Buber himself praised its presentation of his own philosophy.

[54] I have altered the translation of *Begegnung* from "meeting" to "encounter" here and in other quotations from the text, at the advice of Marko Pajevic.

ontological ways in which human beings meet the world, encounter others, and commune with themselves. I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole of one's being, while I-It is never spoken with the whole of one's being (IT: 3). The latter is fragmentary and potentially alienating, while the former integrally gathers and focalizes everything in oneself towards the ontological encounter with the other (but not to the detriment or exclusion of all else). In this difference lies what is fundamental regarding their respective ontological implications: the *I* of these two primary words is not the same, because it is co-constituted by its respective co-arising with the other pole in the relationship (ibid.). In what follows I will explore the two primary words more thoroughly. Section *a* deals with I-Thou, section *b* with I-It, after which I discuss Buber's God as the *eternal Thou* (III.3).

a) I-Thou

The I-Thou is genuine relation and an ontological foundation in so far as it "establishes the world of relation [*Beziehung*]" (IT: 6/ID: 12). There is no component of existence that is not ontologically rooted in I-Thou, because the I-Thou is *relation itself*, and therefore, without it, there is no possibility of the subject-object comportment that takes precedence in I-It. This subject-object comportment is where we commonly find ourselves as it is the basis for everyday worldly existence. Yet its dominating influence on our perception greatly recedes during the genuine I-Thou encounter (*Begegnung*) where "[the] speaker has no thing [*kein Etwas*] for his object [*Gegenstand*] […] *Thou* has no bounds […] When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation [*Beziehung*]" (IT: 4/ID: 10-11).

I-Thou is not an experience (*Erfahrung*) of something (*Etwas*) and does not stand juxtaposed with an object (*Gegenstand*), but is *relation itself*. The I-Thou takes place, in contrast to the subject-object dichotomy of I-It, in the *between* (*Zwischen*) or the *dazwischen* ('there in-between') (Friedman 1960: 57/60) (not unlike the idea of the "between" so integral to Heidegger's conception of Beyng). The I-Thou preserves the difference between *I* and *Thou*, allowing each to be what they really are, which also means to be in relationship (op.cit.: 61). Such a relationship is symbiotic: "Relation is mutual. My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it" (IT: 15). Both polls interact actively and passively simultaneously, co-arise in the encounter.

But the ontological nature of I-Thou is not a thing, or a function of the self, or a *veritas aeterna*. Buber characterizes I-Thou as an encounter (*Begegnung*) to emphasize that it is fundamentally the "reciprocal relationship of whole and active beings" (Friedman 1960: 60). This reciprocal active holism is characterized by such qualities as "mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability" (op.cit.: 57). We could describe it as two complementary wholes coming together in wholeness, rather than two or more parts being added or stitched together to produce only the semblance of wholeness; it is not merely any old relationship between two things or people that can be plotted or described. The *Thou* is not an *It*, but nor is it another *I*, and hence it is not merely a meeting between two individuals. Because of this, if I 'say' *Thou* to another (i.e. turn towards them with my whole being), they need not know anything about my saying *Thou* for the encounter to occur because I am not using them or forcing them (I-It) to be something else through the encounter (IT 9). The *Thou* is also not limited to other people, but "may include animals, trees, objects of nature, and God" (Friedman 2015: 57) and I would add art, books, novels, music, and even things generally, for it is fundamentally the quality of the relation and not what I am related to. As Being, for Buber, is relational in an active reciprocal way (as opposed to being a static free floating tertiary quality) the genuine existential encounter (*Begegnung*) is not "set in the context" of space and time (IT: 33). And nor is it merely a state of mind, but rather it is an *event* (*Ereignis*) (a happening) (IT: 22/ID: 30), and so bears a dynamic quality.

Unlike the alienating difference of subject and object in I-It, the difference of I-Thou facilitates and opens itself as genuine intimacy and love: "Pure relation is love *between* the I and the Thou" (Friedman 1960: 59). The *between* affords this love a wholeness, for the love is between the two poles; it is not merely within one or the other, like a one-sided emotionality or feeling occurring in one person about another. Therefore, when the other becomes *Thou* for me, even if they know nothing about it, there is still love between us, and that means they are on some level drawn into the current of this love, even if not in the same way as myself. Through such love we come to people and the world without the veils imposed upon them by our value judgements (good-evil, wise-foolish) (ibid.). Like the intimations (*der Wink*) of Heidegger's gods, the I-Thou encounter is often

unstable and lightening like, but also seemingly outside of time, eternal, and infinite (op.cit.: 60). Furthermore, Buber describes I-Thou encounters as:

> […] strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security […] it teaches you to meet others, and to hold your ground when you meet them. . . . It does not help to sustain you in life, it only helps you to glimpse eternity (quoted in ibid.).

In teaching us to meet others, it also teaches us to be who and what we are as individuals ('holding our ground'), i.e. fundamentally relational, and not isolated solipsistic centers lacking a circumference. Because I-Thou has this strange otherworldly character that shatters security, which Buber elsewhere describes as "uncanny" (*unheimliche*) (IT: 34/ID: 43), and because it cannot be other than this, I-Thou encounters are "*bound* to become an *It*" (IT: 33). This becoming an *It* is not literal but points to a reciprocality in the two primary words that is fundamental to Buber's ontology.

b) I-It

The encounter (*Begegnung*) of I-Thou contrasts with the experience (*Erfahrung*) that characterizes I-It. For Buber, experiencing the world means only skimming the surface of life, remaining alien to the intimate primal encounter with existence (I-Thou), taking no genuine part in the world (rather, only taking parts of it), confronting existence and existents as objects, and prioritizing as real only that which can be repeated or practiced (which the English word 'experience' conveys) (IT: 5-6).[55] There is no genuine space *between* the *relata* in I-It, but only a difference of user and used, for everything takes place subjectively, or in the person rather than lovingly between the person (as *I*) and the other (as *Thou*) (Friedman 2015: 57).

I-It, ontologically considered, is the matrix of life that is lived in the continuity of time and space (IT: 33). It is only the abundance of I-It, which smothers the capacity to enter into the loving relation of I-Thou, that can be called evil in Buber's philosophy (Friedman 2015: 62). Properly speaking, the two primary words alternate and interpenetrate; the I-Thou makes the I-It possible, and the I-It becomes the matrix whereby the I-Thou encounter can emerge, and through which it can also conceal itself. Regarding this Buber writes: "The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly" (IT: 17)—

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[55] One of the definitions of experience is "knowledge gained by practice" (Oxford University Press (b)). Practice implies repetition.

but he further clarifies that their relationship is a confused entanglement rather than one that proceeds in a neat and orderly fashion (IT: 18). I-It is meant to sustain us to live everyday life (bounded by space and time), and the fullness of such life culminates in the wholeness of genuine relation (I-Thou) (Friedman 2015: 60).

So in spite of what at first seems like an unbridgeable chasm between the ground of these two primary words, they do bear an ontological reciprocality that allows Buber to account for the whole of existence rather than reducing it to a metaphysical dichotomy of the real (*veritas aeterna*) juxtaposed against the unreal (*flux*). I-It is, after all, a primary word, and thus not simply a distortion of I-Thou. As mentioned earlier all I-Thou encounters must fade into the world of I-It, but the other side of this is that it is always possible for I-It to become a doorway back into I-Thou (Friedman 2015: 58), and indeed I-It is properly such a doorway or "chrysalis." Without I-It we would not be able to function because we would be in such a state of rapture via the I-Thou that we would, in a sense, become trapped by its radically intimate embrace:

> It is not possible to live in the bare present [*I-Thou*]. Life would be quite consumed if precautions were not taken to subdue the present speedily and thoroughly. But it is possible to live in the bare past [*I-It*], indeed only in it may a life be organized. We only need to fill each moment with experiencing and using [*I-It*], and it [i.e. the bare present] ceases to burn. /And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without *It* man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man (IT: 34).[56]

Ernest Becker (1973: 52, and Ch. 4), in *The Denial of Death*, speaks of something similar when he surmises that the sheer awe, wonder, and terror of life that especially dominate our minds when we are infants, has to be repressed so that we can actually live and mature. Anyone who has experience with small children knows full well that, through their boundless wonder at the world, they stand especially prone to entering into harm—or even death—if they are not watched and guided by the caring hands of a loving guardian. Thus I-Thou can be curiously (*uncannily*) antithetical to life even while being the foundation and necessity of it. For Buber, real living (as the encounter) is, in a sense, dangerous—literally life threatening—and therefore we must fill the burning wonder of the present with the bare past of I-It if there is to be life at all.

Thus when Buber explains that I-Thou necessarily becomes an I-It he means that the revelatory nature of the encounter yields to words, images, stories, and practices that form the foundations of everyday community life (Friedman 2015: 74-75). Through those

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[56] Additions in brackets are mine.

Its that bear a living connection to *Thou*, the latter can permeate the former culminating in genuine relation winning "a shining streaming constancy" amidst the It-world (quoted in op.cit.: 75). The fullest realization of I-Thou is not in an otherworldly transcendent mystical trance state that blocks out this world, nor is it in a post-mortem heavenly realm; it is intimately nested amidst the phenomenology of the I-It. In other words the I-Thou and I-It are to be brought near to one another such that they blend (but never become 'one' or 'identical') and mundane existence which often seems fragmentary (I-It) is permeated with the presence of I-Thou, a presence that gives rise to genuine meaning and connection even as we move about a world of things and people that do appear, in some manner to us, as objects and isolated phenomenon.

III.3 The Eternal *Thou—God*

The mysterious awesomeness Buber affords to the encounter of the I-Thou is directly pertinent to Buber's understanding of the divine as such. For Buber, God is the eternal *Thou*, which means that "by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou* [God]" (IT: 75). George Kovacs (1996: 46) describes Buber's approach to God as an "interhuman and this worldly realization of the divine" which breaks out of the type of philosophical and psychological thinking that would reduce God to a subjective (or inter-subjective) phenomenon. In a particularly compelling passage Buber illustrates this:

> Of course, God is "the wholly Other"; but He is also the wholly Same: the wholly Present. Of course He is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows; but He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my own *I* (IT: 79).

Buber's God is not a metaphysical absolute (*veritas aeterna*), and neither can He be explained or encompassed by metaphysical system building (Kovacs 1994: 42; 46). God here bears the qualities of both otherworldly and this-worldly transcendence, but is reducible to neither. God is met most completely and intimately, not through turning one's back upon the world in mystical unitive absorption, but by intimately attending to the world of I-It. The eternal *Thou* is so intimate that "there is no such thing as seeking God, for there is nothing in which He could not be found" and that "God is the Being [*Wesende*] that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed [*angesprochen*], not expressed [*ausgesagt werden*]" (IT: 80-81/ID: 97). From this it is clear that God is so supremely intimate that He is present (albeit often concealed) at all times and

in all things, and yet just as with I-Thou, not as an eternal something. He can only be addressed or encountered, but never explained or identified ("expressed") or found through a self-willed seeking as Buber describes: "Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the encounter [*Begegnung*] come about" (IT: 12/ID: 19). God is only found in and through the primal relation (*Beziehung*) to others, to the things of the world, and the world at large, and only when our means of seeking Him has been exhausted.

Only as we go forth and seek the genuine relation with others, finding in them the *Thou* that "fills the heavens" in an "exclusive" confrontation where "all else" does not cease to exist but instead "lives in *its* light" (IT: 78); only in such instances is God directly meeting us, filling us so that we may fulfill our destiny by going forth to the world with the plenitude of the encounter brimming and spilling over into the I-It. We need God (eternal *Thou*) in order to be at all, but simultaneously God *needs* us (IT: 82) to bathe the world in the living light of *Thou*:

> Meeting with God does not come to man in order that he may concern himself with God, but in order that he may confirm that there is meaning in the world. All revelation is summons and sending. But again and again man brings about, instead of realization, a reflexion [i.e. bending back] to Him who reveals: he wishes to concern himself with God instead of with the world. Only in such a reflexion, he is no longer confronted by a *Thou*, he can do nothing but establish an It-God in the realm of things, believe that he knows of God as of an *It*, and so speak about Him. (IT: 115).

Here God is to be found and served in the world (emphasizing the element of this-worldly transcendence); I-Thou as the life giving waters of meaning amidst the I-It (Friedman 205: 75). If, instead of going forth from the divine encounter to the world, and principally to our fellow human beings, we cling to an image of eternity that separates God from humanity, then we only succeed in coming to God as an *It*, rather than as the eternal *Thou*. It is not that God becomes *It*, but that the name God is now mostly an empty placeholder, a mere symbol, with only atrophied power to bring about the encounter once more.[57] As eternal *Thou,* God can never become an *It* (IT: 112). He is eternal in the sense that the I-Thou encounter is *always* possible because ontologically foundational for existence as a whole. The eternal *Thou* withdraws from any attempt to subjugate it to the *It* world, and yet simultaneously the eternal *Thou* 'longs' for the chrysalis of the world through which it can be eternally reborn through encounters. This happens primarily through encountering others

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[57] I say mostly, but not entirely, because for Buber, as I will discuss later, the names of God are hallowed, and always preserve this proximity to the eternal *Thou*.

(Friedman 2015: 74). When we meet another person and, with our whole being, turn towards them as the *Thou* which summons in us the dialogical *I* of the primal word *I-Thou*, then the meeting assumes a holy character and God as eternal *Thou*, is intimately present. *Thou* is the ultimate source of meaning for our life lived in the world.

The potential to encounter the eternal *Thou*, is not dependent upon various traditions of religion, ethical doctrines, ritual conduct, world-denying asceticism, or scientific and philosophical analysis. For Buber God beckons us to meet Him in and through the world, through life itself (embraces the *this-worldly*). The relevancy of Buber's notion of God for our modern age replete with alienation that sometimes means outright atheism, is driven home in this passage: "But when he, too, who abhors the name, and believes himself to be godless, gives his whole being to addressing the *Thou* of his life, as a *Thou* that cannot be limited by another, he addresses God" (IT: 76). Buber's God, which equates to divine encounter and not to God as a metaphysical ultimate being (*veritas aeterna*), requires no conceptual belief in any such traditional notions of divinity (which a religious believer might perceive as necessary in order to have any connection to divinity). All that is required, from Buber's perspective, is the willingness to meet others with the fullness of one's being. Put another way it would be enough to harbor a genuine belief that *love* (as the pure relation between *I* and *Thou*) not only exists, but is radically possible even in the most alienating moments of worldly existence. If one believes in the power of such love to open us beyond ourselves, then the encounter is a genuine possibility for theist and atheist alike.

III.4 The Eclipse

Buber's text *The Eclipse of God* (1953) (*Gottesfinsternis* (GF)) is my main reference for his mature understanding of modern nihilism. The Eclipse metaphor is derived from "the Jewish notion of "hester panim" which refers to God hiding His face" in order to punish the wicked, and yet "following Jewish mystical traditions, Buber interprets the term hopefully, for a hiding God is a God who can also be found" (Batnitzky 2016: vii). It also hearkens back to one of the many questions the Wildman poses regarding the death of God: "Is not night continually closing in on us?" (GS 125). I regard Buber's Eclipse as a rethinking of nihilism and 'God is dead.' For Buber, nihilism is not merely the death of the Christian and metaphysical God (*veritas aeterna*) as it was for Nietzsche. Rather, similar to Heidegger,

there is an ontological concealing at play. The Eclipse is the result of God's concealing nature (juxtaposed with His self-revealing nature, which comes through in the encounter itself) (EG: 54-55). On a very practical level, we can understand this Eclipsing-concealment as an obscuration of intimacy, love, genuine relation and dialogue, and an increase in alienation, solipsism, lack of direction and purpose in life, and a fragmented sense of things. With the rise of the latter, there emerges a tendency to forget the former, such that I-Thou encounters are reduced to mere self encounters, and so Buber explicitly criticizes philosophical attempts to reduce the alienation and horrors of the modern age completely to human or earthly agency:

> Philosophy holds that we lack to-day only the spiritual orientation which can make possible a reappearance "of God and the gods," a new procession of sublime images. But when, as in this instance, something is taking place between heaven and earth, one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery. He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of the transcendence as such—our vis-à-vis [*the relation; God as eternal Thou—LP*]—contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse (EG: 19).

Buber's critique of philosophy here implies not only certain ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also Sartre, Jung, Kierkegaard, and others. He accuses Heidegger of suggesting that we need only cultivate the proper spiritual attitude in order to bring about a rebirth or reappearance of divinity, but this interpretation misses Heidegger's mature view as we find here: "Man does not decide […] whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart" (BW: 234).[58] Clearly Heidegger, despite his lack of attending to the dialogical, does not fall into the camp of reducing the death of God and the reappearance of divinity to human agency and attitude. This misreading of Heidegger is mainly valuable in that it helps us to clarify Buber's diagnosis of modernity. The pathways of philosophical thinking, for Buber, contribute to the Eclipse by the various ways in which they try to reduce God to human subjectivity, to the human spirit. He charges philosophers generally with a prideful disposition that leads them to "offer humanity their own system in place of God" (EG: 40). For Buber the "portent of the present hour" lies in the modern trend of reducing the divine as such, not to yet another metaphysical absolute, but to a psychological phenomenon of the *self* (EG: 16-17). Individuals contribute to the alienation and lack of relation at play during

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[58] For an analysis of Buber's critique of Heidegger, and his view that the latter advances the position that human thought about truth can facilitate a magical summons of divinity, see Herskowitz (2019: 113, and the article as a whole). I tend to agree with Herskowitz's conclusion that: "In contrast to what is indicated in Buber's critique, therefore, Heidegger's reflections on technology bespeak a strong impulse against attitudes of manipulation and exploitation towards being and towards God" (op.cit.: 127).

the Eclipse in so far as they believe that God is in fact dead, was only ever a fiction, or what is worse, reduce the encounter (*Begegnung*) to mere self encounters. To do so is to potentially destroy the ontological structure of our humanness (ibid.).

In contrast to perspectives that would seek the causes of and solutions to nihilism in human agency alone, Buber emphasizes that the complex situation of modernity (and of any period of human civilization) cannot merely be reduced to an improper "spiritual orientation" (EG: 18). There is more than human agency, more than cause and effect at play —God is Eclipsing Himself. Buber advocates, not merely a change in spiritual orientation or the cultivation of a system of ethics, but for genuine understanding: "Let us realize **what it means** to live in the age of such a concealment, such a divine silence, and we shall perhaps **understand** its implication for our existence […]" (EG: 55, ebm). The meaning of this age is the intense (but not total) obscuration of the dialogical I-Thou. The "portent of the present hour" is not merely the loss of God, the decay of religion and meaning, but is something more fundamental: it is a reaction to the Eclipse that fosters the reduction of encounters with God to mere self-encounters. Here the I-Thou becomes unduly concealed and gives way to an abundance of I-It, which seems like an oppressive "divine silence," where "God is dead and we have killed Him" (Nietzsche), or where God and the gods have abandoned us (Heidegger) and will only return if, to use a popular colloquialism, people 'get their shit together.'[59] These attitudes contribute to the Eclipse, changing it from concealment to the destruction of the very structure of human existence. As with Nietzsche, the loss of transcendence implies a loss of life affirming and transformative meaning, but while Nietzsche offered a this-worldly quasi-transcendent ideal through the Overman, Buber emphasizes the need for a transcendence that is neither other-worldly nor this-worldly alone, but could be thought of as a blend of both (EG: 21), and yet which escapes all conceptualizations due to the fact that the reality of God (the divine as such) can only be intimately and viscerally encountered.

According to Buber's reading, Nietzsche did not adequately grasp the crisis of the times by describing it as the death of God. Rather than taking this crisis as a starting point to enter into a more radical relationship with the Absolute (the divine as such), Buber sees Nietzsche merely replacing God with the Overman (a god of *becoming* instead of *being*)

[59] In light of the context, the shit may now be 'spiritual' or 'godly' but it is, nonetheless, still shit.

(Van Straten 2015: 194). Nietzsche aims at a this-wordly transcendence narrative through the Overman, but ends up falling back into the metaphysical idealism he sought to overcome (op.cit.: 173). One ideal (Overman) replaces another (*veritas aeterna*) culminating in an inversion of metaphysics, but not an overturning. Though Nietzsche's thinking does offer space for contemplating the divine, Buber does not find in his work a sufficient attempt in this direction.[60] And yet, simultaneously, Buber's philosophy stresses the importance of the presence of God in this world—of *Thou* winning a shining constancy of meaning amidst the alienation and fatality of *I-It* (of butterfly emerging through chrysalis); God found in and through intimate encounters with others, in rather stark contrast to an individual dialogue with God that was emphasized in Christianity. This bears a strongly Nietzschean mark, but Buber is able to maintain the mystery of divinity as such that Nietzsche tries to get rid of, by refusing to reduce God to a function of the psyche or to an ideal (i.e. to a lie that would help us cope with the flux of existence as *will to power*). Buber does not reduce God to a series of functions (i.e. the sensuous), nor to a metaphysical absolute (i.e. the suprasensuous); God's place is neither of these (EG: 21). Buber's God is not known conceptually, but only through the holy meaningfulness bequeathed in all real encounters.

In the first chapter of *The Eclipse* Buber dwells on the idea that the word/name 'God' (*Gott*) is hallowed (EG: 6-7; see also IT: 75). Therefore, the use of the term in Nietzsche's own utterance becomes, in Buber's estimation, pregnant with a meaning that cannot be merely reduced to the Christian God or *veritas aeternas*, nor to the so called *God of the philosophers* (*causa sui*—the self caused). Thus, according to Buber, the name God (and other genuinely divine names) never primarily means something like *veritas aeterna* or *causa sui*, nor is it ever merely a symbol of divinity. To invoke the name at all, is not only to speak *about* Him, but to speak *to* Him (IT: 75). This perspective also helps to explain the Biblical commandment not to utter the Lord's name in vain. We would do well to approach divine names with great care, not because we magically summon something, but because God very well may answer us (as with Moses or Ezekiel), and how many of us *stand* (*on our own feet*) ready for a divine summons no matter how grand or subtle it may

[60] For a treatment of Nietzsche's philosophy and the divine, see Young (2006) who regards Nietzsche not as an atheist, but as a religious reformer of sorts (op.cit.: 2) (and I tend to agree).

be? For those of us who regularly live in alienation, any version of I-Thou must seem utterly terrifying from the outside!

Because more is at play than human attitudes, ideals, and the faculty of will, Buber's solution is not a mere change in attitude or a new ideology (whether ethical, socio-political, spiritual, or psychological). Instead, it is a call for genuine dialogue, for people to find their way back to the primal comportment/word of I-Thou so that the world of I-It may be infused with its presence and thereby become a basis for I-Thou rather than something that often only obstructs it. To understand the implications of this divine silence for our existence we have first to be able to *endure* it:

> But if man is no longer able to attain this relation, if God is silent toward him and he toward God, then something has taken place, not in human subjectivity **but in Being itself** [*Sein selber*]**.** It would be worthier not to explain it to oneself in **sensational and incompetent sayings, such as that of the "death" of God**, but to **endure it as it is** and at the same time to move existentially toward a new happening, toward that event in which **the word between heaven and earth will again be heard** (EG: 56/GF: 80-81, ebm).

This change in Being itself is the Eclipse, and as we already saw with both Nietzsche and Heidegger, Buber also sees the crisis of the modern age as an opportunity for a more radical engagement with reality than previous metaphysical approaches. By enduring the Eclipse so as to understand it we can rediscover the I-Thou relation that ontologically makes us dialogical beings. Relevant here is a yet unmentioned component of the ontological relationship between the two primary words: there is a limit to the ascendancy of the I-It over I-Thou, and when this limit is reached it necessitates a radical turning (*Umkehr* (Hebrew *teshuvah*) back towards God (Friedman 2015: 66).

The necessity of the return hearkens back to the Eclipse being primarily due to God's self-concealing nature, rather than to human agency, which is only an extension of every I-Thou encounter yielding to I-It; *Thou* concealing itself in a revelatory *It*. Taking a page from Buber's own thinking on the origins of evil being ultimately unexplainable (Friedman 1960: 109), there is no need to try and fully explain the self-concealing nature culminating in the Eclipse, but what is important is to "endure it as it is" while also doing what we can to direct the whole of our being to say *Thou* so that "the word between heaven [i.e. *Thou*] and earth [i.e. *It*] will again be heard." Consider the following: Eclipses occur cyclically, in relationship to one another (Saros cycles), and only during new and full moon within the soli-lunar cycle/relationship.[61] Just as we do not demand to know why they

[61] See Espenak (2012) for a summary of Eclipses and the Saros cycles that link them.

should occur cyclically in order to behold (and enjoy) an eclipse, so too we need not know why God is concealing Himself in this seemingly extreme way in order to endure it and go forth to meet one another in genuine love and intimacy.

Long before Heidegger would appropriate the now philosophically infamous line from Hölderlin's *Patmos* that "Where there is danger, the rescuing force grows too" (IT: 56), Buber had already done so in his *I & Thou* in order to illustrate the very idea that the spiritual darkness of the modern age leads neither to advance nor retreat, but can and must lead to "only utterly new reversal—the breakthrough" (ibid.). The beginning of the *Patmos* line runs "Near is and hard to grasp the god" (ITb: 104, fn. #2, ebm). That God hides means that He can also be found; the darkness of the Eclipse is no permanent darkness—God is *near*, though today more difficult to encounter. As a phase in a larger cycle the Eclipse is only a prelude to a renewing turn towards the divine as such. It is, as with Heidegger, the idea of finding the light in the darkness, of nihilism opening a path to reconnect with divinity in a more genuine manner. Buber's idea of a return to the intimacy and love of I-Thou is most intimately glimpsed if we consider it in light of Exodus 3.14. Here God reveals His true name to Moses usually translated "I am that I am" but Buber (along with Franz Rosenzweig) rendered it (in their translation of the Hebrew Bible into German) as "I will be there [*dasein*], howsoever I will be there [*dasein*]" (*Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde*) (quoted in Batnitzky 2016: xi-xii). God will always be there; i.e. the encounter is always open to us. God reveals His presence to Moses during a dark time of subjugation for the Jewish people, so too, during the darkness of modernity, God's revealing nature is still intimately there for us, needs our help to win a shining constancy of *Thou* amidst *It*, beckons us to turn towards Him as we go out to meet others in genuine love.

Buber's proximity to Nietzsche and Heidegger offers us yet another way of understanding the nihilism of modernity, the death of God, and how and where we may find God today in spite of the rise in alienation and meaninglessness. Like them he also acknowledges that the horrors and dangers of modernity offer us a profound opportunity to reconnect to meaning, that nihilism is only transitional, and brings in a this-worldly transcendence component when discussing God. In answer to Heidegger's query (regarding Buber's essay)—as to whether we (as mortals) address God by saying *Thou* to one another,

or whether only through God's address are we genuinely brought together—I think it is a both-and situation. God brings us into correspondence with one another, and yet we simultaneously help make a place for Him by our saying *Thou* to one another. These co-arise and each implies the other just as an *I* and a *Thou* always co-arise and effect one another.

Reflections & Conclusion

In this final section of the thesis, I will reflect on the relationship between the respective ideas of Buber and Heidegger already explored (R.1), followed by a brief exploration of the relevancy of these ideas for today's world (R.2). I offer these reflections as a way to tie together the major themes of this thesis in order to further address the question of where we might find God today. After these reflections I conclude the thesis.

R.1 A Tale of Two Martins—An *Encounter* with Buber and Heidegger

For Buber and Heidegger, the divine is exceedingly intimate and participates in the fabric of the world so directly that meeting the divine always bequeaths a powerful sense of meaning. Yet, at their extremes, these meetings are simultaneously terrifying and strange, so much so that the divine seems antithetical to life. With Buber, every encounter (*Begegnung*) of I-Thou always involves God as the eternal *Thou*, and these divine encounters culminate in revelations that are to be shared in the everyday world of I-It. The eternal *Thou* gives life meaning. So much so that the most authentic encounters with God occur through encountering others and the world, rather than making God into a supreme person or object to the exclusion of the world. With Heidegger, the en-counter (*Ent-gegnung*) with the gods, and ultimately with the Holy, yields to meaningfulness, to genuine poetry, and so to the meaningful poetry of *things*—of the worlding of the world. Both types of '*encounter'* with divinity constitute *primarily* a this-worldly transcendence, but not in the sense that the this-worldly merely replaces the other-worldly of the *veritas aeterna*. The opening out beyond oneself (transcendence) that emerges in these two types of 'encounter' with the divine as such, bears a holistic character in that it embraces and makes a place for every aspect of existence without the value judgements that accompany the other-worldly metaphysics of *veritas aeterna* where immediate empirical existence gets likened to shadows (unreality). Furthermore, for Buber and Heidegger, the divine as such is neither a being nor an object, and it never becomes one, and so it is not something like morality for its own sake that we can flee towards or manipulate for shelter from the challenges of life. Though I could only touch on this briefly in the preceding chapters, both approaches to the divine also incorporate a historical element; the divine, and the respective divine

'*encounters*,' ontologically aid people to meet the challenges and needs of their respective time and place, to make meaning of life as it occurs in time.

Having summarized these important similarities, I will now attempt to demonstrate some ways in which these respective approaches can be made to interpenetrate and deepen one another. To do so I will focus on bringing together the contrast between Buber's emphasis on relationship and Heidegger's emphasis on death/concealing, and ultimately claiming that these ideas complement one another.

In encountering (*Begegnen*) the other a proximity to death is also at play and vice versa. In pondering on death's universal embrace of all life and particularly dwelling upon my own death, I must necessarily be reminded of how my mortality is intimately shared with others. Where one thing ends, so another begins, and yet, as Heidegger points out, the boundary is not primarily an ending, but where something begins its presencing (*Anwesen*) (PLT: 152). The possibility of death (mortality) marks our boundary and origin, and what is beyond that boundary presences through its concealment/withdrawal. As we saw in Chapter 2, divine meaningfulness arises through the mystery of what is concealed and thereby seems to lie beyond.

The other is always beyond me. When I go to meet the other, then my boundary (my beginning) comes to light, as does theirs. In other words, the boundary of death so important to Heidegger, comes to light when genuinely encountering others the way Buber describes. This is even present in seed form when we walk by a stranger and feel a subtle but palpable sense of uncanniness in that brief exchange. I think that this uncanniness hearkens back to the strangeness of the eternal *Thou* and the Holy. Even though such a meeting often seems bereft of genuine intimacy, the glimmer of uncanniness in the exchange does share something essential in common with the more radical intimacy that comes with opening up to others, which requires us to be vulnerable, and in such vulnerability there is always the risk of death, whether we mean bodily death or a crisis of identity.[62] Through the Fourfold, Heidegger evokes plurality when he employs the plural nouns mortals and immortals. This hints at a primal togetherness at play, that we are always being-with (*Mitsein*) others (other mortals). In meeting and communicating there is always a concealment at play. The most obvious example is that when I face the other then what is

[62] The French speak of the sexual orgasm as *le petite mort*, 'the little death,' and this certainly captures something of the proximity of death and intimacy. Death alerts us to our vulnerability, and sexual intimacy also requires us to be vulnerable.

behind them (including their back) is concealed to me and vice versa, and importantly, these concealed elements are actually not merely absent, but make themselves felt/known through their hiddenness. Perhaps then, in the Fourfold, one way the mortals en-counter the immortals is *in and through one another*. The gods are between the humans, hinting from the sense that there is something beyond our respective boundaries as individuals and through our meeting. Understood this way, Heidegger's en-counter with the gods and Buber's I-Thou encounter enrich one another.

I imagine it this way: In seeing the other, in listening to the other, in beholding the awesome mystery present through encountering the other (that Buber describes)—the fact that I can never fully know what it is like to be them—I open up out beyond myself into the intimacy of connection with everything, and further, into the mystery attending the unknown (attending concealment, as Heidegger highlights). In this opening I 'die' to all that I thought I was, all that I felt myself to be in the depths of my individuality, my isolation and loneliness. Afterwards, upon reflection, I become intimately aware of just how vulnerable we all are, just how temporary life really is, and can appreciate it as a gift.[63]

R.2 On the importance of these ideas for our times

Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Buber all agree that the crisis of nihilism, of meaninglessness, is *transitional*. After acknowledging, in their own respective ways, the tragedy and horror of these times, they strove to find a way to treat the crisis of nihilism as an opportunity for a return to a deeper intimacy with life. They all envision, without rose colored glasses, a proverbial *saving power* in nihilism that does not deny its very real dangers. There is an old saying that you cannot know where you are going if you do not know where you have been. Relative to nihilism, this means that we need to be aware of the historical trends of thought that have contributed to this era where God seems either dead, forgotten, or chillingly silent. By understanding nihilism and how we contribute to it, we are in a better position to be aware of its nature and to meet it with wisdom. This also means that we stand a chance to reconnect with the reality of the divine as such in a way that is relevant for our times in that it helps restore an ontological relationship to the polysemic and joyful meaningfulness of all aspects of existence.

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[63] To be clear, I am not reducing Heidegger's en-counter with the gods to human relationships and I am not claiming that Buber's I-Thou encounter is just an encounter with death.

The importance of these ideas for our world today cannot be understated. We are moving further into a technologically dominated age, further into alienation, confusion, hopelessness, dissolution and loss of what remains of those traditions that offered some meaning bequeathing waters in the deserts of tragedy that have always accompanied life in all ages. We are seeing an increased amount of polarization around many issues, with people tending zealously towards the so called leftwing or rightwing narratives, to the point where, in place of dialogical intimacy we find an us-them mentality driving people further apart (or further 'together' into violence and chaos).

But there is still hope; there are still many currents of love and connection, of joy and rapture, of art and music, of song and dance. We need these *things* (*gatherings*) now more than ever if we are to get through the stormy seas of *nihilism*—of *the abandonment by Being*, of *the Eclipse of God*—and this means that we need an awareness of just what is at stake, of how we may have gotten here. For only by understanding the plight of nihilism do we stand a chance of finding the light in the darkness. We may not know towards which harbor we sail, but we can at least know something about where we have been, about what got us here and the nature of what is transpiring on the horizon. If we can start to understand instead of merely pass judgement upon and willfully fight against the receding tide—merely shouting aimlessly into the void—we might just stand a chance of seeing through the danger and glimpsing what saves. But if Heidegger and Buber are correct, then this glimpse is more than sufficient, for it presages the joyfully intimate meaning that dwells between us all.

Regarding nihilism I chose to focus on the possibility of recovering a genuine connection to the divine because, although a subtle comportment of meaninglessness (skepticism and atheism) permeates the modern world (and is something religious believers also have to contend with because it touches all of us in the modern world), I do agree with David Foster Wallace's insight (see Ch.1 epigraph) that in the often somber 'trenches' of daily life everyone worships something, everyone still seeks a 'sacred' meaning to their life. Therefore, I also agree with Buber's observation that even a staunch atheist can meet the divine, because such a meeting requires no complex technical definitions. It is enough to have an innate sense of there being something more to life even if we do not often have the words or concepts to adequately describe this. I maintain, not so much that we need God or

even to believe in God, but that we need to question God, to inquire about the divine as such. Put less theistically this means that we need to give renewed and genuine attention to connecting to the fundamentally mysterious meaningfulness of life.

I think that the core insight to hearken to in the utterance that 'God is dead,' is not a declaration of atheism, but a summons to meet divinity and find meaning in life in a way that promotes an intimate embrace, or dance with life itself (*the dancing God*), with things, and with one another. As I stated in the beginning, divinity is question worthy because only by questioning do we commune with the meaningfulness of life and connect to that which we stay alive *for*. The death of God beckons us to ask the questions 'what is God?' and 'what does it mean for God to have died?' and thus 'where is God for us today?' The question of where divinity (and the meaning of life) might be for us moderns, lies somewhere between traditional religious pathways and the alternatives of modern thinking, whether that be scientism or some socio-political ideology, or even staunch atheism that denies the value of traditional religious thought. We all worship, and the death of God (nihilism) invites us to engage thoughtfully and intimately with just what precisely this means for each of us.

As I wrote in the Introduction, Heidegger and Buber both manage to provide a compelling non-traditional approach to divinity that continues the theme of *this-worldly transcendence* that emerged in Nietzsche's own attempts to constructively deal with the death of God. I think that they are able to do this because they actually listened to Nietzsche's utterance and tried to grasp/respond to its implications for these times. As discussed in Chapter 1 (especially I.5), the majority of modern ideologies, lacking awareness of nihilism, advance moral positions/solutions regarding the ills of modernity (i.e. the blame lies with someone) that do not address the value decay. Modern morally charged ideological movements merely take their cue from the Platonic-Christian moral schema but offer no meaningful form of transcendence. In contrast, Heidegger and Buber advance a receptive attitude that encourages an understanding of the collapse of meaning and its attendant ills. They investigate 'God is dead' with the aim of understanding what implications this has for our relationship to the divine as such and to the meaning of life. They emphasize a 'divine' intimacy with existence that encourages eager minds to continue

questioning and learning rather than providing one dimensional solutions that ideally would fit everyone.

If there is a single piece of wisdom about these times that we ought to glean from studying Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber together, then it is probably that the only way out of nihilism is in fact *through*. We can find genuine divinity again through a return to the majesty of the earth as transcendentally bounded meaning decays; through spaciously pausing to dwell upon the paradox and mystery of things in the course of everyday life; and through coming together with one another in an intimate and vulnerable 'embrace' that teaches us to be who we really are.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have painted a portrait of nihilism as a crisis of meaning that encircles the modern world according to Nietzsche, and I have given a detailed exposition of two philosophical attempts that aim to address its implications for our relationship to the divine as such. I focused specifically on Nietzsche's 'God is dead' and two subsequent attempts by Heidegger and Buber to philosophically renew our connection to divinity in light of this diagnostic utterance.

In the first chapter I painted a portrait of modern nihilism according to Nietzsche, which emphasized the manner in which the predominant traditional western philosophical, metaphysical, and theological interpretations of the world have collapsed in on themselves and left us with a sense that there is no ontological meaning attending existence, and therefore also nothing sacred. Instead of attempting to understand the smokescreen of meaninglessness that nihilism casts over us, and to thereby become capable of revaluing old values, Nietzsche's reflections highlight how modern people, still obsessed with the quest for enduring truth, largely attempt to fill the void of meaning by reweaving the old values into modern morally charged ideological movements. But this modern morality (and those movements it permeates) lacks the possibility of transcendence, and so must always collapse in on itself, taking its adherents with it into violent and dehumanizing scenarios.

In the second chapter I discussed Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaphysics as the eternal recurrence of the will to power (will-to-will) which culminated in his own understanding of modern nihilism as a metaphysically girded comportment that

enframes (*Ge-stell*) being as an endless series of resources gathered only to generate more resources (*Bestand*). I focused on Heidegger's own philosophical investigations of the divine as such as the way he attempts to counteract this comportment of enframing. By intimately connecting divinity to *things*, and to the world (the Fourfold), Heidegger's ideas on the divine can be understood as arising out of Nietzsche's call for a this-worldly transcendence, and his emphasis on ontological pluralism. Heidegger's understanding of divinity aims at promoting an engagement with the meaning of existence that emphasizes concealment and mystery, joyous intimacy, and death, and which does not degrade empirical reality the way he sees the God of traditional metaphysics doing.

In the third chapter I provided an analysis of Buber's ontology, his conception of God, and his own understanding of nihilism as an Eclipse of God rather than a death. Buber's notion of divinity also carried a Nietzschean influence in that it de-emphasized otherworldly transcendence to bring out this-worldly transcendence. Buber emphasizes God as the holiness of dialogue and encounters with others and the world. For Buber, divinity must be of life (not subordinated to it, but intimately embrace it), must be paradoxical (immanent and transcendent, self-revealing and self-concealing, simultaneously), and must also inspire an ontological pluralism when it comes to meaning in that no two encounters can ever be the same even if they can be alike. While his notion of God is the closest of the three to a traditional conception, it remains largely free from the chains of orthodox religious thought and practice.

In my final reflections I brought out the manner in which the understanding of divinity in Heidegger and Buber coincide and enhance one another when pondered together (R1). Specifically I focused on the way Heidegger's reflections on the death-like quality of divinity can deepen our understanding of Buber's dialogical encounter with others, and vice versa. I then emphasized the importance of contemplating the divine in the modern age where meaning is concerned (R2). In answer to the question of 'where God might be for us today?' I concluded that divinity can most intimately and meaningfully be found and encountered for us moderns today in the proverbial trenches of our everyday lives, in our dealings with *things* and *each other*, and thus through pondering the eerie void of nihilism rather than fleeing from it and back into the arms of traditional religious institutions or placing our faith in morality or science. I revisited the idea that Heidegger and Buber both

manage to provide a compelling non-traditional approach to divinity via *this-worldly transcendence,* a theme that emerged in Nietzsche's own attempts to constructively deal with the death of God. Ultimately I have attempted to synthesize the core insights from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Buber in order to suggest that we would do well to look for God in this world rather than another.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the question of 'where might God be for us today?' in light of Nietzsche's diagnostic utterance concerning the modern age as one where 'God is dead' (*nihilism*) and existence seems ontologically meaningless. In order to address this question I examine two philosophical responses that took Nietzsche's utterance to heart: Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber. I afford special emphasis to the divine in relationship to modernity in their respective ontologies. What Nietzsche referred to as nihilism, Heidegger refers to as the abandonment of Being (*Seinsverlassenheit*), and Buber refers to as the Eclipse of God (*Gotterfinsternis*). The thesis proceeds on the basis that 'God' has always been an integral and 'question worthy' part of the meaning of human existence and cannot merely be written off as a lie or fabrication, but instead demands philosophical scrutiny. By examining the insights of these thinkers together we are afforded a holistic understanding of nihilism and the question of God in the modern world.

Title in Estonian: Arutlusi Nihilismist: Jumalaotsingud Nüüdisajal

Annotation

This thesis examines the question of ‘where might God be for us today?’ in modern times, in light of Nietzsche’s insights about nihilism and the death of God, as well as the ontological treatment of the divine in the respective philosophies of Heidegger and Buber. By examining the insights of these thinkers together we are afforded a holistic understanding of nihilism and the quest for God in the modern world.

Key Terms: nihilism, transcendence, modernity, divine as such, encounter/en-counter

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